

State-Controlled Media Has Failed the Arab People

Ibrahim Nawar

Director

**Arab Press Freedom Watch
(APFW), London**

The fact that Arab countries are lagging behind in the pursuit of democracy is clearly visible and was evidenced during this year 2003. For many decades rulers have been in power who have denied their own people any real opportunity of choice. Laws that are restrictive, and near absolute power for the police forces ensure that no challenge is raised to one-party or family dictatorships. The media is controlled by the state in order to sedate public opinion and beat the drums of the corrupt and ailing ruling clans. In Syria as well as in Tunisia and the rest of the Arab Mediterranean countries the state repression is everyday news, and therefore Arab media is not the only victim of the lack of democracy in the Arab world. For as long as freedom of expression and public liberties in general are severely restricted in the Arab world, many entities have become legitimate targets for state repression, including opposing political parties, NGO's, trade unions, professional associations, student unions and public forums. These circumstances surrounding the Arab media have resulted in a lowering of professional and ethical standards, and a distortion of facts that in most cases denies the basic public right to information. The situation is that most of the Arab media is working as mouth-piece for the ruling clans.

Although the picture of the media in the Arab world looks very bleak, there are some bright spots shining out here

and there. Thanks to advocates of freedom of expression, fighters for public liberties and some brave journalists in the Arab Mediterranean countries, the fight for democracy, public liberties and freedom of expression is underway and will not cease until these rights have been achieved. In Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, dozens advocates of freedom of expression have been sent to prison, newspapers have been closed down, confiscated or censored and broadcasting programmes taken off air. Arab Press freedom Watch (APFW), established in early 2000 in London, has become an advanced and strong vehicle for the struggle for freedom of expression in the Arab world. From Bahrain and Baghdad in the east to Rabat in the west, APFW has joined distant fighters for freedom of expression, and created a new wave in the Arab press, a demand for a credible, free and responsible media.

In the year 2003 the fight for free press in the Arab world went on. Although issues related to Iraq and Palestine have dominated the agenda, space remained for efforts to be allocated to the development of the media and to further the struggle for freedom of expression. In May 2003 APFW, in cooperation with the Egyptian Journalist Syndicate and the International Federation of Journalists, organised a workshop on media ethics. The Cairo-held workshop attracted more than thirty journalists from different Arab countries, and over seventy Egyptian journalists. It was the first gathering of its kind to be held in Cairo without any kind of intervention by the state, and as a result of the workshop it was

agreed to develop an Arab journalists' voluntary code of ethics based on international guidelines and experience. For the first time in its history, the Egyptian Journalists Syndicate issued a statement in November 2003 supporting the Tunisian fighter for freedom of expression, Naziha Rjiba (Om Zied), and condemning the Tunisian authorities that have been practising various forms of harassment of Om Zied in various ways for years. Om Zied was in Cairo in May 2003 and explained to her colleagues the situation in Tunisia, where President Bin Ali is ruling his country through the iron fist of the police force. The show of solidarity with Om Zied was set against the background of the cooperation between Egypt and Tunisia for increased state security. Generally speaking there is an unwritten code of conduct between Arab rulers that does not allow any support for opposition figures in one country from the media of another. Of course the media of one country is deemed free to attack the ruler of another nation if the two regimes are not on good terms or if they are in dispute.

The main pillars of freedom of expression in the Arab world have yet to be properly established in the minds and the hearts of the people as well as in those of journalists and other sections of society that need to express their interests and play a part in the decision-making process through an active role in public life. Interaction between the media and the public is still very weak, when measured by the use of right-to-reply or phone-in programmes, and by other means of encouraging the public to exercise an active role in the media. In the Arab world the fighters in this

struggle need not only to be convinced of their rights, but also to be courageous and ready to sacrifice themselves if need be to defend the cause. About half a dozen brave Arab journalists pay with their life every year for the cause of free press. Since APFW started keeping records of the victims of violations of freedom of expression in 2000, about 20 journalists have died in the field defending the public right to the truth. This year 2003 Journalists in Iraq, Palestine and Algeria have lost their lives owing to the nature of their profession. In Egypt one journalist went missing, most probably kidnapped from his own home and driven to an unknown location, and there is no clue to suggest his fate. Prominent journalist Reda Helal, deputy editor-in-chief of the newspaper al-Ahram went missing in summer and has never been found. He was well known for his outspoken critical views on Muslim fundamentalists. In recent years, some Arab countries have relaxed their restrictions on the media in print, allowing private ownership and reducing censorship or modifying its form. It can also be seen that satellite television has revolutionised the way Arab viewers receive news. Although Pan-Arab media is almost totally controlled by Saudi funds, it provides a wider access to information and cultural aspects, which would otherwise not be available to viewers in the Arab world. In order to capitalise on the progress of information technology and new developments related to it, a new wave of internet sites, publishing or transmitting information to Arab viewers, has mushroomed in the last couple of years. These internet sites provide a new gate for the free flow of information, despite the fact that they suffer many restrictions and in some cases closure by the authorities. In Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Syria and Jordan, the governments spend large amounts of money and allocate much expertise to the disablement of opposition internet sites.

In order to promote the values of freedom of expression and to create a free press, both journalists and the public need to be educated about what constitutes the pillars of freedom of expression. The basic foundations that will provide a solid ground for the

path to achieving freedom of expression include:

Access to Information

The search for the truth always starts with hard facts and information, and not with prefabricated ideas or with personal judgements. But hard facts and information can be hidden and protected by government authorities, which is why secrecy laws, an absence of transparency in government action, and censorship are the natural enemies to the side of the supply of information, which act against the search for truth. On the side of demand, illiteracy is the main obstacle, especially among women. In order to grant them access to information, people must be educated, governments have to be open and transparent, and secrecy laws must be removed.

On occasion Arab governments argue the case against the public access to information by raising issues of national interests or national security. However, these arguments are in fact based on the erroneous assumption that the state has sole responsibility for national interests and national security. On the contrary, in reality each and every citizen bears their responsibility toward the society, not toward the government. There are matters that must be of a secret nature, in times of war for example, such as names of spies working for the government or new weapons being developed to ensure the defence of the country. But when the war is over everyone has the right to know the truth about what has happened. However, any unauthorised person found guilty of using facts obtained from a non-official document can receive a prison sentence of up to five years. If the information in question is linked to national security such an accusation can result in lengthy imprisonment.

Therefore, restricted access to information and hefty penalties in cases of publishing unauthorised facts has resulted in a situation of poor investigative journalism within the Arab press. Secrecy laws, protection laws for official documents, and the absence of rules to hold officials responsible for fabricating lies conspire to damage

the quality of the press in the Arab world. Not one of the Arab countries has clear laws to ensure transparency in either current or past official facts.

Access to Communication

Access to communication includes the right to speak, write and to be heard through the mass media. It also includes the right to set up media and communication facilities or organisations, and the right to print, publish, distribute and broadcast news and opinions.

In general, terrestrial broadcasts are monopolised by the state in all the Arab countries except Lebanon. The internet is under government control, and printed news is heavily regulated and mostly owned by the governments, while other printed materials are subject to censorship. In Saudi Arabia, only members of the royal family have the right to establish a newspaper, only the state has the right to broadcast from within the country, and only the censorship body can permit a book to be published. The internet is a big headache for these institutions, but it is also regulated by government control. The King Fahd Academy for Science and Technology is investing heavily in software that will enable the government to disable websites related to political opposition, and website masters are involved in constant games of cat and mouse with this software in order to maintain the admission of data into the country from abroad. This same Saudi academy is the sole internet Service Provider to the country, supplying its service to subcontractors who are also under state control.

In other Arab countries, that we may call the pro-democracy nations, the scene is no brighter. Although freedom of expression is guaranteed by the constitution (which some Arab countries do not have), it is restricted by laws, and sometimes prohibited by decrees and administrative orders. In Morocco, Tunisia and other countries in which the governments claim to be pro-democracy, access to communications is very poor. Internet publishers are subject to scrutiny in Tunisia, Jordan and Bahrain, and in Tunisia, jour-

nalist Zuhair Yahyaoui was sent to prison because he dared to criticise the Tunisian president in his internet magazine. Another active internet journalist Om Zied, the editor of Kalema magazine has received harassment and was sent to trial in November 2003. A Tunisian court sentenced her to an eight-month suspended prison sentence and fined her \$1000, but the entire case against her was fabricated. She was accused of carrying 170€ on her return to the country from France. In Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon, Tunisia and Jordan, the private sector has been granted the right to set up private satellite broadcasting facilities, though with the exception of Lebanon, none of these facilities may deal with news or religion, and the private broadcasting is dedicated mainly to music and drama. New media free zones were set up in Egypt, Jordan, and Dubai, and these zones have attracted dozens of media production companies and some satellite television stations, mainly Saudi ones such as MBC, Arabiya and LBC (LBC is originally Lebanese but has recently come under Saudi influence through partnership and a production alliance with the newspaper *al-Hayat*, owned by Prince Khaled Bin Sultan). One of the worst features that has been clearly manifested since last year is the political and financial influence of some of the Arab countries on the media policies outside their own borders. In Lebanon, the media (press and broadcasting companies) was heavily pressurised by Saudi Arabia and Syria, the two nations that this year hold the worst record in press freedom among the Arab countries. The Lebanese media is now facing the possibility of becoming the front line for political clashes between Arab governments. If this becomes the case, the Lebanese media may lose most of its remaining credibility. The Saudi government has shown itself to be very sensitive to any criticism anywhere in the Arab world. In Syria, although the government press censorship prohibits the entry of any critical material to the country, it still has a great deal of work to limit any damage that may cross its borders from Lebanon. In summer 2002, the Syrian government exerted heavy pressure

on the Lebanese government to force it to close down Murr TV (MTV) and its affiliated radio station. Also last year New TV (NTV) was suspended as the Lebanese government bowed to Saudi pressure to remove a programme discussing Saudi finances and its budget that was broadcast on the channel.

Aljazeera satellite channel has presented all Arab television stations with a strong political and professional challenge. Since it was established by the Emir of Qatar in 1996, Aljazeera has managed to capture an audience of many viewers in the Arab world and succeeded in establishing itself as a credible international channel, but unfortunately Aljazeera fell into the trap of promoting ideology and political ideas rather than sticking to professional journalism, and connections with Muslim fundamentalists and extreme Arab nationalists have therefore gained the channel a bad reputation in the Arab world. The last straw that severely damaged Aljazeera was its relation with the Saddam Hussein regime. Black question marks are now surrounding several issues concerning Aljazeera: the role of sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi, one of the old Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood who took refuge in Qatar in the sixties, including the fact that Qatar is hosting meetings for leaders of the so-called Islamic-Arab Nationalists Alliance, the promotion of Muslim fundamentalist figures, and the channel's views and selective approach in news and programming. These and other points have created a series of doubts among Arab intellectuals concerning the objectives of Aljazeera. However, propaganda and sensational news and programmes continue to make the channel popular among Arab viewers.

During the Iraqi war, Aljazeera was transmitting from the side of Saddam Hussein. Its reporters (one of whom, Tariq Ayoub, was killed by American bullets) did not believe the events of 9th April, and were lost in the action. As the situation developed they paid no heed to issues such as mass graves or the suffering of the Iraqi people under Saddam Hussein, though there were hundreds of victims who were ready to tell their tragic stories. Aljazeera clearly took the side, not of

the Iraqi people, but of the Islamists, Arab nationalists and the remnants of Saddam's regime. Aljazeera has therefore become perhaps the most hated Arab television channel among the Iraqi people.

The so-called Pan-Arab media is almost completely controlled by Saudi money and influence. MBC and Arabiya are owned by Sheikh Walid al-Ibrahim, a brother-in-law of King Fahd. The newspaper *Asharq al-Awsat*, based in London, is controlled by King Fahd's brother, Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz, and the newspaper *al-Hayat* is owned by Prince Khaled Ben Sultan, one of the King's nephews. The Lebanese LBC and Future televisions have effectively come under Saudi influence through partnership. In short, access to control of the communication networks is fully dominated by the ruling families, and what little space left for the private sector is restricted and ineffective. Ending the state monopoly of the mass media must be high on the agenda.

Access to Professional Organisations and Trade Unions

Trade unionism is currently illegal in the Arab Gulf states, and trade unions and professional associations are part of the state monopoly in Syria, Sudan and Libya. Even in Egypt, where trade unions and professional associations are deeply rooted in tradition, they are now generally under state control. For those individuals who seek the truth, access to professional organisations and trade unions is a way of providing themselves with the protection and strength of a social outer shell. These professional organisations and trade unions also serve their members' needs for professional education, training and experience, a necessary role in the process of political reform, the building of democracy and the promotion of freedom of expression. The organisations also help in creating some sort of balance against the power of the state. Denying people their right and the freedom to found and become members of professional organisations and trade unions is a form of oppression by the state, in a further manifestation of its extensive

THE LMRABET CASE

Ali Lmrabet, Moroccan journalist and representative in Morocco of Reporters Without Borders, started his career in journalism through contributions and work in diverse media. In March 2000, he launched his own publication, *Demain*, which was closed some months later at the same time as *Le Journal and Assahifa*.

In January 2001, Lmrabet was at the head of *Demain Magazine*, the successor to *Demain*, which in December of that same year was temporarily suspended owing to the publication of an article that dealt with a rumour about the sale of one of the royal palaces. This process, which ended with a four-month prison sentence and a fine of 3,000 Euros, is currently under appeal. Despite this, in autumn 2002 *Douman* appeared, a sister publication of *Demain Magazine* in Arabic.

In April 2003, Lmrabet was interrogated by the judicial police of Rabat about the contents of his publications and was forbidden to leave the country. Soon after, he was accused of insulting the King and attacking the territorial integrity and the monarchy through the publication of a series of articles and caricatures.

On 5th May, Lmrabet decided to go on a hunger strike through which he was able to awaken the interest of the international community. Two days later, he appeared in court and on 21st May he was incarcerated and condemned to four years imprisonment (reduced to three). His two publications were closed and he was fined.

On 23rd June, Lmrabet announced that he was abandoning his hunger strike. Although he already had great support from abroad, the Moroccan governmental authorities insisted on the gravity of the charges and the provocative spirit of Lmrabet's writing which, according to the declarations of the Moroccan Minister of Communication, Nabil Benabdallah, systematically questioned any democratic advance in the country and reiteratively published offensive material, calumnies and insults against Moroccan institutions. Those declarations, made in Paris, prompted in September the lodging of a charge of defamation, currently under preliminary investigation.

The controversy was revived when Lmrabet announced, on 30th November, his decision to resume the hunger strike in protest at the

treatment he had received in Salé prison. The Lmrabet case, to which the judicial processes against other Moroccan journalists are added, culminated in a royal pardon that was granted on 7th January 2004 by King Mohamed VI. Among the others to receive a pardon were the journalist Mohamed el Hourd, the director of *Asharq*, Mustapha Alaoui, the director of *Al Usbue*, Abdelmajid Ben Tahar, chief editor of *Asharq*, Mustapha Kechnini, Abdelaziz Jallouli and Miloud Boutrigui.

Conseil Consultatif des Droits de l'Homme:
<http://www.ccdh.org.ma/>

Association Marocaine des Droits Humains:
<http://www.amdh.org.ma/>

Organisation Marocaine des Droits Humains:
<http://www.omdh.org.ma/>

Comité de Défense des Droits Humains:
<http://www.espaceassociatif.org.ma/html/sites/siteframes/f-cddh.htm>

Forum Marocain pour la Vérité et la Justice:
<http://www.espaceassociatif.org.ma/html/sites/siteframes/f-fvj.htm>

Reporters Without Borders:
<http://www.rsf.org>

Maghreb des Droits de l'Homme:
<http://www.maghreb-ddh.sgdg.org/www/>

monopoly. Professional organisations and trade unions must be legalised in the Arab Gulf states, released from state monopoly in Syria, Libya and Sudan, and permitted freedom and independence in the rest of the Arab world.

Access to Fair Laws and Judiciary Processes

This is a very topical issue in the Arab world, in which journalists and writers are governed by special laws and particular courts. In most Arab countries there exists a special branch of security called the Press Intelligence Service (Mabaheth al-Sahafah), which controlled by the authority of the Ministry of the Interior. Laws governing freedom of expression are so strict that in some countries violation of them can result in the closure of the publication, the imprisonment or fining of the writer, and a lifelong ban from writing for the media. There are examples from Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen,

Syria and Libya in which journalists have been sentenced with one or more of these punishments, with or without a previous trial.

Calls for media law reform in the Arab world have been repeated in media gatherings and journalist meetings. The Arab Journalists' Union are working alongside the Arab Lawyers' Union on a plan to campaign for the removal of restrictive legislation, starting with a campaign to abolish imprisonment as a penalty in cases of freedom of expression. Furthermore, during the APFW second annual conference in Cairo (in May 2003), delegates from Arab countries denominated restrictive laws as an obstacle to the creation of a free and responsible press. The final *communiqué* of the conference called upon Arab governments to abolish all restrictive media laws and urged journalists to step up their struggle against these laws. Arab journalists consider their fight for media law reform as part of the overall struggle for democracy in the Arab world.

Arab Media and Public Opinion

11th September has become a turning point for the Arab media. Fighting terrorism was the banner under which most Arab governments stepped up their fight against freedom of expression. Most Arab governments, such as Algeria, Tunisia Jordan and others, have used the agitation created by the so-called anti-terrorism policies resulting from the 11th September attacks on the USA to restrict this feared freedom. The extension of emergency laws that have been in place for decades and the application of what are denominated national security measures on every aspect of daily life are threatening freedom of expression and the road toward democracy in the Arab world. Secrecy laws, violations of civil liberties, and intervention by the state in media policies in the USA and Western Europe is threatening the struggle for freedom of expression in the Arab world, as some dictators or conservative politicians argue that even in liberal countries freedom of ex-

pression is being restricted after the events of 11th September. Arab public opinion is concerned with two further issues aside from the war on terrorism: Iraq and Palestine.

During the war in Iraq journalists were involved in their own media conflict with each other. They created another war, the Media War. Although the war was widely televised, viewers were mostly confused by conflicting reports sent by journalists in the heart of the action and those working behind Iraqi lines. One group was reporting victorious actions of the troops while the other was informing of the plight of the victims of the war, and this ambiguity meant that the war reports seemed biased. Arab media criticised the journalists in the field, and considered them part of the propaganda mechanics of the Allied Forces, rather than independent and impartial reporters. The fact that they were reporting from only one side of the conflict supported this argument among Arab viewers.

On the other hand, Arab satellite channels such as Arabiya, Abu Dhabi and Aljazeera, were until 9th April reporting from within the Iraqi lines. For reasons of competition between the channels, some war reporters ran unverified stories, or tended to sensationalise their reports. This is a dangerous practice as it destroys the credibility of the press. The confusion that was created regarding the fate of Om Qasr port by front-line journalists during the first four days of the conflict was one of the obvious mistakes that damaged the credibility of the Western media.

Besides, the whole world witnessed a high degree of professionalism and dedication on the part of Arab journal-

ists. This was a new phenomenon that has proven the end of the supremacy of the Western media which dominated the scene in the 1991 Gulf War. Arab journalists should be encouraged by such an achievement and continue their fight for more freedom of expression in their own countries.

On the other hand, Arab media has always given the Palestinian cause a great deal of coverage. News about the conflict in Palestine is the cause of all main headlines in almost every Arab country. State-owned, private and opposition papers compete on who can lead and prevail in the battle in the coverage of the *intifada*. Besides, many Arab journalists have made their names by writing, reporting or investigating aspects of the Palestinian people's plight. In recent years, particularly after the first *intifada*, Arab media organisations started to build up their own operations inside the West Bank and Gaza. The Saudi companies MBC and Arabiya, the Lebanese Almanar, Egyptian television, Abu Dhabi television, Aljazeera and many other Arab satellite channels have all established their own services inside the occupied territories. Thanks to brave Palestinian journalists such as Mazen Da'ana, killed this year in Iraq, Hosam Abu Allan and many others, Arab audience were able to see the realities of the Palestinian people's daily suffering.

Palestinian journalists are not given the liberty to carry out their reporting duties freely. In fact they constitute one of the clearly visible signs that shout out against the so-called Israeli democracy. Palestinian journalists are obliged to obtain permits from the Israeli military forces in order to work; their press cards have mostly been

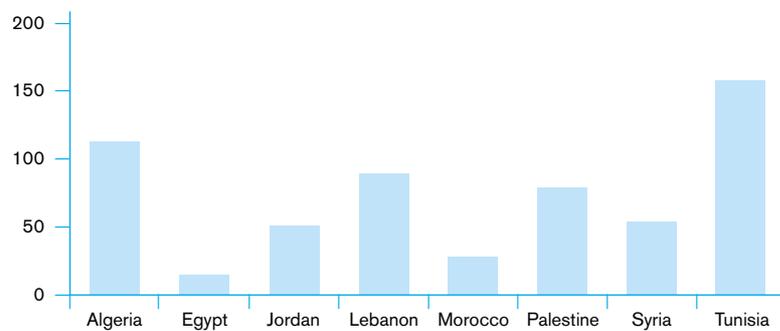
confiscated, and they are harassed and imprisoned, and in some cases killed by Israeli bullets. Palestinian journalists who have paid with their lives for reporting the truth include journalist and cameraman Nazeeh Drowzeh, killed in April by Israeli bullets; Issam El-Talaoui, who was killed by Israeli bullets last September, and in June photographer Imad Abu Zahra died in hospital after being hit by Israeli bullets in Jenin. It is also common Israeli practise to close down newspapers, radio and television stations.

It is clear now that some Arab satellite television stations, and perhaps those that are most influential, try to present Arab viewers with a balanced coverage from Palestine, and with this purpose they invite Israeli officials to speak to the Arab audience. A decade ago Israeli officials could only dream of talking to the Arab public through their own media, and now their wish is granted. They appear on Aljazeera, Arabiya, MBC, Abu Dhabi, the Egyptian Satellite television and many other television channels such as those of Kuwait and Jordan. From time to time, confrontations between Israeli and Palestinian officials are broadcast on the screens of Arab satellite televisions and viewers from both sides may take part in live or recorded programmes. Meanwhile, however, contact between Arab and Israeli journalists is condemned by Arab nationalists and Muslim fundamentalists. Ali Salem, a prominent Egyptian playwright has been boycotted by members of the Egyptian Writers Union and lost his membership, on the grounds that he visited Israel and cooperated with Israeli publishing houses and media institutions. Many Arab journalists relate any kind of cooperation with their Israeli counterparts to a fair and just peace settlement between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

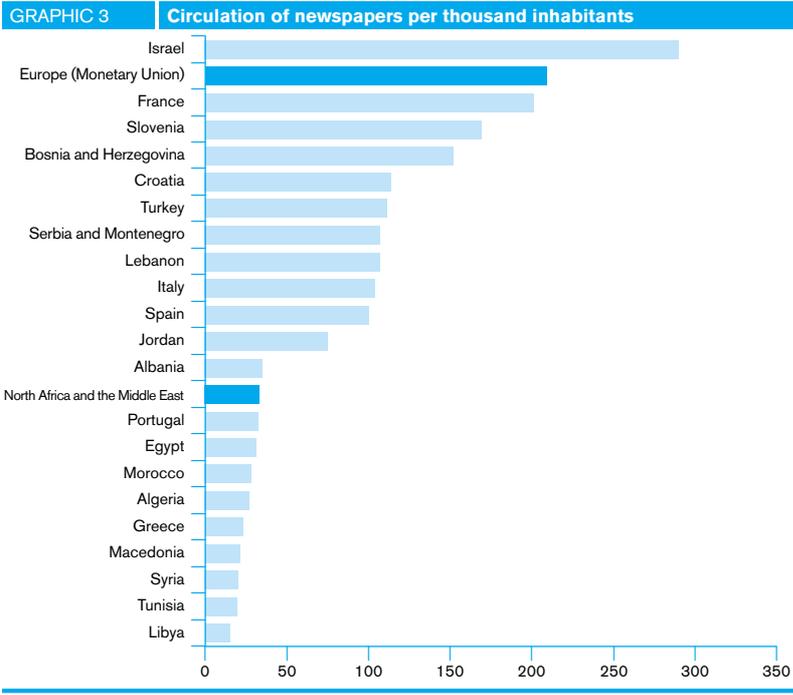
Calling for Political Reform

Since the occupation of Iraq, the winds of change have raised their breath in the Arab world, and the governments are more convinced of the application of the «better to do it yourself» principle. In Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia, Algeria and Moroc-

GRAPHIC 2 Home satellite antennas per thousand inhabitants



Source: ITU: Arab States Telecommunication Indicators (1992-2001)



Source: World Bank, *World Development Indicators*, 2003.

co, as well as in the rest of the Arab world, the talk of political reform is growing in volume, and the media is fulfilling the main role in promoting the discussion. Of course the ruling political clans in the different Arab countries would take great pleasure in introducing cosmetic changes and with them escape from the internal and external political pressure. They employ newspapers, magazines, state owned radio and TV stations to promote their

policies and to strike against their opponents. However, in Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria, pro-democracy journalists are calling for real political reform. In Egypt the call for constitutional reform is particularly strong. The last election, in June 2003, for the council of the Egyptian Journalist Syndicate resulted in the failure of the government candidate for the office of the Head of the Syndicate, while the opposition and inde-

pendent figures were able to achieve a clear victory. In Algeria, parts of the media are engaged in serious confrontation with the President concerning democracy and public liberties. In Tunisia, many brave journalists are fighting against the absolute power of the President, and these pictures are emulated throughout many Arab countries.

In some parts of the Arab world regional or community media play an important part in educating the public about rights and responsibility, but in most cases regional and community media is still new and feeble. Professional, ethical and technical standards need to be raised through funding and training, as the decentralisation of the Arab media is of topmost importance. As mentioned previously, new media such as the internet and websites are also suffering under state control. If the media is to play a positive role in reshaping the future of the Arab world, it needs first of all to be liberated from state control, and to be free and independent. It has to adopt a voluntary code of ethics, by which to guard against the influence of political, religious and business groups. This task is neither simple nor easy, and must be taken seriously on both national and international levels. We must not forget that the Arab world is the most undemocratic area of the entire planet.

www.apfw.org