



# PREDATORS 2021



Eritrea

180/180\*



**Isaias AFWERKI**

Born 2 February 1946

> **President of the Republic of Eritrea**  
since 19 May 1993

> **Predator since 18 September 2001**, the day he suddenly eliminated his political rivals, closed all privately-owned media and jailed outspoken journalists

**PREDATORY METHOD:** Paranoid totalitarianism

The least attempt to question or challenge the regime is regarded as a threat to "national security." There are no more privately-owned media, only state media with Stalinist editorial policies. Journalists are regarded as enemies. Some have died in prison, others have been imprisoned for the past 20 years in the most appalling conditions, without access to their family or a lawyer. According to the information RSF has been getting for the past two decades, journalists may have been held in metal containers, directly exposed to unbearable heat, tortured and deprived of water and medical care. In Eiraeiro prison, where those still held are reportedly located, a chilling message written over an interrogation room says: "If you don't like the message, kill the messenger." Asked in 2009 whether **Dawit Isaak**, a journalist with Swedish and Eritrean dual nationality held since 2001, might be put on trial or released, President Afwerki replied: "We know how to deal with him and others like him and we have our own ways of dealing with that."

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** All outspoken journalists

Journalists who don't toe the official line or who try to reflect the reality of life in Eritrea are systematically persecuted and silenced. There are no longer any independent journalists and media. Those who have avoided imprisonment have changed profession or have left the country. Dozens have journalists have either died in detention, committed suicide, gone missing or fled abroad.

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Complete denial

*"There have never been any imprisoned journalists. There aren't any. You are misinformed."*

(*Al-Jazeera interview, May 2008.*)

*"Again, another lie. It is compromising your credibility as a media outlet. And coming up with a pack of lies and trying to convince anyone by putting them as facts on the ground and trying to give the impression that these are things that exist in the real world."*

(*Al-Jazeera interview, February 2010.*)



Azerbaijan

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**Ilham Aliyev**

Born 24 December 1961

> **President of the Republic of Azerbaijan**  
since 2003

> **Predator since taking office, but especially since 2014**

**PREDATORY METHOD:** Subservient judicial system

Azerbaijan's subservient judicial system convicts journalists on absurd, spurious charges that are sometimes very serious, while the security services never rush to investigate physical attacks on journalists and sometimes protect their assailants, even when they have committed appalling crimes. Under President Aliyev, news sites can be legally blocked if they pose a "danger to the state or society." Censorship was stepped up during the war with neighbouring Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh and the government routinely refuses to give accreditation to foreign journalists.

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Critical journalists

Ilham Aliyev mainly targets independent media and journalists who criticise the government. Investigative reporters are liable to be persecuted if they investigate corruption, embezzlement or money-laundering. After **Zaour Gambarov**, an outspoken reporter who covers social and economic problems in the western Gadabay region for the *Anews.az* website, was physically attacked in connection with his reporting in February 2021, he found himself sentenced to three and a half years in prison on a charge of disturbing public order, before finally receiving a presidential pardon. Aliyev also pursues journalists after they flee abroad and hounds their relatives. **Afgan Mukhtarli**, an investigative reporter who covered corruption and nepotism, fled to neighbouring Georgia but was kidnapped there in 2017, and was brought back and jailed in Azerbaijan. The brother-in-law of **Turkel Azerturk** – a dissident journalist based in the Netherlands and host of a programme for *Turan TV* – was arrested on a drug trafficking charge in 2017. The regime also practices sex-video blackmail. **Khadija Ismayilova**, a journalist who was investigating the Aliyev family's involvement in corruption, was threatened with "public humiliation" in 2012 and, when she refused to abandon her journalism, secretly-filmed intimate scenes of her with her boyfriend were widely circulated online.

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Part denial, part hypocrisy

*"We have free media, we have free Internet. Now, due to the martial law we have some restrictions but before there have been no restrictions. The number of Internet users in Azerbaijan is more than 80 percent. Can you imagine the restriction of media in a country where Internet is free, there is no censorship, and there are 80 percent of Internet users? (...) How can you say that we don't have free media. This is again, a biased approach. This is an attempt to create a perception in Western audience about Azerbaijan. We have opposition, we have NGOs, we have free political activity, we have free media, we have freedom of speech."*

(*Interview for BBC News at the height of the Nagorno-Karabakh war in November 2020.*)

\* 2021 World Press Freedom Index



# PREDATORS 2021



Syria

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**Bashar al-Assad**

Born 11 September 1965

> **President** since 17 July 2000

> **Predator since taking office**

**PREDATORY METHOD:** Criminal and bloody dictatorship

Ever since inheriting the Syrian presidency on his father's death, Bashar Al-Assad has done everything possible to deserve the title of press freedom predator. Long before the start of the uprising and civil war in March 2011, the authorities kept a tight grip on the news reported in the state media and routinely banned foreign journalists from entering the country, while the cyber-police hunted down anyone whose online activities were deemed to pose a threat to the regime's interests. The situation has deteriorated terribly since 2011. Assad is now at the centre of a ferocious system of repression that relies not only on his feared intelligence services but also on "shabihah," civilian thugs who terrorise journalists and anyone presumed to be an opposition supporter. Hundreds of journalists have been physically attacked, arrested, detained arbitrarily and tortured.

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** All journalists, without distinction

More than 700 professional and non-professional journalists have been killed since the start of the civil war in 2011 in government crackdowns or bombardments or as a result of crimes of violence by the various armed groups operating in Syria. Around 100 who were arrested or kidnapped are still missing. Some of the victims had decided to become video reporters in order to cover the abuses that the government was concealing, and for this they were accused of supporting terrorism. Others served as guides for foreign reporters working in the field, or became correspondents for international media outlets.

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Total cynicism

*"She worked with the terrorists, and because she came illegally, she's been responsible of everything that befall on her."*

(Referring, in an interview in English for NBC on 14 July 2016, to Sunday Times journalist Marie Colvin, who was killed while covering the deliberate bombardment of civilians in Homs).

Turkmenistan

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**Gurbanguly BERDYMUKHAMMEDOV**

Born 29 June 1957

> **President of the Republic of Turkmenistan** since 2006

> **Predator since taking office**

**PREDATORY METHOD:** Totalitarian autocracy

Since taking over as president, Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov has often used a reform discourse but the gulf between his words and reality could not be bigger. This is one of the world's most totalitarian regimes. It adopted a media law in January 2013 that proclaims free speech and bans censorship. But that was pure window-dressing. The state continues to have a complete monopoly of the media, which are used to pump out propaganda, and punishes any deviation from the official line very severely.

Since 2008, Berdimukhammedov has been waging a war against satellite dishes, which are used by the population to watch Russian, Turkish or Arabic TV channels and to escape the Turkmen state media's controlled information and stifling propaganda. The only Internet available is a completely expurgated national intranet called "Turkmenet," accessible only to those who show a passport and copy of a document attesting to ownership, rental or free use of the premises where the connection is installed. Use of VPNs is forbidden.

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Clandestine reporters and exile journalists

Several journalists have been detained arbitrarily in the most appalling conditions in recent years and journalists have not forgotten that **Ogulsapar Muradova**, a reporter for *Radio Azatlyk*, the Turkmen branch of *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, died under torture in 2006. *Radio Azatlyk* correspondent **Khudayberdy Allashov** was subjected to electric shock torture while imprisoned in 2017, while the blogger **Nurgeldi Halykov** was given a four-year prison sentence on a trumped-up charge of fraud in 2020 after simply sharing a news website photo. There are hardly any independent journalists left in Turkmenistan, which has been reduced to a vast media desert. Journalists based abroad are attacked and harassed, as are relatives still in Turkmenistan. A few journalists in Turkmenistan still report clandestinely for independent media based outside the country, but they are subjected to unprecedented levels of persecution if caught and most have been forced to abandon their work.

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Authoritarian pressure

*"The Turkmen media do not provide enough coverage of the state's successes."*  
(Message to the media, January 2014).

\* 2021 World Press Freedom Index



# PREDATORS 2021



Cameroon

135/180\*



**Paul BIYA**

Born 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1933

> **President of Cameroon**  
since 6 November 1982

> **Predator since taking office**

**PREDATORY METHOD:** Widespread repression

Independent and critical media are threatened and subjected to regular reprisals. From arrests and threats directed against the pioneers of an independent press in the 1980s to lengthy detentions and prosecutions in more recent years, journalists have been kept under tight control. Those who work in the media have lived under pressure for four decades. Those who show signs of independence by refusing to join the ranks of government mouthpieces have suffered repercussions such as threats, close surveillance of their movements and communications, summonses, arrests, lengthy detentions. The legal framework, among the harshest in sub-Saharan Africa, is used as part of the system of predation. Where the law offers protective provisions, such as a maximum period for detention without trial, it is routinely bypassed. The 2014 antiterrorism law is often used arbitrarily to detain journalists, who are regularly accused of lack of patriotism if they criticize the authorities. In 2017, a government spokesman gave this narrow definition of freedom of the press, which only exists if it is deemed not to threaten the interests or survival of the government: "Journalists can say what they like, provided it is consistent with the defence of our institutions, the state and our government, which today is at war."

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Journalists who do not follow the government line

The founder of the newspaper *Le Messenger*, **Pius Njawé**, a pioneer of independent journalism in Cameroon, and **Amadou Vamouké**, holder of the record for pre-trial detention, are among the journalists who do not follow the government line and incur its wrath. Those working on sensitive subjects such as the fight against terrorism or the crisis in English-speaking regions are particularly vulnerable. *Radio France International* correspondent, Ahmed Abba was released in late 2017 after two-and-a-half years in arbitrary detention. Two years later, fellow journalist **Samual Wazizi**, accused of complicity with the pro-secessionist movement, died in suspicious circumstances after being held in military custody for several days.

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Silence

Paul Biya keeps the media at arm's length, including national outlets, and rarely gives interviews.



Brazil

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**Jair BOLSONARO**

Born 21 March 1955

> **President of Brazil** since 2019

> **Predator since taking office**

**PREDATORY METHOD:** Insults, humiliation and vulgar threats

Self-proclaimed "anti-system candidate," Bolsonaro has advanced himself using social networks, where his rhetoric and ideas resonate widely, bypassing traditional media. Since he took office, the work of the Brazilian press has become exceedingly difficult. His trademark style is to insult, denigrate, and humiliate journalists seen as too critical. For him, the press is "good for nothing," and amounts to "permanent rumours and lies." His combative and foul-mouthed rhetoric is amplified by members of his circle and a well-organised base. Since 2018, the president, his family and his entourage have refined a highly efficient system. On social networks, armies of supporters and bots relay and amplify attacks designed to discredit the press, which is depicted as an enemy of the state.

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Women journalists, political experts and *Globo*

One of the Bolsonaro family's FAVOURITE TARGETS: is the *Globo* TV network, described as "funeral TV," because it has dared to inform Brazilians of the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the number of virus-linked deaths. In 2020, RSF recorded more than 180 attacks against the network, which was accused of wanting to "betray" and "destroy" the country. The network is threatened with non-renewal of its broadcast frequency in 2022. On the ground, its journalists, especially those who cover the presidency from in front of the Alvorada presidential palace are often singled out, humiliated and attacked, sometimes violently, by Bolsonaro family supporters. Sexist and misogynistic attacks against women journalists are also a mark of Bolsonaro's movement. Numerous women journalists, such as **Patricia Campos Mello**, have been hit by sexist attacks and must work under appalling conditions, under attack by digital lynch mobs of the president's supporters.

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Vulgarities

*Some media are "worse than garbage, because garbage is recyclable." "Brazil is bankrupt, there is nothing I can do about it...I wanted to modify the tax-cut scale, but we have this virus that has been fuelled by the press, this useless press."*

(6 January 2021).

*"The press is responsible for the panic in the country, and the loss of lives during the pandemic, a national disgrace."*

*Journalists can go "f... off to their w... mothers" and "stick cans of condensed milk up their a..."*

(27 January 2021).

*"Despicable bastards, you are not patriots... The journalism you do is rotten, corrupt, unscrupulous! You are good for nothing! You only publish lies!"*

(From a 24-minute video by Bolsonaro, broadcast on 29 October 2019, directed at the *Globo* media group).

\* 2021 World Press Freedom Index



# PREDATORS 2021



Thailand

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**Prayut CHAN-O-CHA**

Born 21 March 1954

> **“General - Prime Minister” of the Kingdom of Thailand** since 20 May 2014

> Predator since taking office

**PREDATORY METHOD:** Using “lèse-majesté” charges against critics

Since carrying out a coup d'état and taking over as prime minister in 2014 with the support of the armed forces and monarchy, Gen. Prayut Chan-o-cha has developed an extremely thorough system of information control. From the very first months of his rule, he imposed a relentless regime of terror on all those voicing criticism, who were branded as government opponents. Before his first year as prime minister was over, more than 20 journalists and bloggers had fled abroad to avoid spending years in prison.

Prayut has a tailor-made weapon for cracking down on independent media – a lèse-majesté law that is the most draconian in the world, one that does not just penalise insulting the sovereign. Thanks to the possibility of combined sentences, any ill-considered comment about the monarchy can send someone to prison for up to 60 years. After seizing power, Prayut extended the law's applicability to “national security,” which is tried by military court. The law no longer concerns just criticism of Thailand's absolute monarchy but also comments about the armed forces, the government... or even the king's dog.

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** All opposition

Prayut took power by means of a military coup? Never mind, the army general quickly swapped his military uniform for a prime ministerial three-piece suit. Self-censorship reigns in Thailand and all the mainstream media are strongly encouraged to sing the praises of Prayut's policies. Recalcitrant journalists know they could be fired if they fail to toe the government line. Many pro-opposition media outlets such as Voice TV were banned from broadcasting during the 2019 election campaign.

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Contempt

During a press conference on 9 March 2021, Prayut Cha-o-cha sprayed journalists with hand sanitiser to make them stop asking questions.

*“If you want to ask any questions on politics, ask this guy,”* he said during a press conference on 9 January 2019, pointing to a full-sized photo of himself.

*“We'll probably just execute them,”* he said at a news conference in March 2015, when asked what will happen to journalists who fail to toe the line.



Cuba

171/180\*



**Miguel DÍAZ-CANEL**

Born 20 April 1960

> **President of Cuba** since 10 October 2019

> Predator since taking office

**PREDATORY METHOD:** Soviet-style totalitarianism

The protégé of Raúl Castro, who he replaced as president in 2019 and then as first secretary of the Communist Party of Cuba as well in 2021, Miguel Díaz-Canel is the first Cuban leader since 1959 not to be a member of the Castro family but, following the Castro family tradition, he maintains almost total control over news and information.

TV, radio and print media are all closely controlled by the government while the constitution bans privately-owned media outlets. Journalists who don't toe the party line are subjected to arrests, arbitrary detention, threats of imprisonment, harassment, persecution, illegal home searches and confiscation and destruction of journalistic equipment.

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Independent media outlets, all dissident journalists

Intelligence officers keep a close watch on independent journalists, try to restrict their freedom of movement, subject them to brief arrests and delete information from their phones. Although Internet access is largely controlled by the state, bloggers and citizen-journalists may find a degree of freedom online, but they do so at their risk. Journalists are often jailed while others have been forced to leave the country. The government also monitors the coverage of foreign journalists closely, granting accreditation selectively and expelling those whose reporting is regarded as “overly negative.”

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Authoritarian communism

*“Our journalism is honest, free and sovereign, like the land we defend #WeAreCuba #WeAreContinuity.”*

(A tweet by the president reacting indirectly to the release of RSF's 2020 World Press Freedom – in which Cuba was ranked 171<sup>st</sup> out of 180 countries – on 25 April 2020).

\* 2021 World Press Freedom Index



# PREDATORS 2021



Philippines

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**Rodrigo DUTERTE**

Born 28 March 1945

> **President of the Republic of the Philippines** since 30 June 2016

> **Predator since taking office**

**PREDATORY METHOD:** "Total war" against independent media

After being elected mayor of the southern city of Davao in 1988, Rodrigo Duterte used the pretext of fighting crime to develop a style of governing that showed little respect for the rule of law. The local media quickly became collateral victims of his brutal methods, which tolerate no criticism or even nuanced coverage of his policies.

His openly populist rhetoric, which included having himself nicknamed the "punisher," helped get him elected president in 2016. His presidency has exposed the weakness of the country's democratic system. The executive has enormous power centred on the president. Judges who don't toe the line are pushed aside. Congress tamely endorses all the president's decisions. Backed by most of the private sector, Duterte easily imposes his line on media outlets owned by businessmen that support him. Independent media outlets have assumed the role of opposition, with all the risks that this entails. Thanks to collusion at all levels within the state apparatus, Duterte has an arsenal that he can use to wage "total war" against journalists, an arsenal that includes spurious charges of defamation, tax evasion or violation of capital legislation; rescinding broadcast licences; getting accomplices to buy up media outlets and bring their journalists into line; and using an army of trolls to subject journalists to online harassment.

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** The last sources of resistance

A handful of media outlets have tried to cover Duterte's authoritarian excesses. In March 2017, the irascible president warned them: "I'm not threatening them but someday their karma will catch up with them." They included the country's leading newspaper, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. It was bought up a year later and its journalists were brought to heel. The next target was the country's leading radio and TV network, *ABS-CBN*. In July 2020, the ever-compliant congress sealed its fate by refusing to renew its franchise. He is now targeting the last bastion of press freedom – the *Rappler* news website and its CEO, **Maria Ressa**. Hounded by lawsuits and prosecution brought by Duterte's allies, she is facing the possibility of sentences totalling around 100 years in prison.

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Insults

*"Just because you're a journalist you are not exempted from assassination, if you're a son of a bitch"*

(at his inauguration on 30 June 2016).



Turkey

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**Recep Tayyip ERDOGAN**

Born 26 February 1954

> **President of the Republic of Turkey,** after being prime minister from 2003 to 2014

> **Predator since 2009**

**PREDATORY METHOD:** Aggressive democracy

Turkey's president does not like the media, or rather, he likes the media to be submissive and docile and to sing his praises. He persecutes critics with the help of a law under which they can be prosecuted for "insulting the president" and broad terrorism legislation that allows every kind of abuse. By various political and economic means, he also controls almost all the leading media groups (especially TV channels). The state of emergency declared in July 2016 (after a failed coup) gave him the opportunity to arrest unprecedented numbers of journalists and to close more than 100 newspapers, magazines, TV channels and radio stations. A few courts, including the constitutional court, the court of cassation and the Council of State, have managed to put of some resistance. But the deteriorated climate encourages violence against journalists. More than 100 have been physically attacked in the past five years and one, who worked for a radio station in the city of Bursa, was killed by a listener.

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Critical journalists

Whether left-wing, pro-Kurdish, pro-Gülen, secularist or nationalist – any journalist or media outlet regarded as critical is liable to be prosecuted. Even if Turkey is no longer the world's biggest jailer of journalists, the risk of imprisonment and the fear of having to work under judicial control or being stripped of one's passport are still ubiquitous. Around 50 journalists were briefly arrested in 2020 in connection with their coverage of the situation of Syrian refugees at the border with Greece or the Covid-19 pandemic. Any online reporting that reflects badly on prominent people close to the government is also routinely censored. More than 1,300 links to online articles (about corruption, clientelism and the like) were blocked in 2020 by magistrates under Erdogan's thumb.

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Denial and veiled threats

*"We have never done anything against freedom of expression or media freedom. On the contrary, the press in Turkey has criticised me a great deal, me and my government, and have attacked me a great deal. And despite these attacks, we have been very patient in the way we have responded to these attacks."*

(Interview for *CNN* on 1 April 2016).

\* 2021 World Press Freedom Index



# PREDATORS 2021



Djibouti

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## Ismaïl Omar GUELLEH

Born 27 November 1947

> **President of Djibouti** since 8 May 1999

> **Predator since taking office**

### **PREDATORY METHOD:** Totalitarian dictatorship

The Djibouti government exercises ruthless control over freedom of news and information. In this tiny state in the Horn of Africa, only a handful of media outlets charged with passing on the government's propaganda and communications are allowed to operate. The others are driven underground, into exile or are suppressed. A vast arsenal of predation is deployed to prevent the advent of independent journalism: sources working for foreign media hunted down, arrests, raids, judicial harassment, threats, surveillance, Internet access deliberately restricted, radio stations jammed, news sites censored... Asked in 2020 by *Jeune Afrique* magazine about the complete lack of independent news organisations in his country, Guelleh cited high costs and a small market. In Africa, the Seychelles, with one-tenth of Djibouti's population, has a television station, two radio stations and three privately-owned newspapers. The reason for the blockage is political rather than financial. A national commission responsible for issuing broadcasting licences has never been appointed despite being prescribed in the 1992 Freedom of Communication Law. That law itself is a serious obstacle to freedom of news and information, for example imposing prison sentences for press offences and setting age and nationality requirements for the creation of news organisations.

### **FAVOURITE TARGETS:** All critical voices

Journalists who supply stories and information to foreign media organisations and correspondents of the radio station *La Voix de Djibouti*, which is based abroad but uses sources and journalists in the country, are routinely shadowed and monitored, and regularly arrested.

### **OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Obfuscation

*"The correspondents you are talking about are not proper journalists, but sometimes barely literate fellows who use it as a cover. By the way, we have imprisoned no one."*

(Ismaïl Omar Guelleh talking about the journalists of *La Voix de Djibouti* in an interview with *Jeune Afrique*, November 2020).



Cambodia

144/180\*



## HUN SEN

Born 5 August 1952

> **Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Cambodia** since 14 January 1985  
("Second Prime Minister" from 1993 to 1998)

> **Predator since 2016**

### **PREDATORY METHOD:** Sabotage

Hun Sen has proved impossible to remove in more than 30 years as prime minister and, with the same tenacity, has steadily undermined the press freedom that was initially guaranteed by the 1991 peace accords, to the point that little remains now. Under a semblance of democracy, he has created an opaque system marked by an enormous degree of corruption, with economic and political power concentrated in the hands of a small group with no desire to let nosy journalists pry into their affairs.

Fearing the possibility of defeat in the 2018 parliamentary elections, he began executing a meticulous plan to neutralise independent media outlets in the summer of 2017, deploying an arsenal of measures designed to either ban, obstruct or intimidate them. In the space of a month, no fewer than 30 media outlets were forced to stop operating and journalists were jailed on trumped-up charges.

At the same time, the "Hun Sen system" perfected a propaganda apparatus thanks to the control that his accomplices exercise over Cambodia's mainstream media and, in particular, to the creation of a multimedia news outlet, *Fresh News*, that pumps out pro-government disinformation. In 2021, Hun Sen turned his sights on the few independent media outlets that survive online by starting to build a "Great Firewall" based on the authoritarian Chinese model. When completed, this formidable weapon will allow his government to control the online content that his citizens can access.

### **FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Khmer democracy's last defenders

After the nightmare of the Khmer Rouge regime, the media played an absolutely fundamental role in the construction of democracy in Cambodia from the 1990s onwards. It is these historic press freedom pioneers that Hun Sen's regime has targeted. The *Cambodia Daily*, the country's oldest bilingual (Khmer and English) newspaper, was forced to close in 2017 when the government suddenly demanded the spectacular sum of 5.5 million euros in back taxes. At the same time, more than 30 radio stations had to stop broadcasting news programmes. The purchase of the *Phnom Penh Post*, the last major independent media outlet, by one of Hun Sen's businessmen allies a few months later dealt the final blow to press independence. Today, only a few isolated "foot soldiers" such as the Cambodian Journalists Alliance (CamboJA) do their best to pursue the fight for press freedom.

### **OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Threats (preceding execution)

*"Now the two... who work for Radio Free Asia and Cambodia Daily, who are opposing me all the time... Write things properly. Or you will remember this."*

(Said in May 2017 while pointing to two reporters in the front row of a group of journalists. Both of these media outlets were forced to cease operations in Cambodia a few months later.)

\* 2021 World Press Freedom Index



# PREDATORS 2021



Russia

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## Ramzan KADYROV

Born 5 October 1976

> **President of the Chechen Republic** since 2007

> **Predator since taking office**

### **PREDATORY METHOD:** Reign of terror

Ramzan Kadyrov has established a climate of fear for journalists in Chechnya. He uses the judicial system and police to censor, threaten, attack and imprison media personnel. Journalists are threatened and physically attacked with complete impunity, while the police make a point of taking no action. Calling himself “Vladimir Putin’s foot-soldier,” he uses the Chechen national media such as state-owned Grozny TV to disseminate his propaganda, while “death squads” from the Russian Caucasus periodically target critics in the Chechen diaspora.

### **FAVOURITE TARGETS:** All critics (targeted for elimination)

All critics are to be combatted. Kadyrov likes to refer to liberal Russian media outlets as “traitors” and “enemies of the people,” and he systematically subjects even moderately critical information to categorical rejection. His war against independent information reflects a paranoid vision of the media. Any media outlet or journalist that does not report official speeches or glorify the leader is attacked. At the height of the pandemic in 2020, he threatened to kill the journalist **Elena Milashina** after she wrote a story for *Moscow’s Novaya Gazeta* newspaper about human rights violations being committed in Chechnya on the pretext of combatting the virus, and he then got Roskomnadzor, the federal communications agency, to delete the story. Even critics in other countries are not safe. In 2020, he is alleged to have sent a hitman to kill journalist **Giorgi Gabunia** in Georgia, while a Chechen blogger was attacked in Sweden.

### **OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Death to enemies

On 4 November 2019, Kadyrov said that persons who spread negative information about the Chechen Republic should be “killed, imprisoned and intimidated.”

*“Those who spread rumours are our leading enemies. We are responsible for order and security in our region (...) Those who publish such information must be identified and punished around the clock (...) We will fight these people [journalists] very hard. They spread confusion among us, break the harmony among us, and then make us fight each other.”*

(Comments made on 28 January 2020 during a meeting with Chechen security chiefs, as reported by *Grozny TV*).



Rwanda

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## Paul KAGAME

Born 10 October 1957

> Named **vice president of Rwanda in 1994**, following the genocide. Kagame **rose to the top position in 2002**. The constitution, amended in 2015, allows him to remain in power until 2034.

> **A predator from the time he held senior positions**

### **PREDATORY METHOD:** Instilling fear

Since taking office, Kagame hides behind the memory of the 1994 genocide in order to justify tight control of journalists and media organisations in Rwanda. In that period, media, such as *Radio Mille Collines*, fanned racial hatred. About three decades later, censorship continues, and self-censorship has become the rule, for those who want to avoid becoming government targets. The crime of “insulting the person of the president of the Republic” has been used mainly to muzzle the press. In addition, Kagame is suspected in connection with the death of **Jean-Léonard Rugambage**, deputy editor of the weekly *Umugugizi*, who was murdered while investigating security services’ attempt to murder a general who was exiled in South Africa. To track journalists, the regime relies on intelligence agencies, and informers who are assigned to infiltrate the population. Regime trolls follow, listen to and systematically harass reporters online. As a result, journalists’ sources remain silent, fearing reprisals against them if they speak up. As of this writing, not a sole national private press organization exists in the country.

### **FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Independent journalists

All journalists who openly criticise the president or the regime, who question the development track record, or who bring up killings of Hutus by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (the ruling party) become government targets. Since 1996, RSF has recorded the killings or disappearances of eight journalists, and the convictions of a dozen journalists sentenced to lengthy prison terms. In addition, about 30 journalists were forced into exile.

### **OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Feigned indifference

*“When I hear some of your journalist colleagues express forceful judgements and advice with an authority inversely proportional to their expertise, I have to wonder.”*

(Interview in *Jeune Afrique*, 2018).

*“Freedom of expression? Freedom of the press? Some of them insult people daily. They insult me every day. I could care less. In their cartoons, they call me Hitler – I ignore them, this doesn’t get to me at all. I hold them all in contempt.”*

(Speech at commemoration of the 16<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the genocide, 8 April 2010).

\* 2021 World Press Freedom Index



# PREDATORS 2021



Bahrain

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**Hamad bin Isa Al KHALIFA**

Born 28 January 1950

> **King** since 6 March 1999

> **Predator since 2011**

**PREDATORY METHOD:** Intolerant monarchy

The Bahraini monarchy has taken a tougher approach towards journalists since the Arab Spring protests in 2011. Reporters and photographers have been subjected to constant harassment, there is no longer any independent media, and many critical journalists are serving long jail terms, including life imprisonment, on charges of participating in protests, acts of vandalism or supporting terrorism. Some journalists who fled abroad have been convicted in absentia or stripped of their Bahraini nationality.

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Photojournalists and bloggers

At least 11 journalists are currently held by the authorities. Dozens were arrested and tortured in the weeks following the anti-government protests in 2011. Women journalists and bloggers reported being sexually assaulted and subjected constant mistreatment. After criticising the use of torture in prisons and Bahrain's participation in the war in Yemen, the blogger **Nabil Rajab** spent several years in prison and was eventually released on condition that he remained silent. Another prominent journalist, **Mahmood Al-Jazeera**, is still being held in an isolation cell. He was the editor of *Al-Wasat*, the country's only independent newspaper, which is now closed.

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Barefaced lies

*"We have affirmed our concern and interest, since the beginning of our development process, to provide constitutional and legal guarantees to protect the rights of journalists and media professionals to express their opinions safely and independently, and for their freedom to seek, receive and disseminate information and ideas without restrictions."*

(Statement by the king published on 2 May 2021, the eve of World Press Freedom Day)

*"We fully and consistently support the rights of journalists, writers and staff of media and organisations, who carry out their noble mission without any threat or abuse. We do not, nor will we in the future, tolerate, during our reign, any insult, arrest or detention of any journalist who has exercised their legal and constitutional right to freedom of expression."*

(Statement by the king on 3 May 2021, Press Freedom Day).



Iran

174/180\*



**Ali KHAMENEI**

Born 19 April 1939

> **Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution** since 4 June 1989. President of the Islamic Republic from 1981 to 1989, member of the Council of the Revolution from 1978 to 1981.

> **Predator since 1981**

**PREDATORY METHOD:** Orwellian theocracy

The creator of a Sharia-based penal system, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei often accuses independent media of being manipulated by foreign forces. As head of the country's main political, military and judicial institutions, he orders the arrests of journalists and the long prison sentences (or sometimes death sentences) that the courts give them. The Revolutionary Guards, which he controls, are directly involved in monitoring and harassing journalists, who often summoned for questioning and detained in appalling conditions. Since the advent of the Internet, the Supreme Leader and his agents have also monitored the purity of social media content, imposing a "Halal Internet." Millions of online pages of freely and independently reported information have been blocked and more than 350 newspapers have been closed since 1981.

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** All independent and critical media and journalists

At least 1,000 journalists and citizen-journalists have been arrested, detained, murdered, subjected to enforced disappearance or executed by the Iranian regime since 1979. Iran continues to be the country that has officially executed the most journalists in the past 50 years. The latest victim was **Rouhollah Zam**, the editor of the *AmadNews* website and Telegram channel, who was executed on 12 December 2020.

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** National religious relativism

*"Nowadays some people consistently repeat the phrase 'newly acquired press freedom.' In my view it does not refer to any fact. It is something whose sources are hostile foreign radios."*

(Address to students at Tarbiat Modarres University, 3 September 1998).

*"Our enemies make the most of cyberspace. Unfortunately, the necessary controls are not being carried out in our country's cyberspace, despite all the emphasis I have put on it, and in a sense, it is really 'relaxed.' Those in charge must be attentive (...) Cyberspace must be managed. People should take advantage of this opportunity (...) But we shouldn't give the enemy the means to conspire against the country and the nation. Our enemies use this space."*

(Message posted on social media, 24 March 2021).

\* 2021 World Press Freedom Index



# PREDATORS 2021



Pakistan

145/180\*



**Imran KHAN**

Born 5 October 1952

> **Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan** since 18 August 2018

> **Predator since taking office**

**PREDATORY METHOD:** Military, with dictatorial tendencies

Imran Khan likes the limelight. A former national cricket team star and fashionable jet-setter attending elegant receptions in European capitals, he dedicated himself to philanthropic activities for a while before entering politics in the 1990s. For years his party struggled, making little headway.

But everything changed in the run-up to the 2018 parliamentary elections. In the shadows, behind candidate Khan, the military reasserted the “deep state,” a euphemism for what in Pakistan means permanent supremacy of the armed forces and the feared military intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), over civilian power. With his ideological mix of populism and religious conservatism, Khan was seen as the ideal candidate to look good on the public stage without ever questioning the all-powerful military’s authority behind the scenes. Let him have the limelight, pro-government media, social media and controversies about the law on blasphemy. In the shadows, the military establishment concentrates on suppressing all forms of independent journalism because it cannot stand anyone meddling in its affairs.

Cases of brazen censorship are legion since Khan became prime minister. Newspaper distribution has been interrupted, media outlets have been threatened with the withdrawal of advertising and TV channel signals have been jammed. Journalists who cross the red lines have been threatened, abducted and tortured. In the shadows, behind Khan in the limelight, Pakistan is reliving some of the worst moments of its past military dictatorships.

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Critics (better watch out)

*“Stop covering annoying stories or your family won’t see you alive again.”*

This, in substance, is the message given to the many journalists and bloggers who have been the targets of kidnappings and death threats since Khan became prime minister. Even those who have chosen to live abroad for security reasons have been subjected to intimidation attempts and physical attacks in the countries where they thought they had found a refuge.

Cyberspace, the last sanctuary for free speech and freely-reported news and information, is being subjected to increasingly draconian censorship measures by Khan’s government, while troll armies harass and vilify all journalists and bloggers who dare express criticism, automatically labelling them as anti-Pakistan, anti-military and... anti-Khan. The circle is complete.

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Questionable humour

*“Pakistan has one of the freest presses in the world (...) To say there are curbs on the Pakistan press is a joke.”*

(Press conference in Washington in July 2019, a few hours after viewers of Pakistan’s leading TV news channel, Geo News, suddenly saw their screens go blank.)



South Sudan

139/180\*



**Salva KIIR**

Born 13 September 1951

> **First and only president of South Sudan** since it became independent in 2011

> **Predator since becoming president**

**PREDATORY METHOD:** Constant censorship and harassment

South Sudan is one of Africa’s most hostile and dangerous countries for journalists. Ten reporters have been murdered or killed with impunity since its creation in 2011. As well as an extremely fraught security environment, journalists are subjected to censorship and harassment. The security services are widely used to prevent them from working and to act as an editorial police, infiltrating news media, confiscating newspaper issues as they come off the press, arresting journalists arbitrarily and holding them incommunicado. The climate of fear is such that several journalists have fled the country. These predatory policies are directly encouraged and endorsed by the president, who has threatened to kill journalists he regards as hostile to his interests.

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Independent journalists

Journalists risk their freedom, their safety and even their lives if they try to cover the government’s failures, human rights abuses by the security forces, the disastrous humanitarian and economic consequences of the civil war that broke out in 2013, the political situation or the rivalry between the president and his leading opponent, Riek Machar, who was reinstated as vice-president for the third time in 2020. The victims include **Peter Moi**, who was shot dead in his home in 2015, and **Christopher Allen**, a US-British freelance war reporter who sustained fatal gunshot injuries in civil war fighting in August 2017. He was described as a “white rebel” by the authorities, who made no serious attempt to investigate his death and establish who was responsible.

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Direct threats

*“Freedom of the press does not mean that you work against your country. And if anybody among [the journalists] does not know this country has killed people, we will demonstrate it one day on them.”*

(News conference on 16 August 2015).

\* 2021 World Press Freedom Index



# PREDATORS 2021

The Democratic People's  
Republic of Korea

179/180\*



**KIM Jong-un**

Born on 8 January 1984

> **Supreme Leader of North Korea**  
since 17 December 2011

> Predator since taking office

**PREDATORY METHOD:** Totalitarian surveillance, mass propaganda and the death penalty

The late dictator Kim Jong-il's youngest son and successor, Kim Jong-un is the supreme leader of a totalitarian regime that bases its power on surveillance, repression, censorship and propaganda. Kim constantly tramples on Article 67 of the country's constitution, enshrining freedom of the press, and restricts the media to imparting content that praises the party, the military and himself. As a result of the regime's desire for complete isolation from the world, journalists have been arrested, deported, sent to forced labour camps and killed. The few foreign reporters allowed to visit the country are barred from talking with ordinary citizens and are followed at every step by officials, which results in North Korea being one of the least-visited destinations for journalists worldwide. North Korean citizens can only legally access news provided by the regime's propaganda mouthpiece, the *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)*, and can be sentenced to life imprisonment in a concentration camp just for watching or listening to smuggled information from abroad, while anyone caught importing large amounts of content could face the death penalty.

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Foreign journalists

International media outlets with a presence in the country are closely watched and independent reporting remains nearly impossible. Foreign journalists who manage to enter North Korea need to be prepared for possible harassment by the government. **Rupert Wingfield-Hayes**, a British journalist working for the BBC, was arrested and deported in May 2016 for "attacking the system of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea" and practicing "non-objective journalism." In 2017, four South Korean journalists were sentenced to death in absentia by a North Korean court after giving positive reviews of *North Korean Confidential*, a book critical of the regime.

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Totalitarian control

*"Elementary propaganda officials must become fearless zealots who work tirelessly until people fully understand the Party's policies and until their unit projects reach the height desired by the Party. We need propagandists and mobilisers who continue to spread flames."*

(Kim Jong-un in a letter to propaganda officials on 9<sup>th</sup> March, 2019).

Hong Kong

80/180\*



**Carrie LAM**

Born 13 May 1957

> **Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China** since 2017

> **Chairperson of the Committee for Safeguarding National Security** since 2020

> Predator since 2019

**PREDATORY METHOD:** Stick, and draconian legislation

When Carrie Lam was appointed as Chief Executive of Hong Kong in 2017, she quickly extended governmental press accreditation to online media outlets, giving the impression that she might help to improve press freedom. But Lam soon showed her true colours as Chinese President Xi Jinping's puppet and has since consistently tried to defend his indefensible censorship policies under the name of "patriotism."

The draft amendment she introduced in 2019, allowing extradition to Mainland China, including the extradition of journalists of whom Beijing disapproved, triggered mass protests. During those protests, journalists were subjected to physical violence by the police, violence that Lam kept refusing to recognise. She went on to praise the National Security Law that Beijing imposed in June 2020 so that it could intervene directly in Hong Kong in order to arbitrarily punish what it regarded as "terrorism", "secession", "subversion", and "foreign interference." Punishable by life imprisonment or even the death penalty, these charges opened the way to arbitrary arrests of journalists.

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Public broadcasters, independent media outlets

Carrie Lam has relentlessly targeted symbols of press freedom in Hong Kong. By freezing the financial assets of *Apple Daily*, one of the few mainstream Chinese-language media outlets still openly critical of Beijing, she forced the newspaper to shut down in June 2021. Lam also orchestrated the judicial harassment of *Apple Daily* founder **Jimmy Lai**, a 2020 RSF Press Freedom Prize laureate, and former legislator and former journalist **Claudia Mo**, who were arrested in 2021 and charged under the National Security Law. Lastly, Lam launched a full-blown intimidation campaign against public broadcaster *Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK)*, appointed a new director of broadcasting tasked with setting up an internal censorship system, and took editorial interference to the next level by imposing her own daily talk show, which was broadcast for a month from 28 April 2021.

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** A particular vision of freedom and human rights

*"It's not a problem to criticise the Hong Kong government, but if there is an intent to organise activities to incite the subversion of the government then that is, of course, a different thing [...] Media friends should have the ability to distinguish between them."*

(Carrie Lam during a press conference on press freedom and the police raid on *Apple Daily* headquarters on 22 June 2021).

\* 2021 World Press Freedom Index



# PREDATORS 2021



Singapore

160/180\*



**LEE Hsien Loong**

Born 10 February 1952

> **Prime Minister of Singapore**  
since 12 August 2004

> **Predator since taking office**

**PREDATORY METHOD:** Self-censorship and systematic gagging

The son of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, the city-state's founder, Lee Hsien Loong has perpetuated his father's one-party state and his "benevolent dictatorship" approach, one that amounts to saying: "Sleep in peace good people, your government is thinking for you." There is no room for press freedom in this system. And to guarantee this, Lee has developed a relentless apparatus for news and information control. His first weapon is pre-emptive. Two big business groups own all of Singapore's mainstream media outlets, and it is Lee's government that directly appoints those who run them. Self-censorship is therefore the rule regarding any subject that might concern him. His second weapon is deployed after the event whenever required. The government-controlled Media Development Authority has the power to order the removal of any online content and to order the closure of any media outlet in an entirely arbitrary manner. At the same time, Lee is fond of suing bloggers he doesn't like. He has an army of lawyers who sue them for astronomical sums, subjecting them to interminable legal proceedings with the aim of silencing them. Finally, an "anti-fake news" law that took effect in November 2019 has completed the government's repressive armoury by giving it nothing less than the right to decide whether any news story is "true" or "false."

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** David (beaten by Goliath)

As all the mainstream print, radio, TV and online media are subjected to the government line straitjacket, only a handful of news websites and blogs try, with difficulty, to provide Singaporeans with reliable and independently reported news and information. Their administrators are often sued by Lee in person. The blogger **Leong Sze Hian** had to launch a crowdfunding appeal in May 2021 in a bid to raise the 165,000 euros he had been ordered to pay Lee simply for sharing a Facebook referring to alleged corruption. *The Online Citizen* editor **Terry Xu** has been forced to spend his nights studying Singaporean criminal procedure because he cannot afford to pay lawyers to defend him against Lee's lawsuits.

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Crush the "ants"

"We have learnt to live with all these ant bites."

(On 6 October 2022, referring to a blogger who Lee had sued for 80,000 euros).



Belarus

158/180\*



**Alexander LUKASHENKO**

Born 30 August 1954

> **President of the Republic of Belarus**  
since 1994

> **Predator since taking office but more so since August 2020**

**PREDATORY METHOD::** State terror

Labelled as "Europe's last dictator" by the western media, Alexander Lukashenko has subjected journalists to an unprecedented level of persecution since his disputed reelection in August 2020. One of his priorities is preventing any media coverage of street protests and to this end he has carried out mass arrests of journalists, subjected them to threats, violence and even torture, disconnected the Internet and censored leading news websites and print media outlets.

He has also modified legislation in order to obstruct the media and criminalise their work. Journalists covering unauthorised events are now regarded as participants in the event. Livestreaming has been banned and the list of reasons for denying accreditation is now much longer. Trumped-up charges are now also part of his arsenal. The subservient judicial system has begun to treat the work of independent journalists as "extremism." The scale of the crackdown has forced many journalists to flee abroad, especially to Poland, Ukraine and the Baltic states.

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Independent journalists, hounded relentlessly

Many journalists are currently detained arbitrarily. Lukashenko stops at nothing to silence journalists and even forced a passenger jet flying over Belarus to land in Minsk so that he could arrest one, **Raman Pratasevich**, in an unprecedented action designed to terrorise journalists, both those in Belarus and those living abroad. Pratasevich and other journalists such **Alyaksandr Buraku**, the correspondent of the German public radio broadcaster *Deutsche Welle*, have suffered an alarming fate in prison that includes torture and inhuman treatment. The executives of the leading independent news website *Tut.By* have meanwhile been accused of tax fraud without a shred of evidence.

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Radical

"Don't wait until the end of the election campaign. Throw them out now if they don't respect our laws and try to reproduce [Ukraine's Maidan revolution] here."

(In comments to government officials on 23 June 2020, accusing international media outlets, especially *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* and the *BBC*, of causing rioting in Belarus).

"I understand different opinions perfectly. In the media, there must be debates and alternative discourse. But as in all countries, freedom of expression is regulated by the law."

(During a meeting with representatives of the leading Belarusian media on 9 July 2020).

\* 2021 World Press Freedom Index



# PREDATORS 2021



Venezuela

148/180\*



## Nicolás MADURO

Born 23 November 1962

> **President of Venezuela** since 2013

> **Predator since taking office**

**PREDATORY METHOD:** Censorship and deliberately orchestrated economic strangulation

The Maduro administration's authoritarian and abusive treatment of independent media has not let up since 2017. Journalists are subjected to arbitrary arrest and violence by the police and intelligence services. The National Telecommunications Commission (CONATEL) strips overly critical radio and TV stations of their broadcast frequencies, and coordinates Internet cuts, social media blocking and confiscation of equipment. Most opposition print media have not survived all the various forms of harassment, while online media are subjected to repeated cyber-attacks that make their reporting more and more complex and expensive. Foreign reporters are often arrested, questioned and deported. Many of Venezuelan journalists have been forced to flee the country since 2018 because of the threats and physical dangers.

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Privately-owned media, the newspaper *El Nacional*

More than 100 media outlets have closed since Maduro became president while *El Nacional*, the prestigious national daily founded in 1943, had to stop producing a print version in December 2018. It is still active online but continues to be one of the government's FAVOURITE TARGETS. Its headquarters was seized on 14 May 2021 and it was ordered to pay 13 million US dollars (about 11 million euros) to Diosdado Cabello, a parliamentarian who is Vice-President of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, the ruling party founded by the late President Hugo Chávez. Cabello's libel suit could result in *El Nacional* being permanently stripped of its headquarters and all of its assets in Venezuela. In 2021, the government accused several NGOs and independent media, including the *Efecto Cocuyo*, *Caraota Digital* and *El Pitazo* news sites and *Radio Fe y Alegría*, of being "journalism mercenaries" and of receiving foreign funding to bring down the government.

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Paranoid denigration

"Much of the media war to which Venezuela is being subjected is designed to ensure that no one comes near Venezuela, that no one comes to invest, although Venezuela is the best country in the world to invest in."

(Speech on 11 February 2019 launching "Marca País" (Country Brand), an initiative intended to promote tourism and exports and show the "real country")

"I denounce the international campaign waged by CNN in Spanish, this laboratory of lies, psychological warfare and garbage against the country, against Venezuela. A campaign that is also organised by NTN24, a trashy television channel funded by the paramilitary Alvaro Uribe, and by the Miami Herald, the media that is the depository of all the lies against Venezuela (...) [Media] that are full of hate, rage and madness. [Media] that try to poison and to pour their poison on Venezuela and the world."

(Speech at the inauguration of 80 homes at Caricuao, Caracas, on 18 September 2014).



Myanmar

140/180\*



## MIN AUNG HLAING

Born 3 July 1956

> **Chairman of the State Administration Council of Myanmar** since 1 February 2021

> **Predator since 2011**

**PREDATORY METHOD:** Terror

Gen. Min Aung Hlaing had chomped at the bit for ten years, since becoming armed forces commander-in-chief in 2011. That was the year the then military junta disbanded after ruling with an iron hand for nearly half a century and allowed a free and dynamic press to begin developing. But this army general never ceased to keep a close eye on the media and oversaw censorship and disinformation. In fact, he played a central role in the dissemination of fake news and hate speech in the run-up to the genocide of Myanmar's Rohingya population in 2017. Using his networks within the police and courts, he managed to censor all independent reporting on this subject.

In the light of his dominant role in the political and media domains for ten years, the coup that he carried out on 1 February 2021 was only a partial surprise. With the military back in power, Myanmar found itself overnight in the same situation as under the previous junta, when the media were subject to prior censorship and journalists were arrested by the truck-load, tortured and locked in dog cages. Since staging the coup, Min Aung Hlaing has subjected the media to a rapidly expanding crackdown in which all independent outlets have been closed, dozens of journalists have been imprisoned, and complete control is now exercised over what the press reports. Terror is back.

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Anyone covering the horror

While just armed forces commander-in-chief, Min Aung Hlaing already demonstrated the extent of his ability to create problems for the media. The highest profile case was that of **Wa Lone** and **Kyaw Soe Oo**, two *Reuters* reporters who paid a high price for managing to investigate a massacre of Rohingya civilians in 2017. The victims of political and judicial machinations, they were sentenced to seven years in prison just for doing their job. This decision, taken by a single man, Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, despite widespread international condemnation, had a devastating effect on the entire journalistic profession, which could now clearly see what the price was for tackling stories he regarded as off limits. Nonetheless, after the 2021 coup, journalists heroically covered the protests against the junta for weeks. Arrested and tortured, they were among the first victims of his horrific repressive apparatus.

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Denial

"The media (...) plays a crucial role in enhancing the freedom of expression for democracy [and] improving the government's transparency by distributing knowledge to the people."

(Statement issued on 3 May 2021, World Press Freedom Day, two weeks after all media outlets not controlled by his administration were forced to close).

\* 2021 World Press Freedom Index



# PREDATORS 2021



India

142/180\*



## Narendra MODI

Born 17 September 1950

> **Prime Minister of India**  
since 26 May 2014

> **Predator since taking office**

### **PREDATORY METHOD:** National-populism and disinformation

After becoming Gujarat's chief minister in 2001, he used this western state as a laboratory for the news and information control methods he deployed after being elected as India's prime minister in 2014. His leading weapon is to flood the mainstream media with speeches and information tending to legitimise his national-populist ideology. To this end, he has developed close ties with billionaire businessmen who own vast media empires. This insidious strategy works in two ways. On the one hand, by visibly ingratiating himself with the owners of leading media outlets, their journalists know they risk dismissal if they criticise the government. On the other, prominent coverage of his extremely divisive and derogatory speeches, which often constitute disinformation, enables the media to achieve record audience levels. All that is left for Modi is to neutralise the media outlets and journalists that question his divisive methods. For this, he has a judicial arsenal with provisions that pose a major threat to press freedom. For example, journalists risk the possibility of life imprisonment under the extremely vague charge of sedition. To round off this arsenal, Modi can count on an army of online trolls known as "yodha" (the Hindi word for "warriors"), who wage appalling hate campaigns on social media against the journalists they don't like, campaigns that almost routinely include calls for the journalists to be killed.

### **FAVOURITE TARGETS:** "Sickulars" and "presstitutes"

Gauri Lankesh, a journalist gunned down outside her home in September 2017, is the best-known victim of Hindutva, the ideology that spawned the Hindu nationalist movement that worships Modi. As a rule, any journalists or media outlets that question the prime minister's national-populist ideology are quickly branded as "sickular" – a portmanteau of "sick" and "secular" – and are targeted by "bakht," Modi devotees who bring lawsuits against them, defame them in the mainstream media and coordinate online attacks against them. The attacks are even more virulent if the targets are women journalists, who are labelled as "presstitutes." Rana Ayyub and Barkha Dutt, for example, were subjected to calls for them to be gang-raped and their personal data was posted online to facilitate attacks.

### **OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Media against journalism

"Today the masks are off all journalists, The crisis of credibility is not of the media but the person who is working there. So, stop abusing us."  
(12 May 2019).



Uganda

125/180\*



## Yoweri MUSEVENI

Born on 15 August 1944

> **President since 1986**, one of the longest-serving leaders in Africa and the world. Won a sixth term in 2021 in an election marked by widespread police abuses, including against journalists

> **Predator since the mid-1990s**

### **PREDATORY METHOD:** Hate speech and harassment

Yoweri Museveni often uses threats, insults and curses to publicly attack the journalists and media that criticise him or his authoritarian methods. He has called them "parasites," "stupid," "evil" and "enemies of the state." At a joint press conference with Rwandan President Paul Kagame in 2018, he referred to them as "rumour mongers [who] should always get something to eat" while Kagame smirked.

Museveni's verbal attacks serve as a green light for the harassment of journalists by the security services, who use physical violence, arrest them arbitrarily and destroy their equipment. Censorship is also used. The Internet is often disconnected while social media are monitored by a team of police officers and ICT experts. Economic, administrative and judicial harassment completes the repressive methods. Social media account holders have been subject to a daily tax since 2018, advertisers are pressured not to place ads with critical media outlets, while the latter are sometimes suspended arbitrarily or prosecuted with the aim of silencing them.

### **FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Independent journalists and media

Independent journalists and media – both Ugandan and foreign – are targeted when they cover sensitive subjects such as the regime's authoritarianism, the opposition, the country's economic problems, human rights violations, poor governance, corruption and human rights violations by the police.

### **OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Insults and contempt

"Yes, we are committed to the freedom of the press, but see, the press, especially the Western press, is arrogant. You don't want to learn; you know it all. Then you come on and impose your ignorance on our society. So that's the problem we are having. How can we continue dealing with these arrogant ignoramuses?"

(Interview for NPR, 12 January 2021).

\* 2021 World Press Freedom Index



# PREDATORS 2021



Equatorial Guinea

164/180\*



## Teodoro OBIANG NGUEMA

Born 5 June 1942

> Teodoro Obiang Nguema **took power in a 1979 coup d'état**. After more than four decades running the country, he has **held power longer than any other president in the world**.

> Predator since taking office

### PREDATORY METHOD: Totalitarian dictatorship

Obiang Nguema has run Equatorial Guinea with an iron hand since taking power more than 40 years ago. In the little oil state in the Gulf of Guinea, depicted as the “Kuwait of Africa,” the press is muzzled by draconian and obsolete laws that make any criticism of the president and his policies virtually impossible. The press landscape is limited almost exclusively to state media assigned to relay government propaganda. No foreign correspondent is stationed in the country, and the government does not recognize independent media. The only private television network, *ASONGA TV*, is owned by the president’s son, who is also the country’s vice president. The network is subject to strict censorship. Those who cross the line are arrested or suspended from work. The latter action was taken against seven journalists accused in 2020 of having reported on military violence against a man caught violating a Covid-19 lockdown. Three years earlier, copies of a weekly that had reported on pressure against journalists were recalled and ordered burned. Social networks, the only viable option for the free circulation of information, are ceaselessly discredited by the government in a recently launched campaign.

### FAVOURITE TARGETS: Critical voices

Journalists who dare to criticise the president, his family, security forces, corruption and the authoritarian system, despite limited space for independent information, are systematically arrested, suspended or fired. With the exception of sports competitions held in the country, and other rare events, foreign journalists’ requests for accreditation are invariably rejected.

### OFFICIAL DISCOURSE: Hypocrisy

*“This country is not the one you read about in the international media ... Most of the criticisms of my country and myself are not based on facts and realities in the country. Our doors are open to media and all groups... They should come and see things for themselves.”*

(Obiang Nguema in an interview, *Africa Watch*, September 2012).



Vietnam

175/180\*



## NGUYEN Phu Trong

Born 14 April 1944

> **General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam** since 19 January 2011

> Predator since taking office

### PREDATORY METHOD: Atavistic totalitarianism

Nguyen Phu Trong knows about journalism because he was a journalist himself for much of his adult life. Or at least he knows about the Vietnamese version of journalism. Vietnam has thousands of newspapers, magazines, TV channels and news websites, but just one editor, the head of the central propaganda department of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), who follows the General Secretary’s direct orders.

Trong is the classic apparatchik who rose through the party, got himself appointed chairman of the National Assembly in 2006 and finally head of the politburo five years later. But “Comrade Nguyen” is also a formidable tactician who has used Machiavellian methods to impose a conservative line within the one-party-state and restore an atavistic version of party totalitarianism. Specialised publications that traditionally reflected ideological and pragmatic debates taking place within the party were reined in after Trong was given a second five-year term as general secretary in 2016.

At the same time, Trong has established an unrelenting system of repression to deal with an increasingly robust civil society seeking reliable information, especially on the Internet. To this end, he can count on a police and judicial apparatus that follows orders. To prosecute independent bloggers and journalists, he uses articles in the penal code that, inter alia, penalise those who dare to “abuse democratic freedoms.”

### FAVOURITE TARGETS: Those who reject propaganda

The preferred place for circulating independently reported information and opinions straying from the party line, the Internet is now the focus of attacks by Trong and by Force 47, a cyber-troll unit that gets its orders from Trong. The leading targets are bloggers and cyber-dissidents who have been posting widely online since the start of the 2010s and have been subjected to mass arrests and long prison sentences since 2016. More than 30 of them are currently jailed in appalling conditions.

Trong’s regime also targets journalists who, like him, began their careers in the official press but, unlike him, could not bear to continue regurgitating politburo propaganda and began working to create a free press. Several of them have been arrested since 2020, including **Pham Doan Trang**, who was awarded the RSF Press Freedom Prize in 2019.

### OFFICIAL DISCOURSE: No pluralism

*“Under my rule, the Party Central Committee vows to firmly continue the fight against the expression of political pluralism”*  
(addressing the CPV congress on 26 January 2021).

\* 2021 World Press Freedom Index



# PREDATORS 2021



Hungary

92/180\*



**Viktor ORBÁN**

Born 31 May 1963

> **Prime Minister of Hungary** since 29 May 2010 (after serving initially in 1998-2002)

> **Predator since taking office**

**PREDATORY METHOD:** Political-economic scams, discrediting, self-censorship

Self-proclaimed champion of “illiberal democracy,” Orbán has not stopped, since returning to power in 2010, from attacking media pluralism and independence. After public broadcasting was turned into a propaganda organ, private media were subjugated or reduced to silence. The methods may be subtle or brazen, but they are always efficient. Thanks to political-economic manoeuvres and the purchase of media companies by oligarchs close to Fidesz, the ruling party, it now controls 80 per cent of the country’s media landscape. At the top is the Kesma foundation, which owns approximately 500 pro-government media organisations. The remaining independent media are discriminated against in government advertising and access to official information. Their journalists are systematically denigrated in pro-government media, which call them purveyors of “fake news.” This charge was made a criminal offence during the Covid-19 crisis, with the effect of self-censorship on journalists and their sources. These varied predatory techniques have proved so effective that they have inspired Orbán’s Polish and Slovenian allies.

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Independent media holdouts

After the closing of the daily *Népszabadság* and oligarchs’ assumption of control over news sites *Origo.hu* and *Index.hu*, the government has targeted the RTL channel, the daily *Népszava*, and weeklies *HPV*, *Magyar Hang*, *Magyar Narancs*, and the *24.hu* site. The latest move: a political decision by the supposedly independent radio-television regulatory agency to deprive *Klubrádio* of its broadcast frequency.

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Belligerent

*“We must fight against...media maintained by foreign groups and domestic oligarchs.”*

(Speech delivered in 2018 to celebrate the 170<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1848 revolution).

*“This is not the moment ... to go into hospitals in order to produce staged videos or spread fake news.”*

(Response to a demand by 28 independent media for access to hospitals and to interviews with medical personnel during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020)



Nicaragua

121/180\*



**Daniel ORTEGA**

Born 11 November 1945

> **President of Nicaragua** since 2007 (after having served for the first time in 1979-1990)

> **Predator since his re-election for a third consecutive term, in November 2016**

**PREDATORY METHOD:** Economic suffocation and judicial censorship

Since late 2016, the independent press has been living a nightmare, under constant pressure by the Ortega government and its Sandinista National Liberation Front supporters. They are trying to silence critical voices using a number of tactics: threats, persecution, harassment and defamation campaigns, arbitrary arrests and detentions. A “law to regulate foreign agents” is designed to closely monitor media organisations and groups that receive financing from abroad. Ortega stops at nothing to control information. He has put in place a sordid system of economically choking independent media: Discriminatory policies in awarding government advertising, in granting radio and television frequencies, in limiting the importation of supplies and material. In addition, independent media are subjected to abusive audits, and private advertisers are pressured not to buy space in independent media. In September 2018, the government went so far as to explicitly prohibit the supplying of ink, paper and rubber, leading most of the country’s print newspapers to close. Finally, with an eye to the November 2021 presidential election, Ortega has stepped up information control, launching abusive prosecutions against all oppositionists, both in the political class and the media.

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** The Chamorro family and private media

Publisher Carlos Chamorro, founder of the *Confidencial* news site, and his sister, Cristiana, founder of the Violeta Chamorro Foundation, which advocates for freedom of the press, are the president’s major targets. Chamorro, a fierce critic of Ortega, had to seek temporary exile in Costa Rica in 2019, because of threats and attacks fed by the government. Cristiana Chamorro, a journalist who became a presidential candidate in 2021, has been under house arrest since 3 June, on a government charge of money laundering. Nearly 20 journalists close to the foundation have been interrogated and intimidated by the prosecutor’s office, with the aim of legally overwhelming her, and blocking her election campaign.

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Paranoid and exaggerated

*“Disinformation terrorism, directed from the United States and taken at face value by media from many countries, especially Costa Rica, is brutal, criminal and xenophobic.”*

(May 2020, in a speech directed at Costa Rican and American media – *La Nación*, *Telenoticias*, *Noticias Repretel*, *CNN*) – reviewing government statistics and rhetoric on management of the public health crisis).

*“Journalists are the children of Goebbels.”*

(28<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Nicaraguan Army, 1 September 2007).

\* 2021 World Press Freedom Index



# PREDATORS 2021

Russia

150/180\*



## Vladimir PUTIN

Born 7 October 1952

> **President (or prime minister) of the Russian Federation** since 2000

> **Predator since taking office**

### **PREDATORY METHOD:** Nationalist authoritarianism

Catapulted into the presidency in 2000 after a decade of dilution of authority, Putin has always had an overriding obsession with control. The media quickly felt the effects of his concern to impose top-down authority, called the “power vertical,” during his first two terms as president, when all the national TV channels were gradually brought under the Kremlin’s control from the start of the 2000s and Russian citizens were inundated with propaganda.

The authoritarianism became even more pronounced after Putin’s return to the presidency in May 2012 and an unprecedented wave of protests. The regime reacted to the new civil society assertiveness with a string of draconian laws criminalising protests and limiting free speech. The “foreign agents” law, which has applied to all the media since 2017, causes major financial problems for independent media such as *Meduza*, has forced some to close, and has even forced some journalists to label themselves as “foreign agents.”

Press freedom has been visibly and massively flouted by the police during protests in support of Putin opponent Alexei Navalny. The grip on the Internet has been steadily tightened since 2012 by means of many laws banning various kinds of content, stepping up control over the flow of information, preventing anonymous online communication and establishing a generalised system of surveillance.

### **FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Independent media

Vladimir Putin targets independent media by means of the “foreign agents” law and by getting oligarchs and businessmen to buy up independent outlets and make them toe the Kremlin line. Dozens of journalists were arrested, sometimes violently, while covering pro-Navalny protests, and some were detained arbitrarily. Freedom of expression is more limited now than at any time since the fall of the Soviet Union. At least eight Russian journalists are currently in prison: Alexander Valov (since 2018), **Remzi Bekirov** (since 2019), **Abdulmumin Gadzhiev** (since 2019), **Rashid Maysigov** (since 2019), **Ivan Safronov** (since 2020), **Ian Katelevski** (since 2020), **Aleksander Dorogov** (since 2020) and **Vladislav Yesipenko** (since 2021). **Aleksandr Tolmashev** died in detention in 2020 for lack of medical care.

### **OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Brazen hypocrisy

*“We have so many news channels, Internet channels, we have so many different opinions and there are so many critical opinions in the media, about the authorities (and about yours truly). I don’t think your countries have this, journalists who criticise the government so harshly.”*

(Statement during Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum, 8 June 2021).

*“The media’s active and responsible attitude and a truly independent and courageous journalism are more than ever desired and indispensable for Russia.”*

(Address to the Union of Journalists, April 2013).

Sri Lanka

127/180\*



## Gotabaya RAJAPAKSA

Born 20 June 1949

> **President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka** since 18 November 2019, defence minister from 2005 to 2015

> **Predator since 2005**

### **PREDATORY METHOD:** Death squads

Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s election as president in November 2019 returned Sri Lanka to the darkest hours of its recent history. A retired army lieutenant-colonel, “Gota” was defence minister while his brother, Mahinda Rajapaksa, was president from 2005 to 2015, the so-called “dark decade” during which the military finally crushed the Tamil armed separatists by dint of a great deal of bloodshed, ending the decades-old civil war in 2009.

It was during his time as defence minister that Gota acquired another surname – “Terminator.” He owes this distinction to his role as overseer of a death squad known as the “white van commando” because of the vehicles it used to kidnap and torture journalists, and in some cases execute them, on his orders.

As was to be expected, his accession to the presidency re-awakened old demons, especially as he reappointed himself as defence minister and appointed his brother, the former president, as prime minister. Warrants for the arrest of journalists have been issued, media outlets have been raided and searched, ploys have been used to disinform, and death threats have been made. Much of the Sri Lankan press is now censoring itself, either because of what Gota did in the past or what he is doing now as president.

### **FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Journalists who dare to do their job, those covering sensitive subjects

Many Sri Lankan journalists now face a terrible dilemma. Do they do their job or do they avoid putting their lives in danger? They have to live with the ghosts of so many colleagues who were murdered while, at the same time, the impunity for crimes of violence against journalists committed on Gota’s orders continues to be total. According to RSF’s tally, at least 14 journalists were murdered or went missing while he was defence minister. Around 20 others fled the country after being tortured or receiving death threats.

Against this background, investigative reporting on such sensitive issues as the plight of the Tamil minority or Sri Lanka’s Muslim community seems extremely dangerous. Those who dare are exposed to two dangers. One is judicial, the probability that the police will come with warrants for their arrest. The other is physical, the probability that they will receive death threats, which the police will refuse to register if they try to file a complaint. Either way, terror is back.

### **OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Calls for murder, and to forget

*“Sale porc bouffeur de merde ! Putains de sales journalistes de merde ! “You pig that eats shit! You shit shit dirty fucking journalists! People will kill you!”* (In an interview in July 2012).

*“Do not dwell in the past. I want to become Sri Lanka’s future president. So, it’s better that you focus on the future.”*

(During the presidential election campaign in October 2019).

\* 2021 World Press Freedom Index



# PREDATORS 2021



Tajikistan

162/180\*



## Emomali RAKHMOM

Born 5 October 1952

> **President of the Republic of Tajikistan** since 1992

> **Predator since taking office**

### **PREDATORY METHOD:** Censorship, threats and total online control

One of the region's longest-serving presidents, Emomali Rakhmon has become more and more authoritarian, calling himself "Leader of the Nation" and "Founder of Peace and National Unity" since the end of a five-year civil war in 1997. He imposed official, systematic content censorship on privately-owned and independent media outlets in 1992 and, in 2021, the state-run Tajikistan TV and Radio Committee imposed new conditions for broadcast licences, requiring broadcasters to submit all editorial content in foreign languages, including Russian, for prior approval.

In 2018, the authorities assumed sole control over access to the national Internet, thereby enabling the government's telecommunications agency to block access to news websites despite a lack of legislative provision for this. The national Internet access provider, Tajiktelecom, which is owned by the telecommunications agency, now has a monopoly on sale of Internet access. The authorities have created "troll factories" to discredit critics and media outlets such as *Radio Ozodi*, the Tajik service of US-funded *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)*. Harassed by the intelligence services, subjected to intimidation and blackmail, dozens of journalists have chosen to leave the country in recent years. Others censor themselves and avoid sensitive subjects, which encourages corruption and impunity in Tajikistan.

### **FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Independent journalists

Emomali Rakhmon targets all independent media outlets and journalists, especially investigative reporters who try to cover the corruption that pervades Tajikistan. Former journalist **Khayrullo Mirsaidov** was jailed in 2018 after accusing senior officials of embezzlement. Rakhmon also targets foreign media outlets such as *RFE/RL* and content on social media such as Facebook, YouTube, VKontakte and Odnoklassniki, and messaging services such as WhatsApp and Telegram.

### **OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Nation against foreigners

*"You must be more active and united in the information war against opposition media. And publish your real name on social media! So that our rivals don't accuse you of being trolls."*

(Comments to the leading national media by presidential aide Abdujabbor Rahmonzoda during a round-table with journalists and writers at the headquarters of the state newspaper *Jumhuriyat* on 3 March 2021 - World Press Freedom Day).

*"You, the leaders of the media, must be a reliable shield protecting national interests, cultural and historic values, and the achievements made during this period of national independence."*

(Statement by President Rakhmon at a meeting with the heads of leading national TV and radio stations on 20 February 2019).



Saudi Arabia

170/180\*



## Mohammed bin SALMANE

Born 31 August 1985

> **Crown Prince** since 21 June 2017

> **Predator since 2017**

### **PREDATORY METHOD:** Limitless barbarity

Ever since his aging father named him crown prince in 2017, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has concentrated all power in his hands and has been the de facto head of a monarchy that tolerates no press freedom. The kingdom is one of the world's biggest jailers of journalists and its judicial proceedings are completely opaque. Many imprisoned journalists are given no indication of the charges on which they are being held. When the charges are known, they typically ranged from "defaming the kingdom" and "insulting the monarchy" to "collaborating with foreign entities." There is no limit on the methods used to hound journalists, which include use of spyware, threats, abduction, torture, sexual abuse of detainees, solitary confinement, neglecting their medical needs and depriving them of contact with their families. The gruesome murder of *Washington Post* editorialist Jamal Khashoggi, who was hacked to pieces inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, dealt a terminal blow to any hope of being able to criticise, and exposed the extent of the brutality of the regime's persecution of outspoken journalists, even beyond its borders.

### **FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Pro-reform journalists

The 30 journalists imprisoned in Saudi Arabia include media figures who were widely followed on social media, especially Twitter, and who were potentially very influential. Others were broadcast media presenters who made the mistake of implicitly encouraging reforms in their programmes by tackling sensitive issues and by calling for a debate. They also include women bloggers specialising in women's rights, who criticised the male guardianship system and voiced solidarity with female colleagues who had already been jailed. And finally, **Raif Badawi**, a blogger who has been imprisoned since June 2009 for "insulting Islam," is now a symbol of the scale of the oppressive conservatism that endures in Saudi Arabia.

### **OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Responsible but not guilty

*"When a crime is committed against a Saudi citizen by officials, working for the Saudi government, as a leader I must take responsibility. This was a mistake. And I must take all actions to avoid such a thing in the future."*

(MBS on 30 September 2019, when asked by CBS about Jamal Khashoggi's murder).

\* 2021 World Press Freedom Index



# PREDATORS 2021



Bangladesh

152/180\*



## SHEIKH Hasina

Born 28 September 1947

> **Prime Minister of the People's Republic of Bangladesh** since 6 January 2009

> Predator since 2014 (at least)

**PREDATORY METHOD:** The Digital Security Act, ultimate weapon for imposing self-censorship

The eldest child of Sheikh Mujib, Bangladesh's independence hero, Sheikh Hasina has been a leading figure in Bangladeshi politics since the early 1980s. For years, she led the opposition to various authoritarian regimes that used violence to persecute journalists. Then her party won the December 2008 parliamentary elections by a landslide, and she took office as prime minister the following month

Thereafter, she became increasingly more authoritarian and ready to crack down on press freedom. The trend was confirmed in 2014 when her reelection was made all the easier by the fact that the opposition was denied access to the news media. Although she claims to respect press freedom, her hold on power has been buttressed ever since by a refusal to tolerate any criticism. The Digital Security Act (DSA) adopted in 2018 has rounded off the arsenal that her government uses to impose her views. Packed with deliberately vague wording, it is the ultimate weapon for getting journalists to censor themselves. Online content "liable to disturb public order" is punishable by seven years in prison while "negative propaganda against (...) the Father of the Nation" – Sheikh Hasina's own father – is punishable by 14 years in prison. In other words, vast, vaguely-defined areas have been rendered completely off limits.

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Reporters who annoy her

The Digital Security Act enables Sheikh Hasina's supporters to harass all journalists and bloggers who annoy the authorities. In the first two years or so after it came into effect, it was used to prosecute around 400 individuals, including more than 70 journalists and bloggers. Those jailed under this law are subjected to such appalling conditions that one of them, **Mushtaq Ahmed**, died in prison in February 2021. The supporters of Sheikh Hasina's party, the Awami League, and its student branch, the Chhatra League, serve as her enforcers in the field, harassing and attacking reporters to prevent them from covering streets protests or any form of unrest, especially during elections, sometimes acting as virtual lynch mobs. Journalists often end up in hospital and, in some cases, in the morgue.

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Impose "real" facts

"Journalists who do not publish false news need not worry about the DSA," she said in October 2018 – the DSA being a law that allows the government to determine which news story is "true" and which one is "false."



Egypt

166/180\*



## Abdel Fattah el-SISI

Born 19 November 1954

> **President of Egypt** since 8 June 2014

> Predator since the military coup in July 2013

**PREDATORY METHOD:** Mass arrests

Journalists are readily arrested by the security services – sometimes as part of a wave of arrests, sometimes during streets protests and sometimes at moments of political tension. They can also be arrested out of the blue and held preventively while being investigated. And then they may be placed in provisional detention that is extended indefinitely. The same two charges are often used: "membership of a terrorist group" and "spreading false news." Sometimes the charge is "misusing social media." Journalists may be arrested for covering a protest, writing an article about a sensitive subject, sharing critical social media posts, or working for banned media outlets. Under the August 2015 terrorism law, journalists are required on "national security" grounds to use only the official version when covering terrorist attacks or bombings. The 2017 cyber-crime law criminalises online criticism and gives the authorities a free hand to block websites.

**FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Any media suspected of a link to the Muslim Brotherhood

The few journalists who work for independent media are given a hard time. Bloggers who post photos or videos of demonstrations or contribute to foreign media outlets are particularly targeted. Regardless of their editorial line or their ideological or religious views, they are all liable to be automatically charged with "membership of a banned group," a charge that alludes to the Muslim Brotherhood, which is regarded a terrorist organisation. Around 30 journalists are currently imprisoned on this charge.

**OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Security before everything

"We do a lot so that everyone gets justice in courts, and we do not have political detainees. We previously had chaos, but we are now working on building and stability."

(Abdel Fattah el-Sisi interview for *Die Welt* in April 2021).

"I do not want to exaggerate, but we have unprecedented freedom of expression in Egypt. No one in Egypt can bar anyone working in media or journalism or on TV from expressing their views."

(Abdel Fattah el-Sisi interview for *CNN* in September 2015).

\* 2021 World Press Freedom Index



# PREDATORS 2021



China

177/180\*



## Xi Jinping

Born on 15<sup>th</sup> June, 1953

> **President of the People's Republic of China** since 14<sup>th</sup> March 2013  
**General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party** since 15<sup>th</sup> November 2012 and **Chairman of the Central Military Commission** since 14<sup>th</sup> March 2013

> **Predator since 2013**

### **PREDATORY METHOD:** Void of restraint

When Xi Jinping, whose family was a victim of the Cultural Revolution, took the mantle of leadership in 2013, one could expect he would be a harbinger of liberal reforms in China. On the contrary, he further tightened the regime's grip on news and information, restoring, in just a few years, a media culture comparable with the Maoist era. By relying on the extensive use of new technology, Xi has imposed a social model based on censorship, propaganda and surveillance. The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), an entity personally supervised by Xi, prevents China's one billion internet users from freely receiving and imparting independent information. State media must not just follow the Party's leadership, but must also "reflect the Party's will, safeguard its authority and its unity". The smartphone application *Study Xi, Power Country*, mandatory since 2019 for journalists to download, does not only allow the regime to test their loyalty, but may also be used to apply surveillance over their phones. Under Xi, the harassment of foreign correspondents and their sources has also reached new heights. While abroad, the regime goes to great lengths to promote and export its oppressive model.

### **FAVOURITE TARGETS:** Those who stray from the narrative

Xi's China is the world's biggest captor of press freedom defenders with more than 115 detained in 2021, often in conditions that pose a threat to their lives. Journalists whose reports don't fit the regime's narrative are often being held in "residential surveillance at a designated location" (RSDL), a euphemism for incommunicado detention at one of China's "black jails" where detainees are deprived of their rights and face the risk of being tortured. **Kunchok Jinpa**, a leading media source of information about Tibet, died in February 2021 as a result of mistreatment in prison, much like **Liu Xiaobo**, Nobel peace laureate and RSF Press Freedom Prize laureate, and **Yang Tongyan**, political commentator, who both died in 2017.

### **OFFICIAL DISCOURSE:** Paternalistic indoctrination

*"The media run by the party and the government are propaganda fronts and must have the Party as their family name"*

(Speech pronounced by Xi Jinping on 19<sup>th</sup> of February 2016, during an inspection tour of the state media).

*"They must love the party, protect the party, and closely align themselves with the party leadership in thought, politics and action,"*

(Referring to journalists working for CCTV, Xinhua News Agency, People's Daily newspaper, February 2016).

\* 2021 World Press Freedom Index