

Journalists in Exile 2011: Iran, Cuba Drive Out Their Critics

A special report by the Committee to Protect Journalists



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Two of the world's most repressive nations each forced at least 18 journalists to flee their homes in the past year. In exile, these journalists face enormous challenges. **A CPJ special report by Elisabeth Witchel.**



Newly freed Cuban detainees and their families in a bus after their arrival in Madrid. Exile was the price the detainees paid for their freedom. (AP/Victor R. Caivano)

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Nearly 70 journalists were forced into exile over the past 12 months, with more than half coming from Iran and Cuba, two of the world's most repressive nations, a new survey by the Committee to Protect Journalists has found. Iran, which has waged a massive, two-year-long crackdown on the independent press, and Cuba, which freed journalists from prison only to force them to leave their homeland, each sent 18 journalists into exile.

"I feel unstable because there is nothing for us here," said Cuban reporter Victor Rolando Arroyo Carmona, 59, who served more than seven years in prison on baseless charges before being freed last September and forced into exile in Spain. There, he has experienced significant professional and economic challenges, a common experience among the 67 journalists forced into exile worldwide in the past 12 months. "We don't even have our professional titles," Arroyo Carmona said. "We live in limbo."

Imprisonment, or the threat being jailed, was the leading cause of journalists leaving their home countries during the period examined by CPJ—June 1, 2010, to May 31, 2011—accounting for 82 percent of cases. Another 15 percent fled following physical attacks or threats of violence. Prolonged harassment such as frequent interrogations or surveillance drove 3 percent of journalists in the survey to leave their countries.

At least 649 journalists facing violence, imprisonment, and harassment have gone into exile worldwide since 2001, when CPJ launched its journalist assistance program and began keeping detailed exile records. The large majority, about 91 percent, have not been able to return home. Five countries—Ethiopia, Iran, Somalia, Iraq and Zimbabwe—account for nearly half the total number of journalists driven out of their countries over the past decade. CPJ's survey is based solely on cases it has documented, from which it derives global trends. Other groups using different criteria cite higher numbers of journalists in exile.



Arroyo Carmona

Arroyo Carmona said leaving Cuba was very difficult, but he had few options. After seeing his health worsen—he was diagnosed with diabetes, hypertension, and pulmonary emphysema while serving his prison term in unsanitary and inhumane conditions—Arroyo Carmona felt compelled to take the government's offer of freedom in exchange for leaving the country. "What I was mostly concerned with was my wife's health and my own health, so I decided to leave," he said.

The Cuban government agreed to release Arroyo Carmona and more than 50 other political prisoners, including numerous journalists, as part of a July 2010 deal brokered by the Catholic Church and the Spanish government. But Havana imposed a high price on most detainees: They would have to leave Cuba for Spain immediately. As was the case with other freed detainees and their loved ones, Arroyo Carmona and his family had little opportunity to prepare for leaving home. "They had been given two hours to pack up our belongings and say good-bye before they were taken to Havana," Arroyo Carmona said of the six family members who left behind nearly everything to accompany him into exile. The family stayed briefly in a military compound before being flown to Spain on September 7, 2010.

In Iran, notorious prison, interrogation practices

For its part, Iran topped the list of countries driving journalists into exile for the second consecutive year as the government continued an assault on free expression that began with the disputed 2009 election. CPJ's 2010 survey found at least 29 Iranian editors, reporters, and photographers had fled into exile; the country's total exodus over the last decade is 66, behind only Ethiopia and Somalia.

Alireza "Kambiz" Shabankare, 37, an Iranian writer, photographer, and blogger for reformist newspapers and online publications, was out of the country on a project in Afghanistan when his mother called him from their home north of Tehran last year. "She said don't come here. The police were in the flat looking for you," Shabankare recalled in an interview with CPJ.

Shabankare, who was imprisoned for two years and detained by security agents on several occasions over his 18-year journalism career, decided to return home quietly, figuring the danger would pass. But as dozens of colleagues were arrested and the political climate proved more unforgiving than ever, Shabankare reconsidered. "All the people they arrested, they are going to be more than six years, maybe 10 years, in prison—or even

executed," said Shabankare.

He said he feared the consequences of Iran's notoriously brutal imprisonment and interrogation practices. "I was scared I would tell them information I had—names I know for my work," he said. Iran, along with China, was the world's worst jailer of the press, with at least 34 journalists in prison when CPJ conducted its annual census in December 2010.

This year's worldwide tally of 67 journalists forced into exile is lower than the record-setting 85 documented in CPJ's 2010 survey, but it is consistent with data over the past decade. Data on exiled journalists closely track other press freedom indicators such as deadly violence and imprisonment. The countries with the highest exile rates have long records of press repression. In the past 12 months, CPJ found, at least 14 journalists escaped deadly violence and repressive regimes in the Horn of Africa nations of Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. Three journalists apiece left the Democratic Republic of Congo and Pakistan, where CPJ has documented frequent physical assaults against journalists and longstanding patterns of impunity. At least two Syrian journalists covering the country's popular uprising fled from security agents seeking to detain them. And in Sri Lanka, where anti-press violence has fueled a steady exodus of journalists, two more reporters fled during the past 12 months.



Shabankare in Istanbul. (Hiran Shabankare)

CPJ's survey also found an unusually high number of journalists forced to relocate within their own nations in the past 12 months; 23 did so in this period alone, compared to the 50 who relocated internally over the entire decade. The internal relocations included 12 Ivorian journalists who had been menaced by armed groups in Abidjan at the height of the West African nation's political crisis; the United Nations airlifted them to safety in the north of the country.

For those in flight, safe havens difficult to reach

When crossing borders is the only means to safety, however, it is rarely as simple as boarding a plane. Journalists fleeing persecution may be eligible to apply for asylum once they land in stable, safe havens, but it is increasingly hard for someone coming out of a hostile environment, facing imminent threats, or wanted by the authorities to obtain a visa to such countries.

"For an individual journalist or human rights defender at risk, getting a visa can be a challenge. You are not going to be given a visa for being at risk; in fact, they will deny you for it," said Eleanor Acer, director of the refugee protection program at Human Rights First. Acer said journalists should be allowed to use an expedited resettlement process, and that embassies should be more responsive to human rights defenders who are under threat. The group's senior attorney, Anwen Hughes, added: "This is the problem with the refugee system generally. Conventions on human rights say people have the right to seek asylum, but international law doesn't

have a lot to say about the practicalities of how to get there."

The Iranian Shabankare can confirm this. He has shuttled between three countries—Tajikistan, India, and Turkey—since leaving Iran almost a year ago and now waits in Turkey for resettlement to the United States through the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, a lengthy and uncertain process. "I went to so many embassies to ask for a visa, but they all said no," Shabankare said.

This predicament often leaves dangerous travel through porous borders as the only option. "That may land you in a country with no work permit and a poor refugee protection regime," said Hughes. Dozens of journalists CPJ has heard from in this situation live in desperate, insecure, and impoverished conditions. In April, Somali broadcast journalist Hassan Mohamed lost his leg to infection, unable to afford the medical care he needed while living in exile in Kenya. Since learning of his condition, Somali colleagues, CPJ, and other groups have contributed to his ongoing treatment.

Resettlement is often only the beginning of a fresh set of struggles to start over in a new country with no family and social networks, little financial support, and poor employment prospects. Arroyo Carmona recalled that when he and his family arrived in Spain from Cuba they had virtually nothing. "The most difficult thing at that time was our medical situation. My wife was ill, and I have a son who is diabetic. No one would give us the necessary medication, and for a long time we survived on the insulin we had brought from Cuba, which we didn't even know was still good."

For hundreds of journalists, legal hurdles, language differences, and the challenges of finding work in a new country can be professionally devastating. CPJ's long-term research shows that only about 22 percent of journalists who have remained in exile are engaged in media-related work today; a total of 461 journalists have had to look for work outside their profession.

For Shabankare, not working in the profession has been the most difficult aspect of his time in exile. "Because of torture in my past I always worked in order to keep moving forward. But in Turkey I'm not working—and when I don't work so many bad things come to mind," he said.

CPJ is releasing its annual survey of journalists in exile to mark World Refugee Day, June 20. CPJ's survey counts only those journalists who fled due to work-related persecution, who remained in exile for at least three months, and whose current whereabouts and activities are known. It does not include the many journalists and media workers who left their countries for professional or financial opportunities, those who left due to general violence, or those who were targeted for activities other than journalism, such as political activism.

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Journalists in Exile: A Statistical Profile

Totals for June 1, 2010 - May 31, 2011

Total Fled: **67**

Total Still in Exile: **67**

Returned During Year: **0**

Number relocated within country: **23**

By Region

	Number Who Fled
Middle East and North Africa	22
Americas	19
Africa	19
Asia	6
Europe and Central Asia	1

Top Countries

	Number Who Fled
Iran	18
Cuba	18
Eritrea	6
Ethiopia	5
Somalia	3
DRC	3
Pakistan	3
Sri Lanka	2

Syria	2
Azerbaijan	1
Senegal	1
The Gambia	1
Mexico	1
Afghanistan	1
Iraq	1
Libya	1

By Reason

	Number Who Fled
Threat of Imprisonment	55
Threat of Violence	10
Harassment	2

Totals August 1, 2001 - May 31, 2011

Total Fled: 649

Total Still in Exile: 592

Returned During the Period: 57

By Region

	Number Who Fled
Africa	336
Middle East and North Africa	130

Asia	76
Americas	71
Europe and Central Asia	36

By Country

	Number Who Fled
Ethiopia	79
Somalia	68
Iran	66
Iraq	55
Zimbabwe	49
Eritrea	47
Sri Lanka	25
Cuba	25
Colombia	20
Haiti	18
Rwanda	18
Uzbekistan	18

By Reason

	Number Who Fled
Threat of Violence	279
Threat of Imprisonment	267
Harassment	103

Top Host Countries

	Number Who Fled
US	180
Kenya	66
UK	38
Sweden	32
Canada	29

Professional Status

Exiled journalists who have found work in their field: **132 (22 percent)**

Those who returned home and went back to their profession: **37 (65 percent)**

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