

# Palestinian decree curbs social media expression

The Arab Weekly staff

London

**P**alestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has clamped down on social media and news websites – the main outlets for debate and dissent in the West Bank – with a vaguely worded decree that critics said allows his government to jail anyone on charges of harming “national unity” or the “social fabric.”

Rights activists said the edict, issued in July without prior public debate, is perhaps the most significant step yet by the Abbas government to restrict freedom of expression in the autonomous Palestinian enclaves of the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

A Palestinian prosecutor denied the decree was intended to stifle dissent and insisted that a new law on electronic crimes was needed to close legal loopholes that allowed offenders, such as hackers, to go unpunished.

However, the government blocked 30 websites in recent weeks, Palestinian Centre for Development and Media Freedoms (MADA) said. Most of the sites were affiliated with Abbas’s main rivals – former aide-turned-political foe Mohammed Dahlan and the Islamist movement Hamas, MADA said. A few of the blocked sites supported the Islamic State (ISIS).

Five journalists working for news outlets linked to Hamas were charged with violating the new law but they were released after Hamas released a Palestinian Authority-linked reporter.

Hamas has also been taking steps against journalists and bloggers in the Gaza Strip.

“The Palestinian split between Fatah and Hamas and between the strip and the West Bank is very much affecting human rights, including freedom of expression, and recently we have been seeing it intensifying,” Shawan Jabarin, director of Palestinian rights organisation Al-Haq, told Haaretz.

The worsening situation was criticised by Amnesty International.

“The last few months have seen a sharp escalation in attacks by the Palestinian authorities in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza, on jour-



**Clamp down.** Palestinian youths check their facebook accounts at an internet café in the West Bank city of Ramallah. (AFP)

nalists and the media in a bid to silence dissent. This is a chilling setback for freedom of expression in [the Palestinian territories],” said Magdalena Mughrabi, deputy director, Middle East and North Africa, at Amnesty International.

The two factions have been unable to reconcile in a decade and are often at loggerheads. The journalists’ syndicate called for media to be spared the fallout from the split between the Palestinian factions.

“It is well-known that Hamas does not balk at the idea of hostage-taking but now it would appear that West Bank security agencies trained by the EU and the US are also resorting to mafia-style methods,” wrote Inge Gunther in the German website qantara.de.

Ammar Dweik, head of the government-appointed Palestinian Independent Commission for Human Rights, said the new law was “one of the worst” since the Palestinian autonomy government was established in 1994.

The decree stipulates sentences

of up to life in prison for those who use digital means for a range of offences, including endangering the safety of the state or public order as well as harming national unity or social peace.

“At times, according to interviews conducted by the Observer, the ostensible reasons for arrest have been unquestionably petty, not least the detention of one journalist for taking a picture of prime minister Rami Hamdallah’s convoy on his mobile phone,” wrote Peter Beaumont in the Observer.

Abbas, 82, issued the decree at a time when he is facing new domestic challenges to his rule.

Dahlan and Hamas overcame their rivalry to team up against

Abbas with an emerging power-sharing deal in Gaza, the territory Abbas’s Fatah movement lost to Hamas in 2007.

Polls routinely indicate that two-thirds of Palestinian respondents say they want Abbas to resign. He was elected to a five-year term in 2005 but stayed in office, arguing that political disagreement with Hamas prevented new elections. With Parliament paralysed because of the political split, Abbas has ruled by decree.

Ibrahim Hamodeh, a prosecutor in the attorney general’s office, said the decree was needed to go after those committing electronic crimes, such as hackers and those engaged in online libel.

“There is nothing about (restricting) freedom of expression in the new law,” Hamodeh told the Associated Press (AP).

“The law criminalises distortion, defamation, slandering,” he said. “One can criticise the president and his policy but one cannot accuse the president or anyone else

of treason or make fun of him in an image or something like that.”

Critics said the vague terms in the decree are problematic.

It enables the government to jail anyone for any reason, Ghazi Bani Odeh, a researcher at MADA, told the AP. “It opens the door wide to more violations of freedom of expression,” he said.

The Palestinian journalists’ association in the West Bank, though dominated by Fatah, said it would push back against the decree.

An electronic crimes law is needed but the association said it was concerned about articles that touch on freedom of expression and freedom of reporting, Mohammed Laham, an official in the group, told the AP.

In 2016, Freedom House classified the media environment in the West Bank and Gaza as “not free,” ranking it below Iraq and Zimbabwe and level with Russia.

The Arab Weekly staff and news agencies.

● **The journalists’ syndicate called for the media to be spared the fallout from the split between the Palestinian factions.**



**Makram Rabah**

is a lecturer at the American University of Beirut and the Lebanese American University and author of “A Campus at War: Student Politics at the American University of Beirut, 1967-1975.”

## Lebanon’s freedom of expression in peril

**L**ebanon’s new generation of social media activists are posting criticism of the government and its ministers with one eye on their keyboards and another on the doors that stand between them and the country’s security forces.

It hasn’t always been like that. In the summer of 1976, in a secluded apartment adjacent to the Carlton Hotel in the west of Beirut, Kamal Jumblatt, the leader of the Lebanese National Movement, met with Elias Sarkis, soon to be Lebanon’s sixth president. This meeting came about through the good offices of their mutual friends Salim Kheiredine and Kamal Salibi, with each hoping to convince Jumblatt to endorse Sarkis’s bid for the presidency.

As Jumblatt had done with other presidential candidates, he asked Sarkis a simple question: “Will you protect the freedom of the press and the freedom of expression?” Rather than manoeuvre his way out of the potentially embarrassing situation, Sarkis fell silent, convincing Jumblatt to offer his interlocutor nothing but luck and withholding his bloc’s support.

Jumblatt’s fears were soon proved well-founded. Almost

directly following Sarkis’s inauguration, his government placed restrictions on the Lebanese media and rigorously enforced the country’s censorship laws.

While today, this style of heavy-handed censorship seems committed to the dustbin of history, the issue of freedom of expression remains a constant, with the country’s ruling elite loath to miss any opportunity to remind the public that speaking out can carry potentially dire consequences.

As it stands, the traditional Lebanese media sphere of newspapers and TV exists as a form of virtual hodgepodge, with competing outlets pledging financial and political allegiance to the country’s various local and regional factions. It’s neither politically effective, nor does it stand any real chance of exposing the near structural failings of Lebanon’s ruling establishment.

However, whatever legal restrictions might still apply to traditional media largely disappear on the country’s social media platforms, which many Lebanese writers and activists are looking towards to protest what they see as the state’s political and economic corruption, ultimately evidenced in the election of Michel Aoun as president.

The bulk of Lebanon’s social

media ire appears to be centred on Aoun’s political clique. Specifically, it targeted his son-in-law, Gebran Bassil, the often uncouth minister of foreign affairs. Bassil’s often amateurish and provocative mannerism, in addition to his peddling of shady projects that rarely amount to anything, have cemented his position as a totem hate figure among anti-corruption crusaders.

These individuals more often than not employ sarcasm and humour, not to say insults, to criticise Bassil and other members of the ruling elite deemed complacent or complicit in the machinations of Lebanon’s corruption industry.

Pierre Hachach, who has established a solid following via the short videos he produces exposing, and even ridiculing, some of Bassil’s transgressions, has occasionally received the brutish attention of Lebanon’s security services, including getting a savage beating allegedly from one of Bassil’s henchmen as payment for his efforts.

More serious critics, such as veteran journalist and writer Fidaa Itani, have been summoned by the Lebanese cybercrime division, after Bassil filed a lawsuit against Itani for slander and defamation. While such cases are not generally

punished by detention, Itani was kept in a cell overnight on the pretext of an outstanding fine. He was released the following day but the message was clear; even a simple Facebook post can land you in jail.

Similarly, in August, Ahmad Ismail, a former member of the Lebanese Communist Party and a liberated prisoner from Israeli prisons, was summoned by Lebanese General Security and unlawfully interrogated for hours before being set free. Ismail, whose posts and comments are highly critical of Hezbollah’s hegemony over the Shia and its constant attempts to religiously transform the public spaces in the south of Lebanon where he resides, were enough to incite his targets and draw their ire.

Superficially, these examples of the elites’ efforts to suppress Lebanon’s freedom of expression can just as easily be seen as a means of curbing peaceful protest. However, more significantly, they serve as pointed reminders to a docile populace that their environment, their economy, their way of life and even their lives stand at risk. More importantly, they reaffirm the suspicion that Lebanon’s corrupt political class, who seem unable to book the simplest of criticisms, are fundamentally unfit to rule.

**The bulk of Lebanon’s social media ire appears to be centred on Aoun’s political clique.**