



CHAOS, CONFLICT, IMPUNITY

PEN INTERNATIONAL, CASE LIST 2021

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About PEN International

PEN International promotes literature and freedom of expression. It is a forum where writers meet freely to discuss their work; it is also a voice speaking out for writers silenced in their own countries.

Founded in London in 1921, PEN International – PEN's Secretariat – connects an international community of writers. Governed by the PEN Charter, PEN operates across five continents through 145 Centres in over 100 countries.

The Writers in Prison Committee (WiPC) of PEN International was set up in 1960 as the result of mounting concern about attempts to silence critical voices, globally. The WiPC works on behalf of those who are detained or otherwise persecuted for their opinions expressed in writing, including writers who are under attack for their political activities or for exercising their profession, provided that they did not use violence or advocate violence and racial hatred.

Over time, the work of the WiPC in documenting persecution of writers resulted in the development of PEN's Case List – for years an annual record of attacks, imprisonment and persecution of those who use the written word to express themselves, and currently a compilation of PEN International's most emblematic cases. Every year, members of PEN Centres campaign and lobby relevant governments for an improvement in the conditions of persecuted writers and journalists and/or for their release, as well as for investigations into cases of torture and killings. Through writing to prisoners, where possible, or to their families, they provide encouragement and hope. PEN International and its Centres also advocate for systemic change to restrictive laws and practices, including by submitting concerns and recommendations about freedom of expression issues to various international and regional human rights bodies.

pen-international.org

'My career has taught me that the work of a writer is doing and that when circumstances allow, this doing is in fact writing. On the other hand, when circumstances do not allow for the writing process, a writer continues the expression that is no longer possible in literature, or that has become inadequate through literature with other actions. I have come to see that the work of writing is not to be seen to be doing but, in fact, to do and to keep on doing, regardless of circumstances. Only sometimes, if a writer is very fortunate, is that doing seen.'

Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangarembga,
on receiving the PEN Pinter Prize, October 2021

◆ The PEN Charter

The PEN Charter is based on resolutions passed at its International Congresses and may be summarised as follows:

PEN affirms that:

- Literature knows no frontiers and must remain common currency among people in spite of political or international upheavals.
- In all circumstances, and particularly in time of war, works of art, the patrimony of humanity at large, should be left untouched by national or political passion.
- Members of PEN should at all times use what influence they have in favour of good understanding and mutual respect between nations and people; they pledge themselves to do their utmost to dispel all hatreds and to champion the ideal of one humanity living in peace and equality in one world.
- PEN stands for the principle of unhampered transmission of thought within each nation and between all nations, and members pledge themselves to oppose any form of suppression of freedom of expression in the country and community to which they belong, as well as throughout the world wherever this is possible. PEN declares for a free press and opposes arbitrary censorship in time of peace. It believes that the necessary advance of the world towards a more highly organised political and economic order renders a free criticism of governments, administrations and institutions imperative. And since freedom implies voluntary restraint, members pledge themselves to oppose such evils of a free press as mendacious publication, deliberate falsehood and distortion of facts for political and personal ends.

◆ Case List Methodology

This Case List presents PEN International's most emblematic cases from 2021. It provides an overview and an indication of global trends, as well as a guide to the type of challenges writers face, in which countries, and the kind of actions that other writers worldwide take in support of their colleagues.

The cases featured in this report are representative of the issues and concerns relating to freedom of expression, with a focus on writers. These writers are frequently also journalists and media commentators, and vice versa. Occasionally, visual artists, including filmmakers and cartoonists, may also be featured.

PEN International gathers its information from a wide variety of sources and seeks to confirm it through at least two independent sources. Where its information is unconfirmed, PEN International will either take no action, or word its outputs to reflect the fact that the information is yet to be corroborated.

Sources include reports by academic institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and media, as well as information from individuals in the countries of concern, including PEN members, embassy officials, prisoners' families, lawyers and friends, and exile groups. PEN also works alongside free media organisations such as ARTICLE 19, Committee to Protect Journalists, Freedom House, Index on Censorship, the International Freedom of Expression Exchange and Reporters without Borders.

PEN International's annual Case List provides a snapshot of a larger phenomenon: offences are often not reported, writers may self-censor, and other obstacles may arise in terms of documenting the silencing of writers globally. This is highly likely to be the case for women writers as the full extent of censorship of women must be seen within the wider context of gender-based violence, lack of access to education, and other social, civil, political and cultural rights.

All the cases featured in this report have given permission to be included, either directly or through their families and colleagues. PEN International is working on behalf of many more, both publicly and through confidential networks. To read more about other cases and activities and to access updates on the individuals referred to in this report, check PEN International's website, and PEN International's [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) pages.

This report complements the work of other organisations which can be referred to for further information, notably PEN America's global Writers at Risk Database and the Committee to Protect Journalists' reports on killed and imprisoned journalists.

Journalists in Russia and Philippines jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021 for facing up to repression

The ultimate accolade was given to **Dmitry Muratov**, editor-in-chief and co-founder of the leading **Russian** independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, and journalist and writer **Maria Ressa** from the **Philippines**, awarded the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize 'for their efforts to safeguard freedom of expression, which is a precondition for democracy and lasting peace.' PEN International has campaigned for *Novaya Gazeta* and its staff throughout the years – six of whom have lost their lives – urging the Russian authorities to end impunity for crimes against journalists. PEN International members have also campaigned for an end to the physical and on-line threats and attacks that Ressa has suffered for her reporting on her website, *Rappler*, since the 2016 election of President Rodrigo Duterte.



Dmitry Muratov. Photo credit EUKU CC BY-SA 3.0

'It is clear that your work has left an indelible impression on all those who have had the fortune to meet you. The generosity, determination, and unyielding humanity you have demonstrated has been felt by many people, and I write to express my deep and personal solidarity with you in these difficult times, as your right to freedom of expression – along with so many other rights protected under international law – has been curtailed.'

British lawyer, writer and President of English PEN, Philippe Sands, in a letter to Uyghur writer Rahile Dawut, detained in China: Day of the Imprisoned Writer, 15 November 2021

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FOREWORD

Ma Thida, Chair of PEN International's Writers in Prison Committee

2021 was a year riven by conflicts and the COVID-19 pandemic with tragic consequences for countless people across all continents, among them writers and artists. As COVID-19 raged through prisons, often overcrowded and with little or even no medical care, deaths were inevitable such as that of **Aron Atabek**, who died after serving 18 years in a Kazakh prison. In his poem, beautifully translated and published by PEN International on World Poetry Day in 2014, Atabek describes himself as 'a *storyteller of immortality*'. His words truly live on.

In the midst of the tragedy of the violence erupted in my own country, **Myanmar**, following a military *coup* in February, and then in **Afghanistan** when the Taliban overthrew the government in August, hundreds of thousands of people have had to flee. Afghan artists and writers were targeted by the Taliban whose edicts against art, music and literature made them especially vulnerable. For years PEN Afghanistan had worked to re-establish literature in the country, to provide a place for writers to meet and education programs, work that has been once again extinguished. Two PEN Afghanistan members were shot dead within a day of each other at

the start of the *coup*. Many others have joined the thousands who have fled into exile, while those who stayed behind were silenced.

In **Myanmar**, as soon as the military robbed the elected government of power, the *junta* established a new cyber security law which seriously impacted on freedom of expression. It revoked licenses of many news outlets and raided the offices of international NGOs. Under this pressure, PEN Myanmar decided to go underground. It took down its website and social media pages and closed its office. Its current president went into hiding after he received an arrest warrant for 'defamation'. Its treasurer narrowly escaped arrest and had no choice other than to leave the country. Many of our members have had to hide and move from place to place to ensure their safety. During the 'Spring Revolution' that broke out to oppose the *coup*, at least five poets and writers were killed by *junta* forces, among them, **K Z Win** and **Khet Thi** who were well-known for their creative work. The *junta* also revoked citizenship of some well-known artists and writers, raiding some of their homes and publishing houses. Restrictions on the distribution of books by some writers is another tactic used by the *junta* to crack down on free speech. A collection of writings on the experiences of and opinions on the 'Spring Revolution' that I have helped to gather, has been published as an e-book titled *Spring Diary*, with an English edition



Ma Thida ©Aung Kyaw Moe

expected soon. The tragedy is that freedom of expression for both our members and people of my country have been crushed.

Other Centres have also been under pressure in 2021 and fought back against repression. **Belarus** PEN has struggled against oppression that was scaled up in 2020 and continued through 2021 with mass arrests and trials, among others of many artists and writers. Though the Supreme Court ruled to dissolve the Centre in August, its members – who were forced to relocate – continued their ground-breaking work, including systematically monitoring cultural rights violations. Similarly, in **Nicaragua**, the PEN Centre there had to suspend its activities as the situation got increasingly hostile for journalists and writers. Meanwhile, the growing repression of dissent in **Russia** and the tightening of restraints on NGOs, was a portent of the war afflicted against **Ukraine** in February 2022. This war, like others, is led by a despot and fed by a campaign of disinformation and closure of independent media.

Old conflicts and repression strode steadily on with writers in prison in **China, Turkey, Egypt, Iran** and **Cuba**, countries that have featured in PEN's Case List for much of its existence. Then there is the shocking twenty-year anniversary of the disappearance into the unknown, unlawful detention and possibly death of several **Eritrean** journalists and writers, last seen in 2001.

Yet this bleak picture is accompanied by the creative resistance of Centres, even those under repression, who speak out, publish and support fellow writers under attack. There is also the network of support of writers who, for this moment at least, living without fear of arrest, stand up for those in trouble. Repressed writers' works are published, trials are observed, governments and international organisations are lobbied, safe places for those who have to flee from danger are found: these and many other acts of solidarity have been staged by PEN Centres across the globe.

This report is a chronicle of 2021, a snapshot of this most crisis-stricken of years. It summarises its challenges and illustrates the impact on the individual through cases that are emblematic of the struggle for freedom of expression. I would like to commend the researchers at PEN International whose work is summarised in this report, as well as its editors Sara Whyatt and Sabrina Tucci, for bringing us this record of such a difficult and challenging year for freedom of expression. As Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangarembga said, the work of writing is: *'to do and to keep on doing, regardless of circumstances'*. One should add that defending free expression is a work that needs to be kept on being done, whatever the challenges.

A YEAR OF PANDEMIC AND CONFLICT

In 2021, for a second year, the COVID-19 pandemic reigned with devastating impact on lives, economies, and politics world-wide. From the outset of the health crisis a year earlier, many governments had put in place measures to suppress commentary on the virus and their handling of the pandemic, portraying criticism as 'fake news', and in some cases locking up those who spoke against their policies. These restrictions continued throughout 2021, with arrests of demonstrators protesting COVID-19 restrictions on the one hand and against the way the authorities handled the crisis on the other across all world regions. Online platforms were shut down and journalists in **Bangladesh** and **Venezuela** were arrested for spreading 'fake news'. In **Tunisia**, the pandemic crisis was one of the justifications for a sudden ousting of the government and suspension of parliament at the hands of the President.

Globally, the impact of COVID-19 was particularly felt among the most vulnerable, notably prisoners living under cramped conditions with no or little medical care. At least two imprisoned writers died of the virus: **Aron Atabek**, an elderly **Kazakh** poet who died in November only months before he was due to have served an 18-year sentence; and in **Iran**, **Bakhtash Abtin** who died in early January 2022, two months after contracting the disease.



Bakhtash Abtin. Photo credit Hossein Ronaghi, CC0 1.0

◆ Conflicts

This was also a year of conflicts where soldiers and police turned against citizens, causing deaths, injuries and arrests, and attempting to annihilate freedom of expression. When the Taliban seized power in **Afghanistan** in August, the impact was devastating, pushing the country into political and economic crisis. There were reprisals against a wide range of activists, writers, journalists and intellectuals, with women and minorities particular targets. The situation led to a mass exodus of people fleeing persecution, among them hundreds of writers and artists. The crisis reverberates today, as girls remain excluded from education and free expression is obliterated.

Six months earlier in February, a military *coup* in **Myanmar** led to mass repression, a complete clampdown on freedom of expression and shocking levels of violence against peaceful demonstrators, with thousands of people arrested, among them many writers. The civil war in **Ethiopia's** Tigray that broke out in 2020 came with widespread human rights abuses on both sides. Journalists attempting to report on the conflict found themselves harassed and arrested, amidst an internet blackout in the war area. Freedom of expression was also a victim in the escalation of violence in the **Israeli-Palestine** conflict in May 2021 which saw assaults on journalists, media and cultural offices in Gaza at

the hands of the Israeli army. In **Belarus** pro-democracy activists continued to protest the disputed August 2020 presidential elections. Already beleaguered, they were met with further arrests and prison sentences, newspaper closures, online media crackdowns and the forced closures of civil society organisations, including the Belarusian PEN Centre.

The year ended with the threat of further armed conflict in **Ukraine**, with the Russian authorities accused of waging a deliberate campaign of disinformation.

Elections are frequently a point of high tension, with inflamed rhetoric from politicians alongside greater scrutiny from the media and the public. Under these circumstances, journalists can become targets of crackdowns such in **Nicaragua**, where widely criticised elections were held amidst arrests of journalists, closures of media outlets, and dissidents forced to leave the country, including PEN members. In **Uganda**, elections were marked by widespread state violence. Opposition candidates and their supporters were subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention and prosecution on trumped up charges. Journalists were harassed, beaten and their equipment destroyed for covering opposition campaigns.

◆ Long term prisoners

For decades, certain countries have featured in PEN's Case Lists for consistently imprisoning writers for considerable lengths of time, often many years. The longest serving prisoners are in **Eritrea**, where at least twelve journalists have been held for over twenty years. Since their arrests in 2001, little or nothing has been heard from them, their whereabouts unknown, amid fears that some may have died in custody.

China holds scores of writers in prison serving heavy sentences, several for more than ten years, with minority writers from the Tibetan and Uyghur communities serving particularly harsh terms of up to life imprisonment or disappearing into unknown prisons. A Hong Kong bookseller who disappeared in 2015 is now serving a 10-year sentence. **Vietnam** has also given prison terms of several years' length, such as a nine-year sentence passed against a writer in 2021 for her critical expression. Sentences of up to five years were served against imprisoned writers in **Egypt** for their human rights demands. In the **UAE** and **Bahrain**, two writers are still in prison for their involvement in the peaceful 2011 Arab Spring pro-democracy movement.

Turkey, once holding the highest numbers of journalists in prison, still had at least eighteen in jail in 2021, among them journalist, poet and honorary PEN member Nedim Türfent who has been held since 2016 after reporting on Turkish special police forces' ill-treatment of Kurdish workers. **Iran** continues to imprison its dissident writers to long terms, typically of up to five years, often preceded by lengthy and convoluted pre-trial periods where they live under restraint with the constant threat of being imprisoned.

In several countries pre-trial detention can extend to years. Notably in **Turkey**, where philanthropist and cultural rights activist **Osman Kavala** had, by the end of 2021, been held for more than four years for his alleged role in the 2013 pro-democracy demonstrations.

The most used legislation to imprison writers for considerable periods of time are anti-terror and national security laws which are deliberately

misapplied or misinterpreted to label legitimate dissent as a danger to the public. Writers are held under such laws in **China, Egypt** and **Turkey**. Vague interpretations of laws that may otherwise be considered reasonable, were seen in **Rwanda** where legislation against 'inciting violence' and 'genocide denial' was used against commentators on the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Spurious application of criminal laws, such as fraud or sex offences, have been misapplied to discredit critics, such as in **Russia** and **Morocco** where writers have had to defend themselves against such charges that had little substance. Smear campaigns carried out through the media and on on-line platforms serve to undermine those who attempt to speak out, drowning them out with counter opinions, often hate filled, and can influence the outcome of court hearings.

◆ Internet

The internet and social media present both benefits and dangers for freedom of expression. On the one hand, they offer avenues to share ideas and writings as well as to carry out research, and in some countries are essential to circumvent censorship. On the other, they can increase the visibility and therefore vulnerability of dissident voices, with governments bringing authors to trial or ordering the closure of websites and cutting off writers from their readers. Elsewhere individuals and groups who respond to posts are met with threats and abuse, which at times can be overwhelming and terrifying. An increasing concern is the use of surveillance tools and programmes by state across the world to hack into writers' and activists accounts. Most notably, in **Morocco**, the Pegasus spyware was used to spy on two writers who were subsequently imprisoned. Complaints about its use against reporters in **Azerbaijan, Hungary, India, Mexico, Morocco** and **Togo** – were registered against its Israeli-owned manufacturer, NSO, in September 2021.



Abdulla Atefi. Photo courtesy of BBC Pashto

MURDERS

A year of brutality

2021 was a brutal year for writers and journalists, with the Committee to Protect Journalists listing 27 killed directly targeted for their journalism, and many others targeted for unknown reasons. PEN International has featured the killings of writers in **Afghanistan**, **Mexico**, **Lebanon**, the **Netherlands** and **Myanmar** in 2021, calling for those responsible to be found and brought to trial. It is also tirelessly advocating for justice for others murdered in previous years and for an end to the impunity enjoyed by those who silence their critics through murder.

The brutality of the Taliban *coup* in **Afghanistan** was brought to light with the assassination on 4 August of Afghan PEN member, poet **Abdullah Atefi**. The next day a former journalist and government official who had spoken out against Atefi's murder, **Dawa Khan Menapal**, also an Afghan PEN member, was himself killed. They were among innumerable people, notably intellectuals and rights activists who have been murdered by the Taliban.



Dawa Khan Menapal. Photo courtesy of Afghan Government's Ministry of Information and Culture



Khet Thi

The **Myanmar** military *junta* forces' brutal response to unarmed demonstrators, saw many hundreds killed, among them two poets, and the apparent torture to death of a third.

Amid one of the most horrific reprisals against protests, was the abduction of poet **Khet Thi** on 8 May whose body was recovered from a hospital. He had apparently been tortured to death.



Myint Zin and K Za Win

Poets **Myint Zin** and **K Za Win** were killed when fired upon by security forces while taking part in a peaceful demonstration on 3 March 2021.



Lokman Slim. Photo credit Footloop CC BY-SA 3.0

On 3 February, writer and publisher **Lokman Slim** was found dead in his car outside Beirut, **Lebanon**. Slim had criticised Hezbollah and other sectarian parties for which he had received death threats over the years.



Fredy López Arévalo ©Rodrigo Pardo

In **Mexico**, the deplorable pattern of killings of journalists continued in 2021, with **Fredy López Arévalo** shot dead outside his house in Chiapas on 28 October.

Dutch crime reporter **Peter R. de Vries** died on 15 July from injuries sustained in a shooting in Amsterdam nine days earlier. He was 64. Peter R. de Vries was shot five times, including in the head, while on his way to a car park after leaving the studio of RTL Boulevard, on which he appeared as a guest. Two suspects were arrested soon after the shooting. De Vries had recently acted as an adviser to the key prosecution witness against alleged drug kingpin Ridouan Taghi. Derk Wiersum, the lawyer of a state witness in the case, was shot dead in Amsterdam in 2019.

Conclusion

As PEN International turned 100 in 2021, the wish was that the celebration of 100 years of struggle for the freedom to write, speak, protest and be heard, would be accompanied by progress and positivity about the future. Sadly, what we see from the past year is a pattern of deterioration, and a reversal of gains previously made. There is some hope, however, in that writers continue to speak out, often under enormous threat, showing enormous courage, resilience and creativity. As importantly, PEN members and writers across the world continue to demand justice for their fellow writers under attack. They raise their cases at any opportunity, lobby governments, publicise their plight, and provide lifelines of support to them and their families, including refuge from threat, protecting their right to speak out.

INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGNS 2021

DAY OF THE IMPRISONED WRITER 2021



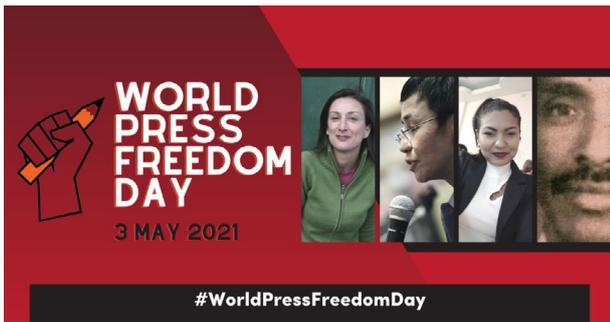
Every year on 15 November, PEN International launches its **Day of the Imprisoned Writer** campaign, highlighting the cases of writers who are imprisoned or facing prosecution and calling for urgent international action to release and protect them. Central to the campaign is the focus on five cases that are emblematic of the type of threats and attacks writers and journalists around the world are subjected to, for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression.

In 2021, the 40th anniversary of the campaign, PEN featured the cases of **Mohammed Al-Roken (UAE)**, **Rahile Dawut (China - Xinjiang)**, **Selahattin Demirtaş (Turkey)**, **Maykel Osorbo (Cuba)** and the collective case of **12 writers imprisoned since 2001 (Eritrea)**.

PEN Centres and members worldwide advocated for these cases, with activities ranging from letter-writing and panel discussions, to press conferences and publishing the work of imprisoned writers. Internationally renowned

writers also sent solidarity letters to their colleagues in prison or under threat. Chilean poet and writer **Germán Rojas wrote to Cuban rapper, Maykel Osorbo**, who was detained in May 2021; Italian author and journalist **Roberto Saviano wrote to Kurdish writer and politician from Turkey, Selahattin Demirtaş**, in pre-trial detention for over four years; British lawyer and writer, **Phillippe Sands wrote to the disappeared Uyghur anthropologist and folklorist, Rahile Dawut**, about whom nothing has been heard since 2017; Nigerian novelist **Ben Okri wrote to twelve journalists and writers in Eritrea, detained incommunicado, without trial, since 2001**; and Syrian author **Yassin al-Haj Saleh wrote to academic, lawyer and writer Mohammed Al-Roken**, serving a 10-year sentence in the UAE.

For more on these cases, see the regional overviews below, and to read the writers' solidarity letters visit [PEN International Day of the Imprisoned Writer 2021](#).



On 3 May **World Press Freedom Day**, PEN International remembers journalists who lost their lives and others who are targeted in the pursuit of a story, celebrating their persistence and courage in the face of repression. In 2021, the organisation featured the cases of:

- **Idris Said 'Abba Arre'**, one of a number of journalists and writers **detained incommunicado, without trial since 2001, in Eritrea;**
- **Daphne Caruana Galizia**, murdered in 2017 in **Malta** in retaliation for her investigations into high level government corruption;
- **Kalúa Salazar**, harassed, threatened, and heavily fined for her exposés of government corruption in **Nicaragua;** and
- **Maria Ressa** whose work on her on-line media portal exposing government corruption in the **Philippines** has led to numerous bogus criminal charges and libel suits. She went on to be awarded the 2021 Nobel Peace prize for her struggle for a free press, alongside journalist, Dmitry Muratov similarly awarded for his journalism in Russia.

For more on these cases, visit World Press Freedom Day 2021.



While poetry has the power to bring people together across continents, many poets worldwide face threats, intimidation and violence for simply speaking up, or using their voice in a way that makes governments feel uncomfortable. On **World Poetry Day 2021**, PEN International highlighted the cases of four poets who risked their life, daily, through their work:

- **Maryja Martysievič**, a poet from **Belarus** who has risked imprisonment and attack for standing up against government oppression;
- **Katherine Bisquet**, among the many artists who joined the San Isidro Movement to combat the repression of artistic freedom in **Cuba** and who had to leave for exile in Europe;
- **Varavara Rao**, an activist and poet who was imprisoned in **India** in 2018 for his part in protests. Freed on bail in February 2021 on medical grounds, faces reimprisonment; and
- **Innocent Bahati**, a popular **Rwandan** poet, who has been missing since February 2021. His disappearance is thought to be linked to his poetry condemning the government's inaction on poverty and corruption.

For more on these cases, visit World Poetry Day 2021.



Around the world many women, including women writers and women's rights activists, fight for the rights and freedoms of women and all individuals, risking their life, daily. On **International Women's Day 2021**, PEN International highlighted the cases of five such women:

- **Volha Kalackaja**, translator and English language tutor from **Belarus**, charged with 'violation of public order', for which she could be imprisoned for up to three years, for taking part in mass protests against the presidential elections in August 2020;
- **Bianca Santana**, writer, researcher, journalist and teacher from **Brazil**, harassed by her government for an article she wrote about connections between relatives and close friends of President Jair Bolsonaro, and suspects in the murder of the Rio de Janeiro city council member Marielle Franco;
- **Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee**, writer and human rights defender from **Iran**, serving 5 years and 8 months in prison for 'insulting the supreme leader' and 'promoting propaganda against the state'. This is in relation to a story she wrote about stoning;
- **Rahile Dawut**, renowned anthropologist and expert on the study of Uyghur folklore, who disappeared in 2017 shortly after making plans to travel from Xinjiang to Beijing for an academic conference. Presumed to have been detained by the **People's Republic of China** government, Dawut's current whereabouts and status remain unknown; and
- **Tsitsi Dangarembga**, award-winning writer, playwright, filmmaker, activist, and a founding member of PEN Zimbabwe, charged with incitement to commit violence and breaching COVID-19 health regulations for peacefully protesting corruption in **Zimbabwe**.

For more on these cases, visit [International Women's Day 2021](#).

International Mother Language Day is annually observed to promote linguistic and cultural diversity and multilingualism. To celebrate the day in 2021, PEN International featured five video-poems recited by poets in their mother language: **Juana Peña (Chol)**, **Seyare Kokche (Crimean Tatar)**, **Wasai Biran Issa (Dazaga)**, **Moeyed Teyib (Kurdish)** and **Santiago B. Villafania (Pangasinan)**. The video-poems were promoted on PEN International's [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) accounts, and made available on PEN International's [YouTube](#) channel.

For more information, visit [International Mother Language Day 2021](#).

Innocent Bahati

RWANDA

I am not asking for cows, I
am not looking to be rich;

I am not asking for a
house, I am a nomad;

O you my benefactor, just
help me to survive this day;

God might have a better
plan for me tomorrow.

*Excerpt from Mfungurira,
Please feed me (2021)*

Katherine Bisquet

CUBA

And as I said one day, with
the strength I had left, at
the doors of a Ministry,
'may love and poetry be
what unites the people.'

Onward!

Excerpt from Katherine Bisquet's
statement upon departing from Cuba
with Hamlet Lavastida (2021)

Varavara Rao

INDIA

When the tongue pulsates,
Tone manumits the air, and
Song turns missile in battle
The foe fears the poet.

Excerpt from *The Bard* (1986)

Maryja Martysievič

BELARUS

Hush little squeakers,
hush right down,

We are being held
hostage by a clown

Don't wake up the angry cat,

Don't even approach his mat.

Excerpt from *Hush little squeakers*

'You are constantly in our minds. You are the focus of our unceasing struggles to set you free. We know that what you are enduring is not easy, but out here thousands of us are keeping the flame of the hope of your freedom alive. All over the world we are with you. Please never let despair conquer your souls.

As writers you extend our hopes and humanity. Your struggles are not in vain, for each day that tyranny seems to win, each day that you are invisible to the world, a new reality is being built. The will of martyrs will erect the temple of liberty. Tyranny never wins. Time is not on their side. It is on your side, whatever happens.

For the children of tomorrow will not forget on whose promethean shoulders the future was built.'

Nigerian author, Ben Okri, in a letter to 12 Eritrean writers disappeared since 2001: Day of the Imprisoned Writer, 15 November 2021

AFRICA OVERVIEW 2021

Nduko o'Matigere, Africa Programme Coordinator

In 2021, across Africa, governments exerted pressure on free speech, within a broader context of rising authoritarianism and attendant declining civic space. Common methods of repression included threats and violence against dissenting voices, notably writers, journalists, and peaceful protestors; digital repression such as internet shutdowns; arbitrary arrests and detentions, enforced disappearances; misuse of rule of law to harass government critics and restrictions of the free press.

Authorities in 10 countries in sub-Saharan Africa used Internet shutdowns to curtail free speech, particularly during periods of heightened public debate on or protest against government policy (**Burkina Faso, South Sudan and Senegal**); civil strife or conflict (**Ethiopia, Nigeria and Sudan**) and contested elections (**Congo, Uganda, Zambia and Chad**). Restrictions on access to digital media through social media taxes, and full or partial Internet shutdowns continue to be in governments' suppression toolkits.

In **Uganda**, civilian opponents of the ruling party were subjected to arbitrary arrests and prosecution on trumped up charges before military courts. Many of them continued to be held in pre-trial detention, without option for bail throughout the year. Authorities in the southern Africa Eswatini Kingdom, deployed the military in a violent crackdown on peaceful protestors after a June 2021 decree by the authorities banning presentation of petitions to the King.

The armed conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia between federal government forces, supported by the **Eritrean** army, and the Tigray Peoples Defence Forces (TPDF), continued to spread to other regions of the country, with more regional militia joining. A joint UN-Ethiopia investigation found all sides responsible for human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings, targeting of civilian populations and facilities, rape, enforced disappearance and prevention of humanitarian access. Since the start of the conflict in November 2020, freedom of expression and access to information have been constrained in war affected areas, with the imposition of telecommunications shutdowns and harassment, intimidation and arrest of journalists reporting on the conflict.

In 2021, PEN International campaign work focussed on **Uganda, Rwanda and Eritrea**, with crisis driven attention on **Nigeria** and **Eswatini** and ongoing monitoring of **Zimbabwe**. Rising authoritarianism is at the root of attacks on freedom of expression across these countries.

◆ Eritrea

2021 marked the 20th anniversary since dozens of **Eritrean** writers, poets, journalists and politicians were rounded up in a massive crackdown on dissent launched by the authorities in September 2001. The writers have remained in incommunicado detention and without trial ever since, with several of them feared dead due to harsh detention conditions. The authoritarian regime in Eritrea continued its repressive policies throughout the year, underscored by forced conscription of civilians into military service and labour camps. Eritrean security forces were also accused of rape, killings and forced repatriation back to Eritrea of Eritrean refugees living camps in the Tigray region.

ERITREA

Collective case of writers and journalists detained for more than 20 years

Two decades with no news

Two decades ago, in May 2001, 15 dissident members of the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PDFJ), known as the G-15, published an open letter in which they denounced the President's abuse of power and presented his actions as 'illegal and unconstitutional'. Following the publication of the letter as well as related interviews and articles published by independent newspapers, all dissidents were detained, including 11 members of the G-15 who were arrested in Asmara on 18 and 19 September 2001 and accused of crimes against national security and sovereignty. On 18 September 2001, eight independent Eritrean newspapers were shut down by the authorities and ten journalists were arrested in with a further two in October 2001. For twenty years, PEN has been focusing on those among them who are writers, as can be tracked in its previous years' Case Lists, working for

journalists alongside media organisations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists – see its [2020 CPJ Report](#). Over the years, the Eritrean authorities have either denied that a clampdown took place, claiming instead that the journalists have merely been sent to carry out their national service, that the closures and mass arrests were necessary for the sake of national unity, and that they were carried out because of the newspapers' failure to comply with laws covering media licences. For many years there have been unverified reports that several of the detainees have died in custody due to ill-treatment and neglect. On 20 June 2016 in an interview with Radio France Internationale (RFI), the Foreign Minister of Eritrea claimed that all the journalists and politicians arrested in 2001 were alive, though no proof was provided. In the same interview, the Foreign Minister said that these men would be tried 'when the government decides'. All that is known is that after the initial raid, the journalists were detained incommunicado at the First Police Station in the capital Asmara for several weeks. After finally receiving visits by family and friends, they went on hunger strike to demand that their cases be brought to court. In response they were transferred to unknown detention centres and later moved to Eiraeiro prison camp, reportedly about 10 miles out of Asmara, to join the former state officials. PEN International [featured this collective case](#) in the 2021 Day of the Imprisoned Writer campaign and published [a solidarity letter to the writers by prominent author, Ben Okri](#). PEN International also featured Eritrea in an [online panel on freedom of expression](#), together with Nicaragua and Belarus. Organized by PEN International and co-sponsored by the Permanent Missions of Canada, Liechtenstein, UK, Finland and Germany, the event saw the participation of writer, historian and Secretary of PEN Eritrea in Exile [Timnet Gedar, who](#) said: *'There is essentially no guarantee in Eritrea that you will be safe from harm or from state violence if you choose to express your thoughts in any way'*.

◆ Eswatini

In **Eswatini**, the authorities continued to retain and use a raft of draconian legislation to stifle dissent and punish critics of government policies and practices, including media practitioners, human rights defenders and opposition parties. These include the 2008 Suppression of Terrorism Act (STA) and the 1938 Sedition and Subversive Activities Act (SSAA). In June, security forces responded violently to peaceful protests over a government ban on petitions to the King, which are viewed as perhaps the only avenue for civic participation in governance in the tightly controlling, absolute monarchy. The Eswatini government also shut down the internet across the country as a measure to silence the protests. PEN condemned the attacks on freedom of expression by the Eswatini authorities through a statement published on 15 July.

PEN ADVOCACY - ESWATINI

July: Stop government attacks on freedom of expression

◆ Nigeria

Authorities in **Nigeria** continued to impose restrictions on free speech, using censorship, restrictive legislation and administrative decrees to curtail freedom of expression. In a joint statement with PEN Nigeria, PEN condemned government attacks on freedom of expression, including the suspension of Twitter operations announced in June.

PEN ADVOCACY - NIGERIA

April: Open letter to the Governor of Kano State: Release Mubarak Bala

August: Stop government attacks on free speech



Stop
government
attacks on free
speech

NIGERIA

FOCUS COUNTRY

Rwanda

In **Rwanda**, authorities continued to use overly broad and vague national security and genocide denial laws as tools to curtail freedom of expression. With an acutely stifled press and civil society, YouTube has emerged as an alternative for discussing and debating social issues, making the platform a highly contested space. Within the year, authorities arrested, prosecuted and jailed individuals for their critical views about the 1994 genocide, slapping them with vague charges such as ‘inciting violence and public uprising’; ‘genocide denial’; ‘justifying the genocide’; and ‘instigating divisions’ and sentencing them to long jail terms. On 7 February, Rwandan poet, **Innocent Bahati** mysteriously disappeared. The popular poet published his poems covering topical social issues on YouTube. He had previously disappeared after publicly criticizing government policy, only to be found in police custody after several weeks. At the end of 2021, almost a year later, his whereabouts and fate remained unknown.



Innocent Bahati ©Andrea Grieder

RWANDA

Innocent Bahati

Suspected enforced disappearance

Innocent Bahati is a popular and nationally recognized Rwandan poet known for his open and critical expression on social issues. He publishes his poetry on YouTube and Facebook and regularly performs at poetry events in Rwanda. His poems

include the most recent *Mfungurira* (Open) *Rubebe*; and *Uwenda Ngomba u Rwanda* (The Debt I Need for Rwanda), among many others.

Bahati has been missing since 07 February 2021 after he reportedly went for dinner with an unnamed person at a hotel in Nyanza district in the Southern Province of Rwanda. After two days of trying to establish his whereabouts, friends reported his disappearance to the Rwanda Investigations Bureau (RIB) which denied holding him. A spokesperson of the RIB publicly stated that Bahati was not in the agency's custody, that an investigation was ongoing and that the RIB would not reveal any information at the time. Friends and associates of Innocent Bahati believe that his disappearance is in relation to his critical poetry, particularly his poems: *Hunger*; *Poverty*; and *Long Regulations*. In 2017, Innocent Bahati had similarly disappeared for several days after he posted a critical comment on Facebook, only to reappear in police custody. Although he was not charged for any offense, he was sent to prison without trial and freed after 3 months. PEN issued a statement on 31 March calling on the Rwanda authorities to investigate and give a public account of the whereabouts of Bahati. Bahati's case was featured as an Empty Chair during the Writers in Prison Committee meeting, and spotlighted during PEN International's 2021 Human Rights Day Campaign.

PEN ADVOCACY - RWANDA

March: *Open letter to all Commonwealth Heads of Government*

March: *Investigate and publicly account for the whereabouts of poet Innocent Bahati*

FOCUS COUNTRY

Uganda

In **Uganda**, the period preceding and following the 14 January parliamentary and presidential elections was marked by widespread violent attacks on opposition supporters and media workers covering opposition campaigns; arbitrary arrests, detention and prosecution on trumped up charges; and enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings perpetrated by security forces and armed pro-government mobs. Two days before the elections, the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) ordered telecommunications service providers to block access to social media and on 13 January, the government imposed a five days nationwide internet shut down. The massive repression underscores the paradox of regular elections across African countries and their declining credibility as a barometer for democratic governance. Assaults on online free speech, saw online journalists covering opposition candidates and critics of the president or his powerful associates targeted for repression by security forces. One such example is novelist **Kakwenza Rukirabashaija** on whose behalf PEN International campaigned after he was violently arrested on 28 December 2021 for comments he had made on his Twitter account. Earlier in the year, writer, poet and academic **Dr. Stella Nyanzi** was forced to flee into exile for fear of her safety, following a wave of arrests and disappearances of opposition supporters, including her close associates and an aide.

UGANDA

Kakwenza Rukirabashaija

Novelist violently arrested and detained incommunicado

Kakwenza Rukirabashaija is a Ugandan novelist and journalist. He is the author of *The Greedy Barbarian*, a satirical novel covering themes of corruption and patronage in a fictional country; and *Banana Republic: Where*



Kakwenza Rukirabashaija ©Kakwenza Rukirabashaija

Writing is Treasonous, in which he recounts his detention experience, including torture during his arrest and detention in April 2020. Since 2020, he has been arbitrarily arrested and unlawfully detained three times by the Ugandan authorities for his writing, the latest incident being on 28 December 2021 when he was violently arrested 2021 and detained incommunicado for comments he had made on his Twitter account about president Yoweri Museveni and his son, who is also the commander of the Uganda land forces.

On 28 December 2021, armed security forces (military and police) broke into Kakwenza’s home in Kampala and violently arrested him without warrant. Kakwenza was subsequently held incommunicado at a military detention facility. Police statements revealed that he had been arrested for critical comments he had posted on Twitter about the president and his son. In a PEN statement issued on 30 December condemning Kakwenza’s unlawful arrest and calling for his release, PEN noted that ‘*Criticism of those in power is not a crime. It is horrifying that Kakwenza Rukirabashaija is facing state harassment, yet again because of his critical views about his country’s first family*’.

PEN ADVOCACY - UGANDA

December: Immediately and unconditionally release novelist Kakwenza Rukirabashaija



Tsitsi-Dangarembga ©Tsitsi-Dangarembga

GOOD NEWS FROM ZIMBABWE

High Court rules in favour of leading novelist Tsitsi Dangarembga

Tsitsi Dangarembga, an award-winning writer from **Zimbabwe**, was arrested in August 2020 while peacefully protesting government corruption. She successfully challenged attempts by the state to prosecute her in the dreaded Anti-Corruption Court, although the charge under which she was arrested had nothing to do with corruption. The High Court ruled in her favour in June. Dangarembga won the PEN Award for Freedom of Expression 2021 in January, and the PEN Pinter Prize 2021 in October.

AMERICAS OVERVIEW 2021

Alicia Quiñones, Americas Programme Coordinator

This year, the American continent experienced one of the worst setbacks in freedom of expression in contemporary history.

In countries such as **Cuba** and **Nicaragua**, legal systems were revised leading to an increase in the persecution, threats and silencing of criticism and attempts at dissent. The situation was such that authors and journalists were forced into exile after threats of imprisonment and even death.

On 11 July 2021, the largest protests of recent decades took place in **Cuba**, where a peaceful social movement led by artists, intellectuals, cultural workers, writers and journalists was met by the Cuban authorities with arbitrary detentions, summary trials and house arrests of an estimated 1,300 people. Reporters and journalists lived under constant threats and systematic harassment. This repression by the government led by President Miguel Díaz-Canel also led to the banishment and forced exile of critical artists, writers, and journalists in exchange for freedom.

2021 was also a fateful year for freedom of the press, expression and information in **Nicaragua**, amid presidential elections widely condemned within the country and abroad as fraudulent, notably in relation to independent candidates disqualified and imprisoned in the run up to the vote. During this period, journalists were also arrested, media outlets seized and dozens forced into exile, among them Gioconda Belli and Sergio Ramírez, writers and members of PEN Nicaragua. The Centre was forced to suspend its activities for fear of reprisals for its criticism of the government. These pressures have had a chilling effect on freedom of expression and created a climate of self-censorship in the country.

Violence against journalists in **Mexico** has long been of grave concern to PEN International, sadly, the atrocities have not stopped. At least seven journalists were murdered this year in possible connection with their work, bringing the total number of journalists murdered between 2000 to 2021 to 145. At least 90% of these crimes remain unpunished. Among those killed in 2021, was journalist and writer **Freddy López Arévalo**, murdered in October in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas. Despite the continuing death toll, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador continued his public attacks against journalists and human rights defenders. PEN Centres in Latin America commemorate the deaths and call for justice for victims annually on 2 November, the Day of the Dead, creating traditional altars and readings in their memory.

PEN Protest | Day of the Dead 2021

31 Oct - 2 Nov

#WordsNoBullets



PEN Centres in Latin America
remember journalists killed for their work

PEN Protest

Day of the Dead is a campaign by PEN International and PEN Centres in Latin America annually to commemorate journalists and writers killed in retaliation for their work. Held in the days around 2 November, Latin American PEN Centres carry out - virtually and in person - activities including poetry recitals, conferences, theatre and music performances and other events. These raise awareness of the persecution, violence and murders of journalists and writers in the region and are a stage on which to call for the climate of impunity and aggression to stop, allowing the free exercise of reporting, dissent, and opinion.

In **Honduras**, another country where journalism is a high-risk profession, threats and harassment of journalists continue unabated. **Dina Meza**, president of PEN Honduras, was herself harassed and monitored for her work as a human rights defender, a pattern of attack that she has endured for a number of years.

In **Peru**, lawsuits against journalists and writers are on the rise. 'Crimes against honour' such as libel or slander are used to stifle journalists with criminal investigations, lengthy and costly trials that, in many cases, force them to quit their jobs. In December 2021, Peruvian journalist and writer **Paola Ugaz** was notified of new charges, bringing the number of criminal proceedings against her to four since 2015, in an attempt to silence her investigative work exposing corruption in the Church and government and to stop the publication of her new book.

In **Venezuela**, literature and journalism can be an open act of resistance. In 2021, the human rights monitor *Espacio Público* counted at least 471 complaints of violations of freedom of expression.

PEN International campaigned on behalf of three writers who were detained and unjustly charged on 31 March 2021. This follows a government strategy aimed at silencing its detractors: detain, charge and leave them in legal limbo.

Haiti's continuing deep political and social crisis is recorded in reports by the Haiti PEN Centre. In June 2021, unidentified individuals murdered more than 15 people in apparently random shootings, among them **Diego Charles**, a journalist for *Gazette-Haïtïy* and Radio Vision 2000, alongside political activist, feminist and radio broadcaster **Marie Antoinette Duclair**.

In the **USA**, PEN America reports issued through 2021 recorded 156 bills introduced in 39 states aimed at limiting teachers discussing race, racism, gender and sexuality. In November 2021, 'state-wide standards against pornography' and 'obscene content' in public schools were introduced. Among them were books such as Maia Kobabe's *Queer Gender: A Memoir and In the House of Dreams*, which addresses abusive same-sex relationships.

FOCUS COUNTRY

Cuba

In 2018, the **Cuban** government passed Decree-Law 349 regulating artistic activity. Under this decree, authorities can suspend art and cultural activities, confiscate materials and sanction individuals. Similarly, Decree 370—introduced in 2019—has been employed to restrict the right to freedom of expression and access information seen as 'contrary to the common good, morals, decency, and integrity through public data transmission networks'. In June, PEN issued a joint statement to the UN Human Rights Council on the restrictions on artistic freedom, freedom of expression and assembly in Cuba.

Artists, musicians, writers and journalists have become prominent voices in denouncing the lack of freedoms and human rights in Cuba. They have spearheaded the 'San Isidro', '27N' and 'Archipiélago' social and cultural movements and led mass demonstrations to draw attention to the situation in the country. Some artists also wrote and performed the song *Patria y Vida*, circumventing censorship in Cuba. Released on YouTube, *Patria y Vida* gained over 300 thousand views and become an anthem against repression.

On 11 July 2021, thousands of Cubans took to the streets in protest against the social, cultural, health, economic and political crisis in Cuba during the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, police and security forces carried out arbitrary arrests and physical attacks against peaceful protesters and warned that singing *Patria y Vida* could be a criminal offence. Several artists – including **Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara** and **Maykel Castillo** (also known as ‘**Osorbo**’), co-author of the song – remain in pre-trial detention at the end of the year and face groundless criminal charges. Osorbo was one of the ‘emblematic’ cases featured in PEN International’s [Day of the Imprisoned Writer 2021](#).

In 2021, at least 50 artists and writers were under house arrest, imprisoned, or under investigation. In December, PEN issued a statement against repression of Cuban artists signed by writers from around the world.



Katherine Bisquet © Héctor Trujillo
Hamlet Lavastida © Peter Rosemann

CUBA

Katherine Bisquet and Hamlet Lavastida

A campaign of harassment and arrest

Katherine Bisquet and **Hamlet Lavastida**, poet and artist respectively, are both activists in the 27N and San Isidro movements. Bisquet has articles published in several media in Cuba and abroad, such as *El Estornudo* (Havana), *Puente de Letras* (USA), *Alba* (London), *Artishock* (Chile), *Hyperallergic* (USA), *Diario de Cuba* (Madrid), *Rialta Magazine* (Mex-Cuba).

Her books include *Something Here is Out-of-Order* and *Depleted Uranium*. In 2021, Katherine Bisquet faced constant threats and was held under house arrest for 70 days in retaliation for her writing and activism; she was one of the poets featured in PEN International’s ‘[World Poetry Day 2021](#)’ campaign. Her partner, artist [Hamlet Lavastida](#), was himself imprisoned for three months for connection with the 27N movement. He was arrested in June 2021 on his return from an arts residency in Berlin and held in a high security prison. Both Bisquet and Lavastida left Cuba on Lavastida’s release in September.



Abraham Jimenez Enoa.
Photo credit Cubanmedia CC BY-SA 4.0

CUBA

Abraham Jiménez Enoa

Under indefinite house arrest

Jiménez Enoa is a well-known journalist and writer, having written for publications including *The Washington Post*, *Gatopardo*, *The New York Times*, and having co-authored the book *Cuba en la encrucijada* (Cuba at the crossroads). He has been under threat since 2020 when he was threatened with jail if he continued his work with *The Washington Post*. In 2021,

state security officials called Enoa to let him know he would receive a passport, which he has been denied for over five years. It transpired that he was asked to leave the country, under threat of facing consequences if refused to do so. Living under constant police harassment and placed under indefinite house arrest, Enoa left Cuba in January 2022.

PEN ADVOCACY - CUBA

Numerous actions were launched on imprisonments, trials and other attacks on writers, artists and journalists in Cuba in 2021.

April: Government must cease harassment of writer Andrés Gómez Quevedo

June: Artist Hamlet Lavastida Abruptly Imprisoned

July: Joint Statement Condemning the Cuban Government's Systemic Harassment of Writers, Artists, and Journalists

July: Writers and artists imprisoned, detained or under threat

July: Organisations and independent media call on the Cuban government to respect the right to freedom of expression

August: We Condemn the Detention of Musician and Activist, Maykel Osorbo, and Support an International Investigation

September: Artist Hamlet Lavastida released from detention

September: Writers and artists remain threatened and imprisoned two months after protests

November: Authorities lock down would-be protesters

December: Prominent Figures Urge End to Repression of Artists

FOCUS COUNTRY

Nicaragua

In **Nicaragua**, both press freedom and freedom of expression and information experienced a disastrous year in 2021. Journalists and media directors were jailed, media outlets were appropriated by Nicaraguan authorities and at least 45 journalists were forced into exile due to lawsuits against them and the general legal environment that curtails their freedom of expression. The right to travel was restricted, passports confiscated, and defamation campaigns intensified against critical reporters. Threats of legal action also made journalists' sources and whistle-blowers, essential to a free and open media, more hesitant to come forward. **Miguel Mendoza, Jaime Arellano, Cristiana Chamorro, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro** and **Juan Lorenzo Holmann**, are among the journalists detained in 2021.

Since May 2021 the Nicaraguan government, in an attempt to silence its critics, carried out a range of actions that negatively impacted the exercise of fundamental rights, such as: the cancelation of the legal status of more than 50 NGOs including PEN Nicaragua; as well as the judicial persecution of journalists and smear campaigns conducted via social media. The government's approval and subsequent application of a new series of punitive laws, has been widely condemned by national and international human rights bodies.

NICARAGUA

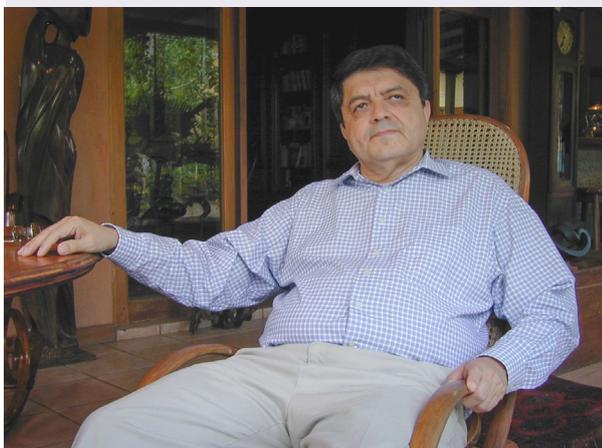
Sergio Ramírez

PEN Nicaragua member
detained in 2021

Sergio Ramírez, a writer, novelist, journalist and recipient of the prestigious Cervantes Literature Prize in 2017, is among those arbitrarily detained in Nicaragua in 2021. His work includes *The Fugitive*; *Divine Punishment*; *The Masked Ball*; *Margarita, How Beautiful the Sea*; *Goodbye, Fellows*;

Sombras Nada Más, among others. Now aged seventy-nine, he was Vice-President of Nicaragua during the first government of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) between 1979-1990. A member of PEN Nicaragua, Ramírez was a participant in the regional meeting of PEN Centres in the Americas in July 2021. In September 2021, he was formally accused of ‘carrying out acts to incite hatred and violence’, and financing insurgent groups while he was travelling abroad. He was issued a detention order and warrant to search his home.

In a video published on Twitter, Ramírez said: *‘As they announced that they searched my house, what they found is a house full of books. (...) I’m a writer committed to democracy and freedom, and I won’t give up on this wherever I am. My literary work is the work of a free man. The only weapons I have are words, and nobody will silence me’*. He currently lives in exile in Spain.



Sergio Ramírez. Photo credit Eduardo Montes-Bradley CC BY-SA 4.0



Kalúa Salazar ©Kalúa Salazar

NICARAGUA

Kalúa Salazar

Journalist living under threat

Kalúa Salazar, journalist and press chief of Radio La Costeñísima, has been the target of an ongoing campaign of legal and police harassment. In March 2021, she reported that at least ten agents of the Special Operations Directorate Police (DOEP) had besieged her home in Bluefields, in the Nicaraguan Caribbean, where she was staying with her family. Salazar also reported that in the early morning of 19 April, she was harassed by the National Police and prevented from leaving her house to go to work, as well as beaten in front of her mother and daughters. In September, she was sentenced by a judge in Bluefields to 120 days imprisonment for alleged slander of three employees of the mayor’s office. Salazar’s work had referred to an anonymous source who accuse the three of corruption. At the beginning of March 2021, a lawyer representing the employees requested that the sentence be extended to three hundred days imprisonment. Salazar said that the trial was ‘political’ and was orchestrated against her, and pointed out that the trial would send an intimidating message to those who are willing to make public complaints. The threats against her continued until Autumn 2021.

PEN ADVOCACY - NICARAGUA

February: *PEN announces a regional alliance to continue its work in Nicaragua with a global impact*

August: *International community called on to unite in defending freedom of expression, press freedom in Nicaragua*

September: *Award winning writer Sergio Ramírez accused of “inciting hatred” and issued a detention order*

November: *Organisations call on Nicaraguan government to provide guarantees for freedom of independent press*

FOCUS COUNTRY**Venezuela**

According to press freedom monitors *Espacio Público* and *Sin Mordaza*, at least 246 attacks on freedom of expression and information were registered in **Venezuela** in 2021, with journalists and reporters being the prime victims. 2021 was marked by blocks on free information on the COVID-19 pandemic and reprisals for disseminating material that challenged the government’s handling of the crisis, as well as arbitrary arrests and lawsuits against writers and journalists. In the last decade, censorship and self-censorship have become the norm in Venezuela, taking forms ranging from arrests of and direct attacks on journalists, increasingly restrictive legislation, and growing numbers of lawsuits against the media.

VENEZUELA**Milagros Mata-Gil and Juan Manuel Muñoz**

Imprisoned for sharing an article on social media

Milagros Mata-Gil is a novelist, journalist and essayist, and a member of the Venezuelan Academy of Language; **Juan Manuel Muñoz** is a poet, storyteller, activist and cultural promoter.

Mata-Gil and Manuel Muñoz were arrested and imprisoned in March 2021, charged with ‘promotion and incitement to hatred’, for writing and sharing an article on the messaging platform WhatsApp. The article describes a party with eight hundred guests, including an attorney general, held in violation of the COVID-19 restrictions in place at the time and without adequate health or safety measures. The article calls on the authorities to pay attention to such irregularities, however, there are no references which could be deemed as incitement to hatred. Both authors were released the following day under precautionary measures, and required to appear in court every 30 days. They were also prohibited from speaking about their case.



Rafael Rattia ©Rafael Rattia

VENEZUELA

Rafael Rattia

Detained for criticism of the authorities

Rafael Rattia is a Venezuelan poet, writer and historian, and the author of works such as *La pasión del suicida* y *Los cantos del apátrida*. He is a columnist for the newspaper *El Nacional*, and the weekly literary column of the daily *Notidiario*, *Laberintos de Agua*. He is the founder and director of the *Archivo Histórico del Delta*, a historical documentation center. In June 2021, Rattia was arrested by police in the state of Monagas. His home was raided and more than sixty books, a laptop, telephones and other valuable were confiscated. He was detained for two days, then charged with ‘incitement to hatred’ for writing and publishing an article about a public official. Rattia is the third Venezuelan writer to be detained in 2021 for publishing articles against or criticizing public officials.

GOOD NEWS

Victims of murders in Mexico find justice

In **Mexico**, where the number of journalists murdered over the years has been shockingly high, with many killings currently unsolved, the conviction of those responsible for the death of two journalists killed in separate incidents in 2017 goes some way to address the long history of impunity in the country. On 15 June 2021 a federal judge in the state of Chihuahua, Mexico, sentenced Hugo Amed Schultz Alcaraz, the former mayor of the Chihuahua city of Chínipas, to eight years in prison for his role in the murder of journalist **Miroslava Breach**, shot dead in March 2017 for her investigation into corruption and the drugs trade. **Javier Valdez Cárdenas**, another investigative journalist murdered in 2017, had justice served in June 2021 with the sentencing of gang leader Juan Francisco Picos Barrueta to 32 years and three months in prison. Cárdenas was renowned for reporting on drugs trafficking. PEN International welcomed the sentences and called for the perpetrators of other unresolved killings to be brought to justice.

PEN ADVOCACY – VENEZUELA

April: Drop charges against Milagros Mata-Gil and Juan Manuel Muñoz

ASIA AND THE PACIFIC OVERVIEW 2021

Ross Holder, Asia/Pacific Programme Coordinator

Around the world, the proliferation of authoritarianism represents a profound challenge to the values and norms that underpin the right to freedom of expression. This has been the case for several countries in the Asia/Pacific region where growing authoritarianism and the re-establishment of dictatorial regimes have resulted in increasing levels of violent conflict, censorship and repression of dissent.

In **Myanmar**, the military's *coup d'état* in February has resulted in the brutal unravelling of hard-fought democratic reforms that promised a departure from the country's troubled history of conflict and repression. From the first day of the military *junta*'s seizure of power from Myanmar's democratically elected government, the regime has waged a campaign of state terror against civilians, violently repressing any form of critical expression.

In **Afghanistan**, the Taliban's return to power has resulted in systematic violations of the rights of women and girls, increased persecution of minorities, reprisal killings and a mounting humanitarian catastrophe. The Taliban's absolute intolerance of any form of expression that falls outside the structures of its ultra-conservative interpretation of *sharia*, has led to the collapse of Afghanistan's previously vulnerable yet vibrant public sphere, with thousands of writers, poets and journalists attempting to flee the country to avoid persecution.

In **Thailand**, the government's increasing repression of the country's protest movement has included excessive force and the use of draconian legislation to clamp down on freedom of expression. By the end of 2021, over 160 people had been charged under Thailand's deeply problematic *Lèse-majesté* legislation, including poet and activist **Arnon Nampa**, who now faces 24 charges, each with sentences ranging from three to fifteen years' imprisonment if convicted. The Thai government has also sought to use COVID-19 emergency legislation to target demonstrators, charging over 1,400 people throughout the year. Those convicted face up to two years' imprisonment.

Several countries across the region used national security legislation to target government critics and silence dissenting voices. Throughout 2021, examples of these restrictions were seen in countries including **Bangladesh, China, India, Sri Lanka** and **Vietnam**.

In **Bangladesh**, the Digital Security Act (DSA) was used by authorities to harass and detain journalists, writers and activists, resulting in a chilling effect on any criticism of the government. PEN International was deeply saddened by the death of writer **Mushtaq Ahmed**, who passed away while in detention. He was arrested under the DSA for his comments on social media that criticised the government's response to the pandemic.

In **China**, authorities in Hong Kong have continued to use the deeply problematic National Security Law to target government critics. The sweepingly broad and vague nature of the legislation means that anyone who engages in critical expression against the government, could potentially be threatened with long-term imprisonment while being afforded extremely limited rights and protections. This has had a severe impact on civil society in the territory, leading to the closure of numerous NGOs and independent media organisations.

In **India**, the government's punitive use of the country's anti-terror law, referred to as the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, gives authorities the power to imprison individuals for years without having to submit supporting evidence. Writers, poets and scholars are among those held in various forms of detention under the legislation, including octogenarian poet **Varavara Rao**, who was belatedly permitted time-limited medical

bail after falling gravely ill in prison. Scholar and linguistic rights activist, **Hany Babu**, who has been detained since 28 July 2020, was also hospitalised after contracting a serious infection while in prison. He was subsequently forced to return to prison and attempts to secure him medical bail have been refused.

In **Vietnam**, authorities continued to engage in their long-standing practice of using national security legislation to target critics of the regime, frequently resulting in heavy prison sentences. PEN International condemned the ongoing imprisonment of writer and activist **Pham Doan Trang**, who in December 2021 was sentenced to nine years' imprisonment.

FOCUS COUNTRY

Afghanistan

This year has borne witness the Taliban's shocking return to power, having seized almost total control over Afghanistan following the withdrawal of NATO military forces and the collapse of the country's republican government. This has had a devastating impact on Afghanistan's fragile civic space, resulting in the mass exodus of writers, artists, journalists, and other public intellectuals from the country, with many of those unable to escape now living in hiding, and fearing persecution because of their writing.

Prior to the fall of Kabul, the Taliban and other militant groups waged a violent insurgency, striking terror into the civilian populations through a campaign of targeted assassinations and reprisal killings in an effort to silence dissenting voices. As the Taliban expanded its control across large swathes of the country over the summer, the militant group imposed severe restrictions in occupied areas, including the systematic discrimination against women and the censorship of independent media, forcing many to flee to the relative safety of Kabul.

In August, as the Taliban reached the country's capital, at least two members of PEN Afghanistan were assassinated. **Abdullah Atefi**, a poet and historian of Pashto literature, was taken from his home and executed on the street. **Dawa Khan Menapal**, a former journalist and government official who had spoken out against Abdullah Atefi's killing, was assassinated the following day during Friday prayers.

The rapid fall of Kabul to the Taliban and the total collapse of the republican government, resulted in chaotic scenes at Kabul's International airport, where those fearing persecution desperately sought to be evacuated at great personal risk. For the few who have managed to leave, an uncertain future awaits. While a small number of writers and poets have been safely resettled through the support of organisations such as PEN International, many more now face a perilous existence in Afghanistan's neighbouring countries, struggling to support themselves and at risk of further persecution or deportation back to Afghanistan.

For the vast majority of Afghans unable to leave the country, there is little sign of the Taliban relenting in the cruel intolerance that defined their previous rule during the 1990s. Despite public assurances by Taliban officials of greater freedoms for women, the militant group has already enacted regulations to remove women from the public sphere and to deprive girls' access to education. PEN International has also received reports of numerous writers and public intellectuals destroying their books and being forced into hiding, fearing reprisals for their writing. The militant group has also cracked down on peaceful dissent, resulting in arbitrary arrests of public intellectuals and the targeted killing of women's rights activists. This grave situation has been compounded by the country's humanitarian crisis, with millions now on the brink of starvation.

By denying Afghans the space to openly express, exchange and debate ideas, the Taliban's repressive actions have robbed Afghanistan of many of those most able to address the country's pressing challenges and has forced those remaining into silence, plunging the entire country into protracted strife and suffering.

Due to the risk of violent reprisals faced by any Afghan writer or public intellectual who criticises the Taliban or promotes values perceived to be incompatible with the militant group's ultra-conservative ideology, a general composite is included below to provide examples of the current reality faced by Afghan writers and public intellectuals.

AFGHAN COMPOSITE WRITER #1

'Ariana'

Ariana is a poet and women's rights activist. A vocal advocate of women's rights, Ariana used poetry as a medium to challenge and question cultural and religious norms in Afghan society. She would regularly publish her poetry on online blogs and social media, which included numerous photos of her participating in cultural and literary events – many of which would not have been permitted under Taliban rule. Ariana represents female writers, poets and journalists who have used their writing to challenge socially conservative norms and advocate for women's rights, which had improved since the fall of the Taliban in 2001 through the determined efforts of activists such as her. The Taliban's return to power in 2021 signalled an unravelling of these hard-won rights, and a return to the dark time when the voices of women were silenced by the Taliban's deeply patriarchal rule. Many now live a life of fear and insecurity, subjected to threats and denied the ability to work or travel independently without a *mahram*, a male family member acting as their 'guardian'. For those who have spoken out against the Taliban's repression, the militant group has conducted a campaign of terror, using detailed target lists that include the names of writers such as Ariana to conduct raids and kidnappings. With a growing number of women activists being killed or going missing, Ariana has fled her home and now lives a life entirely dependent on others, constantly moving locations out of constant fear of being discovered.

AFGHAN COMPOSITE WRITER #2

'Firash'

An outspoken critic of the Taliban who has published several books advocating for greater secularism in the country's politics and society, **Firash** has received numerous threats from the Taliban and other militant groups and was previously detained by the then-Taliban government in the late 90s due to his writing. Having lived the last 20 years in relative safety following the end of Taliban rule, he has become an influential public figure while continuing to receive threats from individuals aligned with the Taliban. The militant group's return to power signalled an end to his safety and freedom to write, forcing him to flee the country with his family to greater safety. Firash represents the small number of Afghan writers and public intellectuals who have fled Afghanistan to a neighbouring country, where they now live a perilous existence, facing starvation and potential deportation back to Afghanistan. Many without passports have crossed illegally into neighbouring countries, depending on friends or diaspora communities for support and accommodation. Without official ID or a visa, they are unable to seek employment or avail of medical care and are at risk of exploitation due to their vulnerable status. For those who managed to travel abroad on a time-limited visa, many are just days away from a similar fate, and are desperately contacting foreign governments and NGOs to secure longer-term visas and resettlement support.

PEN ACTIONS ON AFGHANISTAN

PEN International, in close coordination with several PEN Centres, has worked intensively in support of PEN Afghanistan's at-risk staff and membership, facilitating the evacuation and long-term resettlement of a number of Afghan writers, poets and publishers along with their families. PEN International has also provided other forms of support for Afghan writers at

risk, both inside and outside Afghanistan. PEN International continues to work alongside PEN Centres and partner organisations in support of Afghan writers at risk. PEN International issued three public statements in 2021:

August: [PEN International and PEN Norway condemn the murder of Afghan PEN member](#)

August: [Outrage at second murder of Afghanistan PEN member by Taliban](#)

November: [Taliban's new media regulations are latest effort to silence women, stifling free expression in country](#)

FOCUS COUNTRY

Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, authorities have continued to target those who have publicly criticised the government with imprisonment through the use of security legislation, including the Digital Security Act (DSA) which can result in sentences of up to 14 years' imprisonment. Despite drawing international condemnation following the death in detention of writer **Mushtaq Ahmed** after he was arrested under the DSA, the government has continued to crackdown on critical voices. On 17 May 2021, [journalist Rozina Islam](#) was arrested and later charged with espionage after she published several news reports highlighting the government's mishandling of the pandemic.

BANGLADESH

Shahidul Alam

On trial for comments on student protests

Shahidul ALAM, photojournalist and social activist, [was arrested](#) by plainclothes police officers on 5 August 2018, who raided his home just hours after he gave an [interview to Aljazeera](#) where he recounted his experience documenting student protests. On 6 August 2018, Alam was brought before a lower

court in Dhaka and accused of ‘making provocative comments’ and ‘giving false information’ to the media under Section 57 of Bangladesh’s draconian Information Communications Technology Act (ICT Act). The legislation was subsequently repealed in October 2018, raising questions over the continued legality of the case against him. Alam was granted bail in November 2018, and in [December 2021](#) his request to have the case struck down was rejected by Bangladesh’s High Court.

Alam is the founder and managing director of the Drik Picture Library and the creator of the Patshala South Asian Media Academy, a photography school in Dhaka that has trained hundreds of photographers. In 2014, he was awarded the [Shilpakala Padak](#) for his significant contribution to Bangladeshi culture in the field of photography. In June 2018, he was announced as the 2018 winner of the prestigious US-based [Lucie Award](#) in acknowledgement of his exceptional contribution to photography and society, given the Tribute Award by the London-based Frontline Club and named, among others, TIME Magazine’s Person of the Year. Most recently, in 2020, Alam won the Committee to Protect Journalists’ [International Press Freedom Award](#).

FOCUS COUNTRY

China

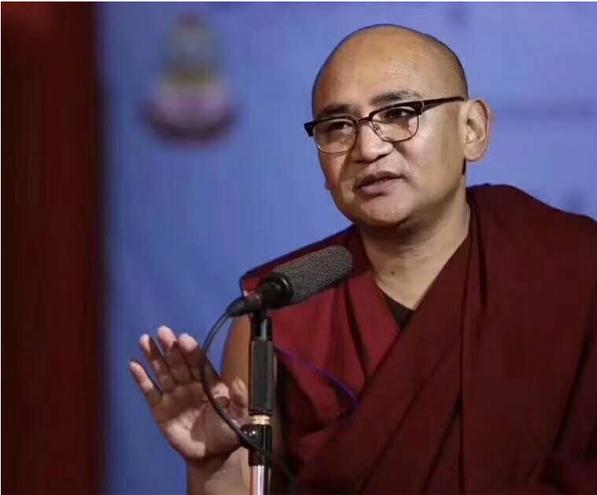
As the ruling Chinese Communist Party celebrated its centenary in 2021, the regime continued its sustained crackdown on civil society across the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The PRC government also continued to expand its increasingly panoptic state censorship and surveillance apparatus, constraining the space for free expression by controlling access to [independent information](#). The regime’s propaganda machine sought to fill the information vacuum, deploying disinformation to manipulate public discourse so as to shield the PRC government’s political leadership [from growing international criticism](#) over its egregious human rights abuses.

Dissident writers, [journalists](#) and bloggers continued to languish in prison, many enduring long-term prison sentences. At least 13 members of the Independent Chinese PEN Centre (ICPC) have been subjected to ongoing detention, and many other writers and public intellectuals have been subjected to various forms of harassment, including [travel restrictions](#) and surveillance. PEN International mourns the passing of ICPC member **Li Liqun**, who [tragically took his own life](#) on 23 July 2021 as a result of unrelenting persecution by the PRC authorities.

In **Xinjiang**, the PRC government show no sign of relenting its abhorrent subjugation of the Uyghur and other minority populations. The mass detainment of Uyghurs remained of the utmost concern, with the PRC government shifting from a programme of extrajudicial internment to the imposition of [severe prison sentences](#) and coercive labour practices. Among those detained were [hundreds of Uyghur](#) writers and public intellectuals, including poet **Perhat Tursun**, academic **Rahile Dawut** and Sakharov Prize winner **Ilham Tohti**. The scale of the injustice being perpetrated by the PRC government amounts to cultural genocide, with all forms of public expression subject to severe government controls in an attempt to dislocate the Uyghur population from their identity and heritage.

Similarly in **Tibet**, the PRC government’s ongoing pursuit of greater cultural homogeneity has resulted in the long-term imprisonment of Tibetan intellectuals and cultural figures, and the implementation of a regressive language policy that actively suppresses Tibetan language use among the region’s Tibetan population, a key marker of their identity. The regime’s repression of the country’s minority populations was also underway in **Inner Mongolia**, where [education reforms](#) designed to limit the use of Mongolian-language instruction have led to widespread public opposition, and in turn, the enactment of [coercive ideological regulations](#) intended to stifle any resistance.

In **Hong Kong**, arbitrary arrests and the forced closure of [independent media outlets](#) are the latest efforts by the PRC government to silence the territory’s once-vibrant civic space. The government’s cynical and expansive use of national security legislation to [criminalise critical expression](#), continued to impose a profound chilling effect on Hong Kong’s civil society.



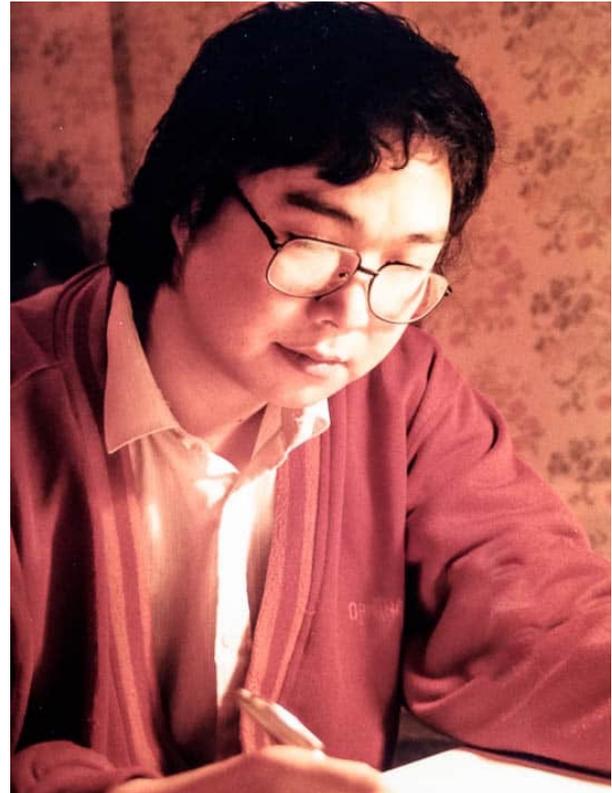
Go Sherab Gyatso aka. Gosher. Photo courtesy of anonymous

CHINA/TIBET

Gō Sherub Gyatso

Served a ten-year sentence in a secret trial

Gō Sherub Gyatso (also known as Gosher), a prominent Tibetan writer, was initially detained by PRC security services on 26 October 2020, in the Sichuan's city of Chengdu on suspicion of inciting secession. He was subsequently transferred to the Tibetan Autonomous Region where he was formally charged on 3 February 2021. According to reports, Gosher was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment following a secret trial held in December 2021. There are ongoing concerns over Gosher's health, following reports that he was detained while seeking medical treatment for a chronic lung condition. Gosher is the author of over 10 books, including *Wake Up* (2007), *General Knowledge & the Path* (2011) and *Insights of a Thinker* (2013). Much of his writing centres on Tibetan Buddhism, language, and culture. An outspoken intellectual and advocate for Tibetan monastic education, this is the fourth time that the PRC authorities have imprisoned Gosher, who was previously detained in 1998, 2008 and 2011 for his criticism of government restrictions on Tibetan religious and cultural practices.



Gui Minhai. Photo courtesy of anonymous

CHINA/HONG KONG

Gui Minhai

Forcibly disappeared in 2015 – then sentenced to ten years in prison

Gui Minhai, a writer and publisher with Swedish citizenship, was one of five Hong Kong booksellers who were forcibly disappeared in October 2015. He was taken from his vacation home in Thailand by the PRC security services and was not seen in public until three months later, when PRC state media aired a forced confession video where Gui claimed he had voluntarily returned to China to turn himself for a 2003 traffic offence. Briefly released while under continued surveillance in late 2017, Gui was subsequently detained by plain clothes police officers on 20 January 2018. He was in the company of two Swedish diplomats, on his way to Beijing for medical testing after showing symptoms of a neurodegenerative disease. On 24 February 2020, Gui was formally sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment on national security charges.

Gui is also a poet, bookseller and member of the ICPC. He was the owner of Mighty Current Media and joint owner of its retail arm, Causeway Bay Books. Mighty Current Media is a Hong Kong-based publishing company best known for its sensationalist books about private lives of China's political leadership. Causeway Bay Bookstore had a similar reputation and was a popular destination for those seeking to buy books that were banned or otherwise unavailable in China's mainland. In 2020, several poems written by Gui during his initial detention were published as a [collection](#) titled, *I draw a door on the wall with my finger*.



Rahile Dawut. Photo courtesy of anonymous

CHINA/XINJIANG

Rahile Dawut

Dissappeared since 2017

Rahile DAWUT, a Uyghur poet, anthropologist and folklorist, disappeared in late 2017 shortly after making plans to travel from Xinjiang to Beijing to participate in an academic conference. It is presumed that the PRC government is responsible for her disappearance,

holding her in secret for over four years, despite international outcry and media attention, and a campaign led by Dawut's daughter [calling for her release](#). In July 2021, [investigative reporting](#) by Radio Free Asia's Uyghur Service confirmed her imprisonment according to sources within Xinjiang University.

Born in Xinjiang, Dawut is a leading expert on the study of Uyghur folklore and cultural traditions. An associate professor at Xinjiang University and founder of the university's Minorities Folklore Research Center, Dawut is recognised internationally for her unique contribution to the study and cataloguing of Uyghur cultural heritage. Her work was also recognised and supported by the PRC government. In 2016, just a year before she was detained, Dawut received a research grant from the Ministry of Culture, reportedly the largest ever given to a [Uyghur research project](#).

PEN International continued to monitor the ongoing detention of members of the ICPC, with over a dozen held in various forms of detention over 2021. Specific cases include writers **Qin Yongmin** (13 years' imprisonment, due to be released in 2028), **CHEN Shuqing** (10 and a half years' imprisonment, due to be released in 2025) and **LÜ Gengsong** (11 and a half years' imprisonment, due to be released in 2025). Hundreds of Uyghur writers, poets and public intellectuals remained in various forms of detainment, including poet **Gulmira IMIN** (life imprisonment), scholar **ILHAM Tohti** (life imprisonment) and literary critic **Yalqun ROZI** (15 years' imprisonment, due to be released in 2033). Numerous Tibetan writers and public intellectuals also remained in long-term imprisonment, including **Kunchok Tsephel GOPEY TSANG** (15 years' imprisonment, due to be released in 2024) and **Jo Lobsang JAMYANG** (seven and a half years' imprisonment, due to be released in 2022). In Hong Kong, news mogul **Jimmy Lai** and scholar **Benny Tai** remained detained on multiple charges and facing potential life sentences if convicted of violating Hong Kong's National Security Law.

GOOD NEWS

Three writers released in 2021

Rare, good news came from **China** where ICPC members **DU Bin** and **LIU Feiyue** were released, the former on bail in January after being detained in December 2020, and the latter in November 2021, although facing a further three years' deprivation of political rights. PEN International also welcomed the release of Tibetan linguistic rights activist **Tashi WANGCHUK** in January 2021, subject to a further five years' deprivation of political rights. While no longer imprisoned, all three will face restrictions on their freedom of movement and are likely subject to ongoing surveillance by PRC authorities.

◆ India

In India, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government continued its crackdown on political opponents and independent media, using tactics ranging from harassment, surveillance and long-term imprisonment. This includes the detention of a group of writers, scholars and activists who were detained in connection to their public support of marginalised communities in India. Many of those detained were subjected to various forms of ill treatment, resulting in the hospitalisation of poet **Varavara Rao** and the death in custody of activist **Stan Swamy**. New media regulations enacted in February 2021 also threatened to undermine freedom of expression online by providing the government with broad powers to control content disseminated on social media platforms.

INDIA

Hany Babu

In prison for commentary on human and linguistic rights

Hany Babu is an associate professor of language and linguistics at Delhi University and an anti-caste activist and advocate for greater protections of marginalised languages, who has regularly used his writing to highlight the relationship between human rights and linguistic plurality. On 10 September 2019, Babu's home was raided by police who seized his laptop, mobile phone and books on caste and social formations. He was subsequently arrested by India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) on 28 July 2020 and sent to India's notorious Taloja Central Jail where he has since been held in grossly inadequate conditions. In May 2021, Babu was repeatedly denied basic medical treatment after contracting a severe eye infection, eventually resulting in his temporary hospitalisation before he was forced to return to prison.

Babu is one of 16 writers, scholars and activists, including poet **Varavara Rao**, who have been detained by the Indian government under India's counterterrorism law, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). The charges against the group, referred to as the BK-16, reportedly arose from evidence of their 'involvement in inciting violence' at a public event held on 31 December 2017 by activists advocating for the rights of Dalits and other marginalised communities. On 1 January 2018, one day after the event, riots erupted between Dalits and Hindu nationalists during a celebratory gathering to mark the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Bhima Koregaon, a significant cultural event among India's Dalit community.

FOCUS COUNTRY

Myanmar

On 1 February 2021, Myanmar's military mounted a *coup*, seizing power over the country's democratically elected government. In the months that followed, the military *junta* engaged in a campaign of terror against the very people it had a responsibility to protect.

In response, Myanmar's civil society has shown defiance in the face of dictatorship, forming a civil disobedience movement that peacefully expressed their opposition to military rule through mass protests, labour strikes and boycotts of businesses linked to the military. The *junta* reacted to this by unleashing shocking levels of violence against unarmed civilians while at the same time subverting the country's legal system in an attempt to legitimise its repression.

This has had a devastating impact on free expression across the country, resulting in the silencing of independent media and the criminalisation of peaceful dissent. By the end of 2021, the military *junta* has arrested over 11,000 civilians, with many detained in retaliation for their participation at protest rallies or for their posts on social media. Dozens of writers, poets, journalists and public intellectuals, including Maung Yu Py, Maung Thar Cho and Htin Lin Oo, are among those held in various forms of unjust detention, with many subjected to torture and other forms of ill treatment. Meanwhile, the military *junta* has expanded its use of internet blackouts and other forms of censorship and disinformation in an effort to limit citizens' ability to access independent information and communicate with the outside world.

Of greatest alarm is the military *junta*'s willingness to torture and murder those who have shown defiance in the face of oppression. By the end of 2021, the *coup* has been responsible for the deaths of almost 1,300 civilians. This includes the murder of poets K Za Win and Myint Myint Zin, who were among dozens of unarmed protestors shot by *junta* forces during peaceful protests. Disturbing information has also emerged of the systematic torture of detainees, including the shockingly depraved murder of poet Khet Thi, who was reportedly tortured to death.

Throughout Myanmar's history, poets have played a central role in the country's struggle against tyranny, using their writing as a source of defiance and solidarity in times of repression. Since the *coup* began, poets and writers are once again at the forefront of the resistance movement, their words symbolising the people's spirit of resistance. The deliberate targeting of poets and writers serves to highlight the illegitimacy of the military *junta*'s rule over Myanmar, which now threatens to push the country into a self-perpetuating cycle of violence with no end in sight, condemning an entire generation to a future without hope or opportunity.



Than Myint Aung. Photo courtesy of anonymous

MYANMAR

Than Myint Aung

Serving a three-year prison sentence

Writer **Myint Aung** was taken from her home by the *junta* on the morning of the first day of the military *coup* and was held at an interrogation centre in Yangon for a month before being transferred to Insein Prison. On 27 December 2021 she was sentenced to three years' imprisonment under newly amended provisions to the Myanmar's Penal Code, reportedly in connection to speeches she gave at literary events in 2019.

Than Myint Aung is a philanthropist who has been celebrated for her charity work in support of disadvantaged children and the vulnerable elderly in Myanmar, resulting in her awarding of the Citizen of Burma award in 2014. She is also an established writer who used fiction as a medium to highlight many of the social issues that

she addresses. She has published several literary works including *Many lives with me*, *His sky*, and *The colours are moving slightly*. In 2002, Than Myint Aung was awarded Myanmar's National Literature Award for a collection of short stories.



Wai Moe Naing. Photo courtesy of anonymous

MYANMAR

Wai Moe Naing

Facing trial on suspected fabricated charges

Wai Moe Naing, a youth activist, writer and member of PEN Myanmar, was arrested on 15 April 2021 by junta forces that reportedly used an unmarked vehicle to ram him while driving on a moped as part of a protest rally in the Monywa region. He faces multiple charges under the amended Penal Code, including murder and incitement. The charges are reported to relate to the killings of two police officers in the Monywa region, but no evidence has emerged that links Wai Moe Naing to the crime. Wai Moe Naing's friends and family have rejected the accusation of murder on the strongest possible terms.

Wai Moe Naing began writing as a student, and had his first short story published in Teen Magazine at the age of 13. His writing has since been published in several literary outlets, including *Khit Yananthhit* Magazine and *Pae Tin Tharn* Journal. In the immediate aftermath of the military coup, Wai Moe Naing rose to prominence as a leader of the anti-coup

protest movement and was among those who popularised the idea of banging pots and pans as a non-violent act of resistance to the military junta's rule.

MYANMAR

Maung Yu Py

Serving two-year sentence

Maung Yu Py was arrested on 9 March 2021 while attending an anti-coup protest in his hometown of Myeik, located in southern Myanmar. Charged with unlawful assembly and spreading false news under the amended Penal Code, he was sentenced to two years' imprisonment in June 2021.

Considered to be one of Myanmar's most well-known poets, Maung Yu Py published his first collection of poetry, *The Bird that was Killed when the Sky Capsized* (2000), at the age of 20, and has since published several poetry collections, including *There is a New Map for that Little Island Town Too* (2007) and *With the Big Television Turned On* (2009). His poetry has also been featured by *Poetry International* and was included in *Bones Will Crow: Fifteen Contemporary Burmese Poets* (2011), an anthology edited by Ko Ko Thett and James Byrne. In 2015, Maung participated in University of Iowa's prestigious International Writing Program as a visiting fellow.

PEN ADVOCACY - MYANMAR

February: *Military coup undermines the will of the people and raises the spectre of the country's authoritarian past*

March: *Two poets among dozens of unarmed protestors killed by military junta*

March: *Joint Statement: International Human Rights Groups Condemn Violent Crackdown Against Journalists in Myanmar*

April: *Arrest of satirist and poet Zarganar highlights latest efforts by military junta to silence public figures*

April: *Joint Statement: Call for freedom of expression in Myanmar and the immediate release of Japanese journalist, Mr. Yuuki Kitazumi*

April: *Outrage over assault and arbitrary arrest of PEN Myanmar member by military junta*

May: *Depraved torture and murder of detained poet marks new low for military junta*

May: *PEN International Calls for Immediate Release of US Journalist*

The Myanmar PEN Centre was one of the many NGOs and civil society groups whose activities were suspended, and whose members suffered reprisals for their part in the protests. Soon after the *coup*, the Centre issued statements, condemning the coup, calling for the release of poets and calling on the global creative community for solidarity.

◆ Philippines

While there have been positive free expression developments in the Philippines in 2021, including the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to **Maria Ressa**, numerous challenges remain. The Duterte government's open hostility towards independent media and the President's 'war on drugs' campaign has created a hostile environment for journalists and government critics, with many subjected to various forms of threats and harassment, including criminal defamation charges and red-tagging (a form of black-listing where individuals or organisations are accused of being communist sympathisers, signalling their opposition to the current government). A culture of impunity for those engaged in gross human rights violations continues to undermine free expression in the country. In 2021, at least two journalists, **Jesus Malabanan** and **Orlando Dinoy**, were victims of targeted killings.

PHILIPPINES

Maria Ressa

Nobel Peace Prize laureate under constant harassment and threat

Maria Ressa, journalist and writer, was initially arrested on 13 February 2019, and has since been the target of a campaign of legal harassment and intimidation by the Duterte government. She currently faces numerous bogus charges, including libel and tax evasion, for carrying out her journalistic work. Among others, she exposed government corruption and the horrific human cost of Duterte's 'war on drugs', which has resulted in thousands of extra-judicial killings. If convicted on all charges, Ressa could face close to a century in prison.

Ressa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021 in recognition of her efforts to 'safeguard freedom of expression, which is a precondition for democracy and lasting peace'. She is the author of two books on the rise of terrorism in Southeast Asia: *Seeds of Terror: An Eyewitness Account of Al-Qaeda's Newest Center* (2011) and *From Bin Laden to Facebook: 10 Days of Abduction, 10 Years of Terrorism* (2013). She is the founder and CEO of *Rappler*, an online news platform.

◆ Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, the government continued to undermine the right to free expression through the intimidation of journalists and civil society activists. Several Tamil journalists, including **Selvakumar Nilanthan** and **Punniyamoorthy Sasikaran**, were subject to interrogations by the country's anti-terror police, while the government continued to use its deeply problematic Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) to target minorities and those who exercise their right to freedom of expression.

SRI LANKA

Ahnaf Jazeem

Detained for writing poetry

Ahnaf JAZEEM, a poet and former teacher, was arrested on 16 May 2020 under Sri Lanka's draconian PTA. The arrest was in connection to a Tamil-language poetry anthology called Navarasam (நவரசம்), which he wrote and published in July 2017, as well as other unsubstantiated claims of exposing his students to 'extremist' content with the intention of turning them into followers of 'extremist ideology'. His arrest comes against a backdrop of increased marginalisation and discrimination targeting Sri Lanka's Muslim community. The Sri Lankan authorities reportedly found copies of *Navarasam* at a school that was being investigated for its alleged links to the Easter Sunday Terror attacks. Despite the fact that the book is currently listed in Sri Lanka's national library, having never been banned, the authorities decided to detain Jazeem for its content, among other reasons. After 19 months of detention without trial, where he was detained in squalid conditions on the basis of a case marred by numerous due process violations, Jazeem was released on bail on 15 December 2021. He remains subject to onerous bail conditions with his trial still looming ahead.

◆ Thailand

In Thailand, insulting the monarchy is considered a criminal offence under the Thai criminal code and can result in a sentence of up to 15 years' imprisonment per count if convicted, as established by Thailand's *lèse-majesté* law, last used in 2017 before mass protests swept across the country in 2020. As part of the Thai government's ongoing efforts to suppress the protest movement, by the end of 2021 it charged over 160 people for violating the heavily criticised legislation. The rapid acceleration in the use of *lèse-majesté*

charges against protestors has attracted the alarm of the United Nations and its independent experts, who have called for the law's repeal.

The Thai government also sought to use emergency legislation ostensibly intended to address the pandemic against demonstrators, clamping down on freedom of expression. Over the course of 2021, over 1,000 protestors were arrested under the legislation.

THAILAND

Arnon Nampha

Detained on multiple charges for his peaceful criticism of the Thai monarchy

Arnon Nampha, a poet and human rights lawyer, was first arrested on 7 August 2020 on multiple charges of sedition and obstruction for his participation in the peaceful protests that have taken place in Thailand throughout much of 2020, calling for reform of the Thai monarchy and an end to the use of *lèse-majesté* laws. Nampha was granted conditional bail the following day but pledged to continue to participate at public rallies. Over the following weeks, he was re-arrested on several occasions for making speeches and for his role as a leader of the protest movement. In May 2021, Nampha contracted COVID-19 while held in pre-trial detention. Detained since 11 August 2021, he now faces a total of 24 charges for his peaceful participation at demonstrations. This includes multiple *lèse majesté* charges, which can result in a maximum sentence of 15 years' imprisonment, per count. As an activist lawyer, Nampha has established a reputation for taking on challenging cases involving the deprivation of human rights by the Thai government. These include *lèse majesté* cases and those who have been detained for their political opposition.

Nampha has emerged as a leader of Thailand's protest movement. He uses his poetry to shine a light on the struggles faced by those who have been marginalised within Thailand, for instance his collection of poetry *People are Blind*

and Mute No Longer (translated) which was released to coincide with the fifth anniversary of the 2006 military *coup*. In 2021, PEN International [published the online version](#) of the Thai protest booklets, which contain speeches made by Nampha during the 2020 protests.

Trang's published works include *Chính trị bình dân* (*Popular Politics*), *Cẩm nang nuôi tù* (*Handbook on Supporting Prisoners*), *Phản kháng phi bạo lực* (*Non-Violent Opposition*) and numerous other works. She has also sought to publish her writing online, through her [blog](#) and [social media](#), in order to overcome state censorship of traditional media and to raise awareness of human rights issues in Vietnam.

◆ Vietnam

In 2021, Vietnamese authorities continued to impose severe restrictions on the right to freedom of expression, prohibiting independent media and imposing a wide range of restrictions on government critics, including harassment, arbitrary arrest and the imposition of severe prison sentences. Many of those detained are denied access to legal counsel and subjected to protracted periods of pre-trial detention and hostile interrogations. The authorities continue to use Article 117 of Vietnam's Penal Code to silence dissidents, with those convicted facing up to 20 years' imprisonment.

VIETNAM

Pham Doan Trang

Held incommunicado for over a year

Pham Doan Trang is an author, journalist, and democracy activist. On 6 October, her apartment in Ho Chi Minh city was raided as part of a joint operation by Hanoi Police and officials from the Ministry of Public Security. She was held incommunicado for over a year and was finally granted permission to meet with her lawyer on 19 October 2021. Trang has been denied access to adequate medical care throughout her detention, raising concerns for her health due to her pre-existing medical conditions. On [14 December 2021](#), the Vietnamese authorities sentenced Trang to nine years' imprisonment under article 88 of the 1999 Penal Code.

EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA OVERVIEW 2021

Aurélia Dondo, Europe and Central
Asia Programme Coordinator

2021 proved to be one of the most hazardous years for writers and journalists in Europe and Central Asia. Six journalists were killed as they carried out their professions – the highest figure since 2015. In March, radio host **Hazım Özsu** was shot dead in his home in Turkey by a listener who objected to his comments on religion on his show. In April, veteran crime journalist **Giorgos Karaivaz** was gunned down outside his home in Greece. In June, Azerbaijani reporter **Maharram Ibrahimov** and cameraman **Siraj Abishov** were killed by a landmine explosion in the Kalbajar region, west of Nagorno-Karabakh. In July, cameraman **Aleksandre Lashkarava** died after being assaulted by a mob of anti-LGBTI protesters in Georgia. A few days later, investigative journalist and crime reporter **Peter R. de Vries** died from injuries sustained in a shooting in the Netherlands.

Poet, journalist and dissident, **Aron Atabek** died aged 68 on 24 November while being treated in a Kazakh hospital for COVID-19. Imprisoned since 2006, he had been released in October amid concerns over his health. Atabek, who had served most of an 18-year prison sentence for organising mass disorder, had always maintained his innocence and rejected a government pardon premised on admitting his guilt.

My Throat Will Die

ARON ATABEK

(b. 31 January 1953–
d. 24 November 2021)

My throat, unable to speak, will die
For the sounds of my homeland.
My ancestors' patter will vanish
Like water into sand.
I am a storyteller of immortality
In Semitic and Etruscan tongues;
I am the dust of Turkic dialects
Writing in Russian.
Many lives' twisted fates
Are lost inside me, mourning,
And I myself am a naked tangle of nerves
Pulsating with verses.

Translated by Alfia Nakipbekova
and Niall McDevitt

Impunity remained a concern across the region. October saw the 15-year anniversary of the murder of Russian journalist **Anna Politkovskaya**. In Malta, a long-awaited public inquiry into the assassination of investigate journalist **Daphne Caruana Galizia** found the state responsible for her murder.

The crisis in Belarus that broke out in 2020, continued unabated. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, Belarus overtook Turkey as the region's worst jailer of journalists. The crackdown on independent and critical voices in the country reached new high in May 2021, when the Belarusian authorities went as far as to hijack an aircraft to detain exiled blogger and activist **Roman Protasevich** and his partner **Sofya Sapega**. Elsewhere critical writers and journalists continued to be subjected to police violence, harassment and threats, particularly in Turkey, Russia, and Belarus (see detailed country profiles below). In Italy, writer and journalist

Roberto Saviano marked 15 years living under constant police protection, after receiving threats from the mafia. Attacks against journalists covering COVID-19 related protests intensified, including in France, Germany, Italy and Spain. In July, the Pegasus Project investigation revealed that authorities in Azerbaijan and Hungary used the spyware against journalists and activists. In September, the European Commission published its first-ever recommendation to strengthen the safety of journalists across the European Union.

Authorities introduced legislation that severely restricted the rights to freedom of expression, under the pretext of stopping 'foreign interference' – as in Russia's 'foreign agent law' – or combatting fake news, as in Greece, where spreading 'fake news' became a criminal offence in November. This vaguely worded law could lead to journalists being jailed for up to five years. Authorities in Poland, Latvia and Lithuania declared local states of emergency along their borders with Belarus, amid a surge of migrants and asylum seekers facilitated by the Lukashenko regime. Journalists attempting to report on the crisis were excluded from restricted areas, faced criminal prosecutions, and were briefly detained by police. The year ended with the threat of further armed conflict in Ukraine, with the Russian authorities accused of waging a deliberate campaign of disinformation.

Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) continued to be used as a tool to silence journalists, the media and human rights activists across the region. These lawsuits are brought usually by wealthy, powerful individuals with the sole intent of burdening the defendant with a legal case until they give up or retract their criticism. In October, the European Commission launched a public consultation with a view to preparing a directive, expected to be adopted in 2022.

In December, **Dmitry Muratov**, editor-in-chief and co-founder of leading independent Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, was awarded the Nobel peace prize, alongside journalist and writer Maria Ressa from the Philippines, thus highlighting the importance of investigative journalism and freedom of expression in contributing to peace. Muratov dedicated his Nobel prize to 'all true journalism... to [his] colleagues from *Novaya Gazeta*, who have lost their lives... to the colleagues who are alive, to the professional community who perform their professional duty'.

FOCUS COUNTRY

Belarus

The Belarusian authorities unleashed an unprecedented crackdown on independent media in a bid to silence critical reporting on the protests that have swept Belarus since the disputed presidential elections of 9 August 2020. They disrupted internet access and blocked over 100 news and media websites, including the online media outlet *TUT.BY*. Amendments to the Mass Media Law and to the Law on Mass Gatherings, signed into law in May 2021, made it virtually impossible to report on public protests.

Scores of journalists were arbitrarily detained, beaten, sentenced to prison or hefty fines; many saw their accreditation revoked. Persecution intensified in July 2021, with the security forces raiding offices and homes of independent journalists across the country, including those working for *Nasha Niva*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and *Belsat TV*. The Belarusian authorities subsequently moved to ‘purge’ civil society, with the Supreme Court notably ruling to dissolve the Belarusian PEN Centre in August. In November, the Ministry of Information of Belarus blocked the websites of several civil society organisations, including that of the Belarusian PEN Centre.

Since August 2020, over 935 artists and cultural workers – including 187 writers and those using the written word – were persecuted, with over 78 detained and many suffering beatings and torture. Some were attacked in the streets by police and pro-government supporters. Others found themselves forced to resign or dismissed from their jobs, losing contracts, and having performances and readings cancelled because of their engagement in the protests.

While journalists, writers and artists arrested in 2020 typically received administrative detention orders, imprisoning them for up to two weeks (see 2020 Case List), the attitude towards dissent hardened with lengthy prison sentences were handed down in 2021 against dissenting voices – targeting journalists, activists and opposition politicians alike.

Renowned writer and member of the Coordination Council for the Transfer of Power, **Svetlana Alexievich** remained in exile in Germany. Charged in August 2020 under Article 361

of the Belarus Criminal Code – appeal to overthrow or change the constitutional order of the Republic of Belarus or to carry out crimes against the government – the case against her was still pending as of 31 December 2021. Her name and books were removed from the school curriculum in Belarus in August 2021.



Alaksandr Bialacki. Photo credit Bladyniec, CC BY-SA 4.0

BELARUS

Ales Bialiatski

Detained awaiting trial

Writer and human rights defender **Ales Bialiatski** is the founder of the Viasna Human Rights Centre, an organisation that campaigns for opposition activists who are harassed and persecuted by the Belarusian authorities. In March 2021, the Belarusian Investigative Committee opened a case against Viasna under Article 342 of the Criminal Code (organising and financing actions that grossly violate public order), as part of a broader crackdown on independent media and civil society organisations. As Chairman of Viasna, Bialiatski was summoned for questioning to the central office of the Investigative Committee on 7 April 2021. He demanded a protocol of interrogation in Belarusian, which took several days to produce.

On 14 July 2021, Bialiatski was detained alongside several Viasna colleagues

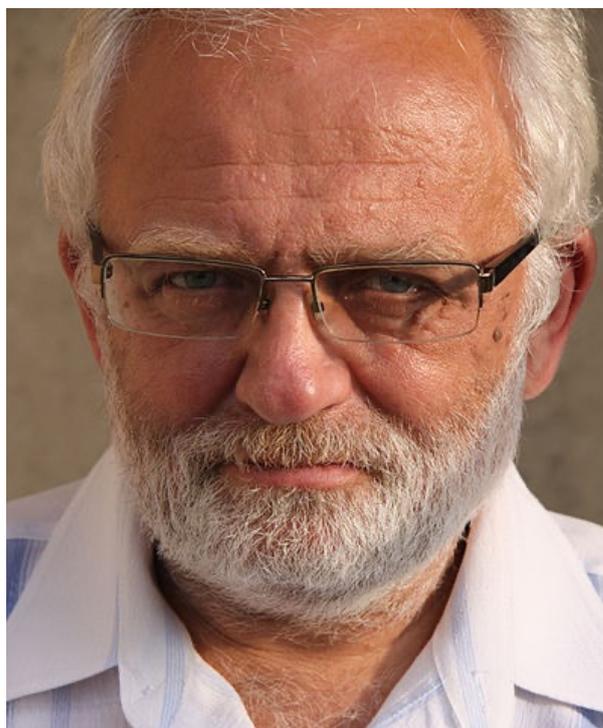
following raids by Belarusian law enforcement officers on more than a dozen civil society and human rights organisations. Bialiatski was transferred to pre-trial detention on 17 July and subsequently charged under Article 243 (2) of the Criminal Code (tax evasion), which carries up to seven years in prison. A date for his hearing had yet to be set as of 31 December 2021. He remains in pre-trial detention.

It is not the first time Bialiatski has been targeted by the Belarusian authorities. On 4 August 2011, he was arrested again on spurious charges of tax evasion – he used his personal bank accounts in Lithuania and Poland to fund Viasna, as the organisation could not hold a bank account in Belarus. On 24 November 2011, Bialiatski was sentenced to four-and-a-half years' imprisonment in a high security prison colony. PEN members actively campaigned for his release; he was amnestied in June 2014.

Bialiatski, born on 25 September 1962, is a literary scholar, essayist and human rights defender. He was a founding member of the Belarusian literary organisation *Tutejshyja* (The Locals) and formerly served as head of the Maxim Bahdanovich Literary Museum in Minsk. He founded Viasna in April 1996.

was convicted of 'hooliganism' and sentenced to two years of house arrest.

Kalackaja, born on 12 May 1971, has translated into Belarusian the works of some of the world's most renowned authors, including Margaret Atwood, Virginia Woolf, William Golding and Tennessee Williams. Scores of writers and translators called for her release, including Margaret Atwood, the European Writers Council, the European Council of Literary Translators' Associations, and several PEN Centres.



Uladzimir Mackievič. Photo credit Andrei Schutt, CC BY-SA 4.0

BELARUS

Volha Kalackaja

Under house arrest

On 18 January 2021, translator and English language tutor **Volha Kalackaja** was giving a private tuition class at her home in Minsk, when police entered and took her for questioning. She was subsequently held in pre-trial detention and charged with 'malicious hooliganism' under Article 399 of the Belarusian Criminal Code. PEN International believes that the charges against her were disproportionate, and fears she was being targeted for taking part in peaceful protests. On 24 March 2021, Kalackaja

BELARUS

Uladzimir Mackievič

Awaiting trial in prison

Uladzimir Mackievič was detained on 4 August 2021 after the Belarusian KGB raided his house. He was transferred to a pre-trial detention centre on 15 August and charged with organising and preparing actions that grossly violate public order, under Article 342 (1) of the Criminal Code of Belarus, which carries up to

three years in prison. PEN International believes he is being targeted for his views and writings critical of the Belarusian authorities. A date for his hearing has yet to be set as of 31 December 2021.

Born on 14 May 1956, Mackievič is a prominent Belarusian philosopher, essayist, public figure and broadcaster. He played a key role in launching Charter '97, a civic initiative working to restore democracy and human rights in Belarus. In 2011, after being stripped of the right to teach at Belarusian public universities for criticising President Alexander Lukashenko, he co-founded the Flying University, an independent platform that promotes critical thinking. Prior to his arrest, he had been hosting 'Talk of the Day', a show on Belsat TV channel since 2012.

A prolific writer, Mackievič penned numerous articles and about 50 research papers on philosophy, politics, culture and transformation of education. He co-authored a series of books on civil society, dialogue and values entitled *Belarus for Beginners* (2006-2009), and published video courses on philosophy and social change. His main books include *Belarus: Against the Obvious (Think Belarus Manifesto)* (1994), *Belarusian Democracy. In Defiance of the Obvious* (1996), *Moscow Must Be Destroyed* (1998), *Challenging Silence* (2006), *The University: a debate about foundations* (2011), and *Global warming after the Cold War* (2017).

PEN ADVOCACY - BELARUS

Since 2020, the crackdown on writers, artists and cultural workers has been cause for deep concern from PEN International and PEN Centres, who issued a number of statements and staged action against the attack on freedom of expression in Belarus.

February: *PEN Centres world-wide call for an end to the abuse of fundamental rights of those who speak out against repression*

March: *Release Volha Kalackaja*

April: *PEN International expresses concerns over the detention of Aliaksandr Fiaduta*

May: *Urgently end escalating crackdown on independent voices*

July: *The PEN Community stands with the Belarusian PEN Centre*

July: *Joint call condemning the Belarusian regime's raids on journalists and human rights activists*

August: *Authorities dissolve the Belarusian PEN Centre*

August: *Relentless crackdown one year on from disputed presidential elections*

August: *Amidst escalating crackdown, the international community must stand with the people of Belarus*

September: *Resolution on Belarus*

November: *Website of the Belarusian PEN Centre blocked*

November: *Free writer and human rights defender Ales Bialiatski*

December: *Philosopher Uladzimir Mackievič held in pre-trial detention*

◆ Malta

On 23 February, a Maltese court sentenced Vincent Muscat – one of three accused hitmen – to 15 years in prison after he pled guilty to involvement in the assassination of Malta's leading investigative journalist, **Daphne Caruana Galizia**, in October 2017 – including by placing the bomb that killed her. Eight men had either admitted to or been charged with complicity to kill her as of 31 December 2021.

On 29 July 2021, a landmark public inquiry into the assassination of Caruana Galizia published its conclusions, finding that 'the State has to shoulder responsibility for the assassination because it created an atmosphere of impunity, generated from the highest levels in the heart of the administration of the Office of the Prime Minister and like an octopus spread to other entities like regulatory institutions and the police, leading to the collapse of the rule of law'. PEN International called on the Maltese authorities to accept the Board of Inquiry's detailed recommendations, to publish a plan of action on how they will be implemented and to ensure

better protection of journalists going forward.

On 26 August 2021 – what would have been Caruana Galizia’s 57th birthday – PEN International and PEN Malta were proud to publish a collection of poems written to honour her legacy.

That same month, PEN International and PEN Malta called on the Maltese authorities to urgently strengthen the protection of journalists and activists, in the wake of a coordinated spoof attack that notably targeted blogger, activist and PEN Malta General Secretary Manuel Delia.

FOCUS COUNTRY

Russia

The Russian authorities continued their decades-long campaign of targeting independent civil society and dissenting voices. The arrest of anti-corruption campaigner and opposition figure **Alexei Navalny** in January 2021 triggered countrywide protests that were swiftly repressed. Over 100 journalists were reportedly detained, intimidated or harassed by authorities amid the January 31 protests, in a bid to suppress access to information. Throughout the year, foreign journalists were expelled or denied visas in retaliation for their reporting.

In April, President Putin signed a law that would allow him to run for president twice more in his lifetime, potentially keeping him in office until 2036. New laws severely restricted the rights to freedom expression, association and peaceful assembly, and led to a further shrinking of civic space in Russia. The scope of ‘foreign agents’ was widened to include individuals and unregistered groups, while the criteria of what is defined as ‘foreign funding’ was expanded. Two laws on ‘undesirable organisations’ also entered into force, exposing a wide range of activists to a high risk of criminal prosecution.

The number of independent news outlets and journalists added to the ‘foreign agents’ list continued to grow, notably targeting Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Meduza* and *Dohzd TV*. The human-rights news website OVD-Info was blocked in December for ‘promoting terrorism and extremism’. That same month, the authorities ordered the closure of human rights groups Memorial Human Rights Centre and International Memorial Society for failing to abide

by the repressive ‘foreign agents’ legislation. A total of 111 entities and individuals were on the ‘foreign agents’ list as of 30 December 2021.

In February 2021, theatre and film director **Kirill Serebrennikov** was fired as artistic director of the Gogol Center, a progressive, experimental theatre known for contemporary productions that often deal with political or sexual themes. In June 2020, Serebrennikov had been found guilty of fraud – in a case widely seen as part of crackdown on artistic freedom. He was given a three-year suspended sentence and banned from heading a cultural organisation.

On 31 August 2021, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the Russian authorities had failed to properly investigate the murder of prominent journalist and human rights activist **Natalia Estemirova**. It found Russia in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights and ordered it pay €20,000 in compensation. The Court further urged the Russian authorities to ‘continue in so far as possible to determine the circumstances of Ms Estemirova’s abduction and murder, identifying the perpetrators, and punishing those responsible.’ Estemirova, a journalist and human rights activist who worked with the human rights centre Memorial in Chechnya, was abducted by unidentified armed men on 15 July 2009 near her home in Grozny and found dead on the same day in the neighbouring Republic of Ingushetia. She was 51 years old. No one has been brought to justice for her murder.

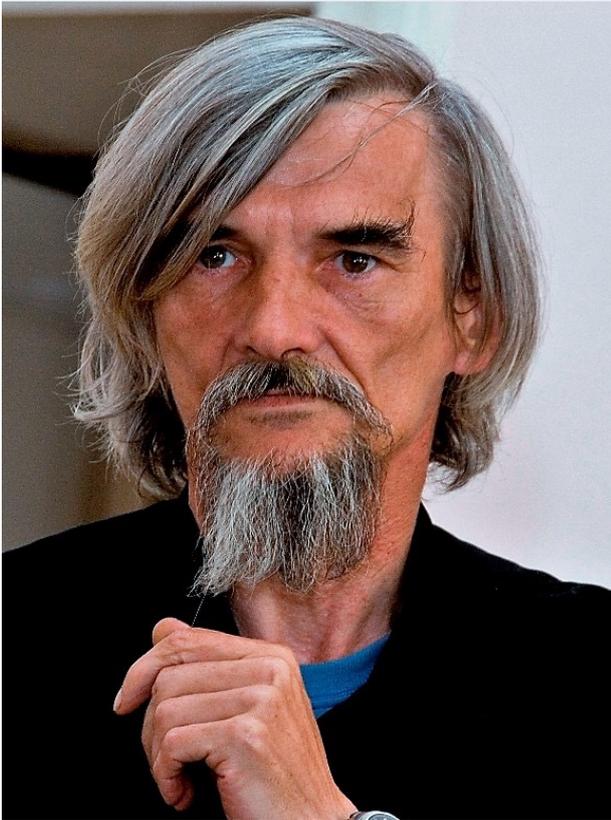
RUSSIA

Yuri Dmitriev

Protracted and fabricated trial

On 27 December 2021, a court in Petrozavodsk, the capital of the Republic of Karelia, increased a jail sentence for Memorial historian **Yuri Dmitriev** to a total of 15 years, on charges his supporters in Russia and abroad say are punishment for his research unearthing human rights abuses of the Stalin era.

Head of the Karelian branch of the human rights centre Memorial, North-Western Russia, and honorary member of St Petersburg PEN, Dmitriev was arrested



Yuri Dmitriev. Photo credit Mediafond, CC BY-SA 4.0

on 13 December 2016 and charged with making pornographic images of his adopted daughter and possessing an illegal firearm. He denied the charges, saying that the purpose of the photographs was to monitor the health of the child for social services. He spent more than a year in pre-trial detention.

On 5 April 2018, he was cleared of the child pornography charges but was sentenced to two years and six months of probation (three months after deducting time spent in custody) and community service for illegally possessing components of a firearm. On 14 June 2018, the Karelian Supreme Court overturned his acquittal and placed him under new charges of 'violent acts of a sexual nature in relation to a person who has not reached the age of fourteen' and underwent enforced psychiatric testing.

Both criminal cases against Dmitriev were merged in October 2018. On 22 July 2020, he was acquitted of the firearms charges and those of child pornography but sentenced to a three-and-a-half term for sexual assault against an underage child. On 29 September 2020, the Karelia Supreme

Court overturned the July acquittal relating to possession of firearms and sent the charges of child pornography for further expert 'consideration'. It increased his sentence by another 10 years. The appeal hearing took place behind closed doors, without the presence of Dmitriev or his lawyer.

The introduction of new charges and the overturning of acquittals underline the concerns of human rights monitors that these criminal prosecutions are a blatant attempt to silence not only Dmitriev but to threaten all Memorial staff.



RUSSIA

Memorial

NGO shut down for refusing to register as 'foreign agent'

On 28 December 2021, Russia's Supreme Court ordered the closure of the **Memorial International Historical, Educational, Charitable and Human Rights Society** over 'repeated' and 'gross' violations of the 'foreign agents' law – particularly the failure to mark their 'foreign agent' status on all their publications. The following day, a Moscow Court ordered its sister organisation, **Memorial Human Rights Centre**, to shut down for failing to abide by

the ‘foreign agents’ law, and for justifying terrorism and extremism. Memorial Human Rights Centre notably kept a list of individuals it classified as political prisoners, including opposition leader Alexei Navalny. On the same day, the European Court of Human Rights called on Russia to suspend the closure of the two Memorial organisations, while it continued to examine the organisations’ 2013 application against the ‘foreign agents’ law, a request that was ignored. Appeals were ongoing as of 31 December 2021.

Memorial was established in Russia in 1988 as an organisation focusing on political repression in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, legal and moral rehabilitation for its victims, and justice for all. Nobel Peace Prize winner Andrey Sakharov was one of Memorial founders. Although local authorities attended events in Memorial’s early years, attitudes started to change, with the Russian authorities glorifying the Soviet past after Vladimir Putin stated in 2017 that the ‘excessive demonisation of Stalin is one of the ways to attack the Soviet Union’. The December rulings came amidst sustained assault by the Russian authorities on independent civil society.

PEN ADVOCACY- RUSSIA

April: PEN International joins PEN Moscow and St Petersburg PEN to demand the release of Alexei Navalny

August: End impunity for crimes against journalists

November: Move to shut down Memorial condemned

◆ Spain

In Spain, the authorities continued to use legislation that stifles freedom of expression. On 16 February 2021, riot police entered the University of Lleida, near Barcelona, and arrested rapper **Pablo Hasél** who had barricaded himself inside the building after refusing to hand himself in to the police to serve a prison term for ‘glorifying terrorism’ in his songs and on Twitter. His arrest triggered protests and clashes in several cities in the country. Hasél – real name Pablo Rivadulla Duro – was sentenced under Article 578 of the Spanish Criminal Code, which prohibits ‘glorifying terrorism’. He was also found guilty of insulting the Crown and state institutions. Spain’s Criminal Code unduly restricts freedom of expression in the name of national security. In recent years, scores of musicians have been unfairly prosecuted on the grounds of glorification of terrorism and/or insulting the Crown.

In June, PEN International and PEN Català welcomed the release of unjustly imprisoned Catalan writers and civil society leaders **Jordi Sànchez** and **Jordi Cuixart**, who were serving a nine-year prison sentence for sedition through participation in Catalonia’s independence referendum held on 1 October 2017. Sànchez and Cuixart were among nine jailed Catalan politicians and activists pardoned by the Spanish government. All remained banned from public office, with the pardons conditional to them not committing serious crimes over a given period of time. PEN International called on the Spanish authorities to quash the sentences and convictions of Sànchez and Cuixart.

FOCUS COUNTRY

Turkey

The situation around freedom of expression in Turkey in 2021 remained dire, marked by a rising number of physical attacks on journalists and corresponding impunity for the assailants. Journalists and writers continued to face arbitrary prosecution and judicial harassment through anti-terror, defamation and other laws. Those targeted were typically charged with defamation, insulting the president, or making terrorist

propaganda, landing scores of journalists, artists and academics with fines and prison sentences. PEN International repeatedly urged the Turkish authorities to take all necessary steps to guarantee freedom of expression online and offline, notably by aligning Turkey's counter-terrorism laws with international standards and repealing all criminal defamation laws.

The government announced plans to table a 'disinformation' law that is likely to result in the further criminalisation of freedom of expression and independent journalism online. The authorities continued to discredit independent media that receive foreign funding, culminating in a bill proposing mandatory registration for organisations and individuals that receive funding from or are 'influenced' by foreign entities.

The erosion of the rule of law in the country meant that the judiciary continued to be largely politicized and unable – with the partial exception of the Constitutional Court – to protect fundamental rights. In a major setback, Turkey withdrew from the Istanbul Convention on violence against women in June, and moved closer to banning the pro-Kurdish opposition Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). The authorities continued to forcibly replace elected HDP local officials in the southeast, thus depriving voters of their elected representatives in parliament and local government. PEN International urged the authorities to uphold political pluralism, which is essential to provide a real choice to voters.

Dozens of journalists of Kurdish or pro-Kurdish outlets remained in prison on trumped-up terrorism charges, including news editor, reporter, poet and Honorary Member of PEN Melbourne **Nedim Türfent**, held since 2016. Writer and former co-chair of the pro-Kurdish HDP, **Selahattin Demirtaş** was still behind bars after five years, despite the European Court of Human Rights twice ruling for his immediate release. PEN International featured his plight in the 2021 Day of the Imprisoned Writer campaign. The Turkish authorities refused to abide by a 2019 ruling of the European Court of Human Rights to release publisher, civil society actor and human rights defender **Osman Kavala**, prompting the Council of Europe to vote in December to begin the formal process of infringement against Turkey. He has been held without trial since November 2017.

PEN International continued to call for the sentencing and conviction of Kurdish PEN member and writer **Gulgeş Deryaspî** to be overturned. Deryaspî faced six years and three months in prison for 'membership of a terrorist organisation'. Her appeal was pending as of 31 December 2021. The retrial of writer **Aslı Erdoğan** – who was acquitted of terror-related charges in February 2020, only to see the prosecution appeal against her acquittal to a higher court – opened in December [UPDATE: she was acquitted on 10 February 2022]. Scores of writers, journalists and academics remained on a decade-long trial for alleged links to the Kurdistan Communities Union – **KCK** (for more information about KCK-related trials please see 2018 Case List).

On 26 March 2021, a court convicted 27 of the 76 defendants accused in connection with the 2007 murder of writer, journalist, and honorary PEN member **Hrant Dink**. Four were sentenced to life in prison, including two without the possibility of parole. Dink's family said they would appeal the verdict, arguing that the court did not expose the full conspiracy behind his killing.

TURKEY

Yavuz Ekinci

Faces up to 7 ½ years in prison

Yavuz Ekinci faces up to seven-and-a-half years in prison on 'terrorist propaganda' charges under Article 7/1 and 2 of Anti-Terror Law No. 3713, for eight tweets published on his Twitter account in 2013 and 2014. The tweets, none of which promoted or incited violence, for the most part related to the Newroz (New Year) celebrations in Diyarbakır, south-eastern Turkey, and to the 2014 battle of Kobane in Syria. The indictment came in the wake of a sustained social media crackdown that has seen tens of thousands of people prosecuted in Turkey for their social media posts in recent years. The first hearing in the case was held on 9 September 2021 and was ongoing as of 31 December 2021. PEN International calls for all charges against him to be dropped.



Yavuz Ekinci ©Ege Tonbul

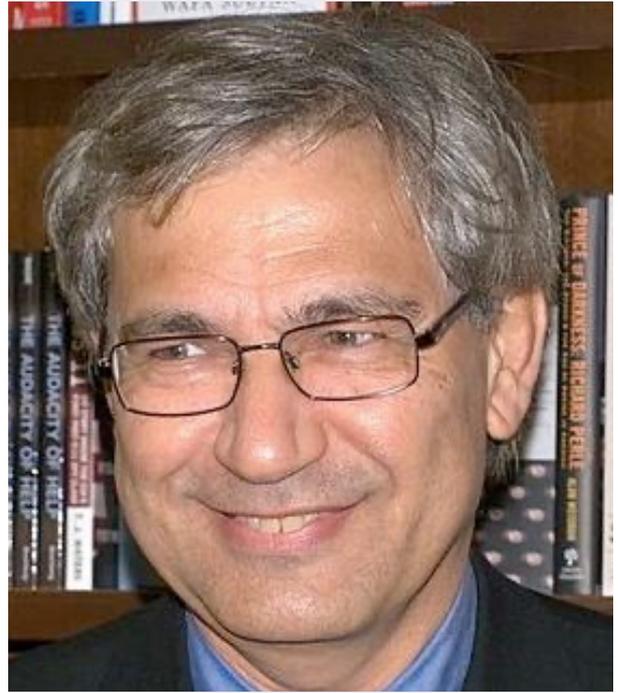
Ekinci, born in 1979, has received multiple awards for his short stories, including the 2005 Haldun Taner Award and the 2007 Yunus Nadi Award. His work focuses on the plight of Kurdish people in Turkey and has been translated into English, German, and Kurdish. He currently works as a teacher in Istanbul.

TURKEY

Orhan Pamuk

Another insult trial opened

In April 2021, a lawyer from İzmir, Western Turkey, lodged a complaint against Nobel laureate and PEN International Vice President **Orhan Pamuk**, stating that the novelist had incited hatred and animosity among the public by insulting Mustafa Kemal Atatürk – the founder of modern Turkey – in his latest book *Nights of Plague*. The complaint further accused Pamuk of ridiculing the Turkish flag. The



Orhan Pamuk. Photo credit: David Shankbone CC BY 2.0

İzmir Public Prosecutor's Office launched an investigation and sent the file to its counterpart in Istanbul, which decided not to prosecute. The claimant subsequently appealed against the decision. His objection was accepted by a penal court of peace in November, triggering a new investigation. Pamuk denies all accusations. PEN International urged the Turkish authorities not to proceed with the case which was ongoing as of 31 December 2021.

Pamuk, born on 7 June 1952, is one of Turkey's most acclaimed novelists, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2006. He was elected Vice President of PEN International in 2019. His latest novel, *Veba Geceleri (Nights of Plague)*, was published in Turkey in March 2021 (English publication in September 2022).

It is not the first time Pamuk is being targeted for his writings. He was charged in 2005 with 'insulting Turkishness' for commenting during an interview with a Swiss newspaper on the mass killings of Kurds and Armenians in Turkey during deportations in 1915-1916. Pamuk received death threats and copies of his books were burned. PEN Centres campaigned on his behalf; the case against him was eventually dropped in the wake of international outrage.



Meral Şimşek ©Meral Şimşek

TURKEY

Meral Şimşek

Sentenced to a year and three months in prison

On 9 December 2020, anti-terror police detained writer, poet, and Kurdish PEN member **Meral Şimşek** in Malatya province, Eastern Turkey. She was released the following day pending trial and placed under a travel ban. In January 2021, she was formally charged with 'membership of a terrorist organisation' 'making terrorist propaganda'. The indictment notably mentions Şimşek's short story *Arzela*, featured in the anthology *Kurdistan + 100*, in which twelve contemporary Kurdish writers imagine a country they could call their own by the year 2046. On 7 October 2021, the Malatya 2nd High Criminal Court found Şimşek guilty of 'making terrorist propaganda' and sentenced her to one year and three months in prison. The court acquitted her of the charge of 'membership of a terrorist organisation' and lifted her travel ban. Her appeal was ongoing as of 31 December 2021.

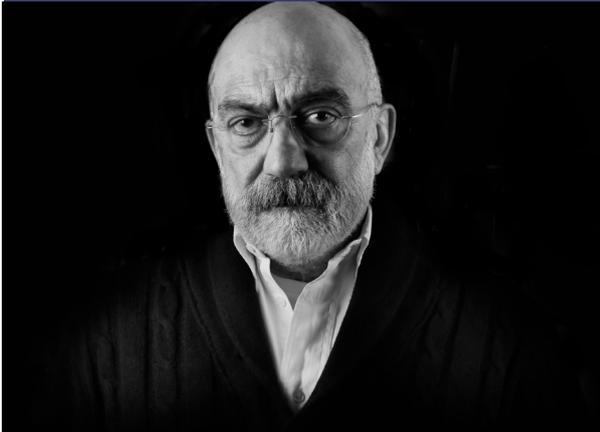
Şimşek attempted to flee to Greece on 29 June 2021 but was apprehended by Greek police who reportedly stopped, strip-searched her and then handed her over to masked individuals who forced her to cross the border back into Turkey. On 30 June, she was detained by the Turkish police at the Ipsala border crossing and sent to Edirne Prison, where she spent seven days before appearing in court. Şimşek was released and asked to report to the police station three times a week while she awaits trial for 'entering a restricted military area' in Ipsala for which she faces up to five years in prison. The case was ongoing as of 31 December 2021. PEN International called on the Turkish authorities to overturn her conviction and drop all charges against her.

Şimşek, born in 1980, is the prize-winning author of three poetry books – *Mülteci Düşler (Refugee Dreams)*, *Ateşe Bulut Yağdıran (Clouds on Fire)* and *İncir Karası (Black Fig)*. Her novel *Nar Lekesi (Pomegranate Stain)*, published in 2017, tells the story of Şimşek's family and sheds light on the plight of Kurdish people in Turkey in the 1990s. She became a member of Kurdish PEN in June 2020. She also works as an editor and frequently publishes poems and articles.

GOOD NEWS

Ahmet Altan released after more than three years in prison

In April 2021, PEN International members welcomed the release of Turkish writer and journalist **Ahmet Altan**. First arrested in September 2016, Altan spent over three years in pre-trial detention, in what amounts to judicial harassment. Sentenced to 10-and-a-half years in prison on 4 November 2019 following proceedings marred by violations of his right to a fair trial, he was released pending appeal only to be sent back to jail eight days later – a move PEN International denounced as a 'despicable



Ahmet Altan ©Sahan Nuhoglu

act'. On 14 April 2021, Turkey's Court of Cassation overturned his conviction; he was immediately released due to time served. The Court of Cassation's ruling follows a judgement by the European Court of Human Rights, issued on 13 April, ordering Turkey to free Altan immediately and pay him €16,000 in damages for violating his rights to freedom of expression, as it found 'no evidence that the actions of the applicant had been part of a plan to overthrow the government'.

In October 2021, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the offence of insulting the president under Article 299 of the Penal Code is incompatible with freedom of expression. The court also found no justification for the imposition of police custody or a criminal sanction in the case before the court, which involved an individual who posted critical content about Erdoğan on Facebook.

PEN ADVOCACY - TURKEY

Numerous actions were launched on imprisonments, trials and other attacks on writers and journalists in Turkey in 2021.

April: Writer Ahmet Altan released from prison

April: Take action for Selahattin Demirtaş on his birthday

April: Free Selahattin Demirtaş

April: Conviction of Kurdish PEN member must be overturned

May: PEN Centres worldwide call for the acquittal of all defendants in the Gezi hearing, and for the immediate release of Osman Kavala

August: Charges against Kurdish PEN member must be dropped

September: Drop charges against writer Nurcan Kaya

September: Writer Yavuz Ekinci facing jail for social media posts

October: PEN International Vice President Orhan Pamuk under investigation for his writings

October: Verdict expected in trial of writer and Kurdish PEN member Meral Şimşek

October: Global appeal marks 2000 days in prison for Nedim Türfent

October: Solidarity with Nedim Türfent

October: Press freedom crisis compounded by increasing digital censorship

◆ United Kingdom

On 10 December 2021, PEN International and nine PEN Centres condemned the decision of the UK High Court to clear the way for Wikileaks founder and publisher **Julian Assange** to be extradited to the US. The judgement overturned the District Court's decision of 4 January 2021 to deny extradition on medical grounds, on the basis of Assange's poor mental health. PEN deemed the decision to be a blow to press freedom around the world, setting a dangerous precedent that could affect the legitimate work of journalists and publishers everywhere. PEN called for the charges against Assange to be dropped and urged the UK authorities to release him immediately and to block his extradition to the US.

Police arrested several men in connection with the murder of journalist, writer and LGBTI campaigner **Lyra McKee** – bringing to nine the number of arrests over the killing and related offences. McKee was shot dead by a masked gunman in April 2019 as she was observing a riot on the Creggan estate in Derry, Northern Ireland.

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA OVERVIEW 2021

Mina Thabet, MENA Programme Coordinator

In the MENA region threats to freedom of expression continued throughout 2021. The assassination in **Lebanon** of prominent writer and publisher **Lokman Slim**, illustrates the danger under which writers and journalists live. He was found dead in his car after his family reported him missing. According to press reports, his body was riddled with bullets, four to the head and one in the back. Over the years, Slim reportedly received many threats because of his criticism of the Hezbollah militia and its role in Lebanese politics.

Governments in many countries in the region saw the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to further stifle critics for a second year-round, restricting freedom of expression, access to information and press freedom. Authorities across the region, including in **Egypt, Morocco, Bahrain, Kuwait, UAE** and **Saudi Arabia**, used 'dissemination of fake news' or 'spreading rumours' charges to silence critics who had challenged their governments' response to the pandemic.

Attacks against press freedom and journalists are of special concern in **Iran, Egypt, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories**, and **Morocco**. With the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in May 2021, these attacks reached acute levels. In March, the International Criminal Court (ICC) opened an investigation into the situation in Palestine leading PEN International to urge the ICC prosecutor to include the Israeli attacks against media offices and cultural institutions in Gaza. In **Morocco**, courts sentenced prominent journalists **Omar Radi** and **Soulaimane Raissouni** to six and five years in prison, respectively, following unfair trials. In **Egypt**, authorities kept a tight grip over the media landscape, excluding voices that do not conform to the official narrative about the situation in the country.

FOCUS COUNTRY

Egypt

Egyptian authorities continued their crackdown on freedom of expression, expanding online censorship, blocking websites and widening the use of counter-terrorism legislation and ‘fake news’ charges. Their crackdown on academic freedoms, targeting young researchers and scholars studying abroad was also stepped up. In April 2021, PEN [joined calls](#) for the immediate and unconditional release of scholar and researcher **Ahmed Samir Santawy**, arbitrarily detained since 1 February 2021 on spurious terrorism-related charges. In June, the Emergency State Security Court [sentenced](#) him to four years in prison on charges of publishing ‘false news’. In July, historian, scholar and writer **Alia Mosallam** was [arrested](#) upon arrival at Cairo International Airport for a family visit. She was later released on bail pending investigations into charges of misuse of social media, disseminating fake news and joining a terrorist group.

In addition, Egyptian authorities have been expanding the use of pre-trial detention as a tool to silence critics. One example is the February 2021 [arrest](#) of **Jamal el-Jammal**, a prominent writer known for his criticism of the government, who was seized at Cairo International Airport upon arrival from Istanbul. He had spent years in [exile](#) after he was prevented from writing for [newspapers](#) due to his critical views. The prosecutor ordered his pre-trial detention on charges of ‘disseminating false news’, ‘misusing social media’ and ‘joining an unlawful group’.

In March 2021, PEN International [condemned](#) the sentencing of filmmaker and activist **Sanaa Seif** to 18 months in jail after she was found guilty, under trumped-up charges, of ‘disseminating false news’, ‘misusing social media’ and ‘insulting an on-duty police officer.’ Seif had been in prison since June 2020 for her peaceful activism on behalf of her arbitrarily detained brother, blogger and prominent activist Alaa Abd el-Fattah (see below). She was [released](#) in December after serving her sentence.

In November 2021, human rights defender and journalist **Hossam Bahgat** was found [guilty](#) of ‘insulting the election authorities’ in a tweet in which he blamed the election authority of

mishandling the parliamentary vote held in 2020. The authorities also blocked the *Disclose* website following its [investigation](#) in which it was claimed that the French authorities were complicit in human rights abuses in Egypt, including selling [mass surveillance](#) programs to the Egyptian government and complicity in [aerial strikes](#) against civilians.



Galal El-Beairy. Photo courtesy of El-Beairy's family

EGYPT

Galal El-Beairy

In pre-trial detention

Galal El-Beairy is an Egyptian poet and lyricist known for his criticism of the authorities. In March 2018, he was arrested at Cairo International Airport on his return from travels abroad. After a week when he had effectively ‘disappeared’, he appeared before the notorious Supreme State Security Prosecution (SSSP), showing signs of torture and beatings. He faced charges of ‘joining a terrorist group’, ‘disseminating false news’ and ‘insulting the President’ for lyrics he had written for the song *Balaha*, performed and disseminated online by exiled Egyptian singer Ramy Essam. The song heavily criticises President Sisi and was deemed insulting to the President. El-Beairy was eventually released on probation in April 2019. He was sentenced in a separate case, on 31 July 2018, to three years imprisonment on charges of ‘disseminating false news and rumours’ and ‘insulting the Egyptian army’. This is in relation to his book of poetry, *The Finest Women on Earth*, where he challenged the authority’s narrative around the Egyptian military and its relation to politics.

In July 2021, El-Behiry had served his three-year sentence; however, he was not released. He was once again 'disappeared' for three weeks before appearing before the SSSP to face charges of 'disseminating false news' and 'joining a terrorist group'. As of the end of the year, he was still in pre-trial detention. His family informed PEN International that his health had significantly deteriorated due to his imprisonment, poor prison conditions, and lack of adequate medical care.

Galal el-Behairy

O prison outside of me

O imprisoned sigh

O prison inside of me

Your walls are stubborn,
without doors.

O friends and lovers

We wait...

Excerpt from *I have a date with tomorrow*

EGYPT

Alaa Abd el-Fattah

Sentenced to five years imprisonment

Alaa Abd el-Fattah is a prominent blogger, activist, and writer known for his criticism of the government and calls for reform. His activism and technology expertise made him a crucial voice of the Arab Spring, during which he wrote about human rights abuses and the need for democracy. Abd el-Fattah has spent more than two-thirds of the last decade in prison solely for practising his right to freedom of expression.



Alaa Abd el-Fattah. Photo credit Alaa Abd el-Fattah CC BY-SA 2.5

In September 2021, PEN international condemned the relentless persecution of Abd el-Fattah through arbitrary detentions and other discriminatory and punitive treatment. According to his family, prison authorities have denied him access to books and newspapers, as well as the opportunity to leave his cell and exercise. Such punitive measures had a devastating impact on Abdelfattah's mental and physical health.

In October, Abd el-Fattah was referred to trial - after two years in pre-trial detention - before Cairo's Emergency State Security Misdemeanor Court. In December, he was sentenced to five years imprisonment, alongside prominent human rights lawyer Mohamed al-Baqer and blogger Mohamed 'Oxygen' Ibrahim, who were sentenced to four years imprisonment with no right to appeal and convicted following grossly unfair trials.

Good news from Egypt

In the midst of continued repression in **Egypt**, good news came in April 2021 with the authorities' decision to release prominent journalist **Khaled Dawoud** and photojournalists **Solafa Magdy** and **Hossam Sayyad**, welcomed by

PEN International. The three had been arrested in 2019 following a crackdown campaign on free speech. Later in July 2021, a further six journalists and activists, including writer and journalist **Jamal el-Jammal**, activist-journalist **Esraa Abdel Fattah**, journalists **Motaz Wadnan** and **Mustafa el-Aasar** were also released.

PEN ADVOCACY - EGYPT

January: *Egyptian authorities should immediately end Ramy Kamel's arbitrary detention*

March: *States break silence to condemn Egypt's abuses at UN rights body*

March: *Jailing Filmmaker and activist Saana Seif reveals the government's determination to crush freedom of expression*

April: *Release researcher Ahmed Samir Santawy and stop violating academic freedom Egypt*

April: *74 ngos urge Egyptian authorities to release researcher Ahmed Samir Santawy*

September: *Authorities must stop persecuting Alaa Abdelfattah, immediately end his arbitrary detention, and allow him access to books pending release*

December: *Retaliatory verdicts following an unjust 'emergency' trial must be quashed*

◆ Iran

The Iranian authorities showed no signs of easing their crackdown on freedom of expression, loosening their grip over the media landscape, or stepping down their online censorship, with the persecution of writers worsening as medical negligence in prisons and detention facilities became a central concern amid the prevalence of COVID-19. In July 2021, the Iranian Parliament approved a controversial bill known as 'Protecting Users' Rights in Cyberspace and Organising Social Media.' If enacted, the bill will impose further restrictions on the already curtailed access to the internet in Iran, criminalizing the use of banned services, including VPN, that many Iranians use to overcome the blocking of international news services and social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter.



Narges Mohammadi. Photo courtesy of English PEN

IRAN

Narges Mohammadi

Narges Mohammadi is a writer, journalist and human rights defender and Honorary Member of Danish, Belgian, Norwegian and Swedish PEN. She is the former Vice-President and spokesperson of the Defenders of Human Rights Center (DHRC), which advocates for human rights reform and represents political prisoners and prisoners of conscience in legal proceedings. In May 2021, Mohammadi was handed a sentence of 30 months in prison and 80 lashes, a few months following her release in October 2020 after serving a five-and-a-half year prison term. The charges against her include 'propaganda against the regime', 'defamation' and 'rebellious conduct while incarcerated.' In November 2021, she was again arrested and taken to an unknown location while attending a memorial service in the city of Karaj for Ebrahim Ketabdars, who was shot and killed by security forces during a demonstration against the regime in November 2019. Mohammadi was kept in poor conditions, under solitary confinement for 64 days, which led to a severe deterioration in her physical and mental health and acute weight loss. In January 2022, her husband reported that she was given yet another sentence, this time of more than eight years, plus 70 lashes. In February she was transferred to hospital after her health deteriorated. She was released on temporary medical furlough later that month.

IRAN

Reza Khandan- Mahabadi, Baktash Abtin and Keyvan Bazhan

Sentenced for ‘spreading propaganda against the system’ and ‘assembly and collusion against national security.’

Reza Khandan-Mahabadi, Baktash Abtin and **Keyvan Bazhan** are members of the Iranian Writers’ Association (IWA) and authors of numerous books of Iranian history, sociology and literary criticism. In May 2019, they were sentenced to six years’ imprisonment for ‘spreading propaganda against the system’ and ‘assembly and collusion against national security.’ Their conviction stemmed from their joint authorship of a book about the history of the IWA, which has for decades been critical of successive Iranian governments. The sentences against Abtin and Khandan-Mahabadi were upheld on appeal, with that of Bazhan’s reduced to three and a half years.

In November 2021, Abtin contracted COVID-19 while detained in Evin prison for the second time. His health condition deteriorated as authorities denied him medical care. He was eventually hospitalized, and his family and lawyers appealed to the authorities to transfer him to a private hospital as his condition worsened. He was placed under a medically induced coma and passed away on 9 January 2022. PEN International holds the Iranian authorities responsible for Abtin’s death and calls for an urgent investigation into the medical negligence that led to his demise. His fellow writer Khandan-Mahabadi also contracted COVID-19. On appeals from his family, he was transferred to a private hospital and subsequently to his home where he continued to receive treatment under house arrest.

FOCUS COUNTRY

Morocco

Moroccan authorities have in recent years cracked down on freedom of expression, arresting, prosecuting and imprisoning critical voices. In 2021, journalists **Omar Radi** and **Soulaiman Raissouni** were sentenced to lengthy prison terms in separate cases. Both were convicted after long periods of pre-trial detention, under trials that were manifestly unfair, and had suffered public smear campaigns aimed at further undermining them. They had also been subject to surveillance using the controversial Pegasus spyware. These are just two cases that illustrate the extent of government retribution against journalists who speak out and disclose injustices.

Alongside this, the Moroccan Penal Code was expanded to further silence critics and journalists, bringing unfounded charges against them, and violating their right to due process and fair trials.



Omar Radi. Photo credit: Lamyachary CC BY-SA 4.0

MOROCCO

Omar Radi

Sentenced to six years imprisonment

Investigative journalist **Omar Radi** is known for exposing corruption and nepotism between political powers and business elites, as well as for his work on human rights and social movements. In July 2020, he was summoned for an investigation into espionage allegation, arrested and charged with ‘undermining internal state security by receiving foreign funding,’ and ‘undermining external state

security through collaborating with foreign intelligence.’ He was also charged with ‘indecent assault,’ and ‘rape,’ after a former colleague alleged that he assaulted her in July 2020. He was detained, and remained in pre-trial detention for over a year before being sentenced to six years imprisonment in July 2021. The sentence was upheld in March 2022. His trial has been widely condemned as grossly unfair, aimed at silencing his critical voice and as a deterrence to others. At the time of his arrest in 2020, Radi had already been under surveillance for more than two years and, in June 2020, just a month before his arrest, Amnesty International reported that Radi had been targeted by the Moroccan authorities using the notorious Pegasus spyware. This sophisticated hacking software developed by a private Israeli company, has been used by heads of states across the world to spy on their critics. Shortly before his arrest, Radi had been subjected to a sustained smear campaign by the Chouftv news website known to have ties to security agencies. The site accused Radi of receiving foreign funds to provide espionage services to foreign companies, allegations for which he was subsequently charged.

Radi denies the accusation of sexual assault and rape of a work colleague, saying that the relationship was consensual. Trial monitors have highlighted clear irregularities in the trial process. PEN International has examined the case files, which show that the evidence on both counts is highly flawed, leading it to conclude that Radi is being targeted for his work. Although the two offenses of espionage and rape were unrelated, they were tied together. His case is part of a pattern of government critics being arrested and prosecuted on dubious charges of sexual offences, financial misdemeanors, or working for foreign governments.



Soulaiman Raissouni. Photo courtesy of Raissouni’s family

MOROCCO

Soulaiman Raissouni

Imprisoned, in poor health conditions

Soulaiman Raissouni is a prominent journalist and editor-in-chief of the now-closed opposition newspaper *Akhbar al-Youm*, known for his editorials critical of the Moroccan authorities. In May 2020 he was arrested on charges of ‘sexual assault’ and ‘enforced confinement’. Raissouni denied the allegations, denouncing them as retaliatory and politically motivated in a bid to intimidate him. His claims are supported by local human rights groups who condemned his arrest as arbitrary, citing the circumstances of his arrest and smear campaigns by pro-government media. As in Omar Radi’s case, national and international human rights organisations have further highlighted the Moroccan authorities’ pattern of intimidation of dissenting voices through the use of sexual assault charges.

Raissouni remained in pre-trial detention for almost a year before being sentenced in July 2021 to five years imprisonment and 100,000 Moroccan Dirhams (c. €9,500). His sentence was upheld in February 2022. The trials were marred by irregularities, including being prevented from attending several trial hearings such as his sentencing session. Furthermore, the Court ignored most of the defence requests and issued its verdict without listening to the defence’s

main witnesses. Throughout his pre-trial detention, Raissouni was denied access to his family and legal counsel on several occasions. He underwent a 122-day hunger strike to protest his detention and trial, which ended in August 2021 with his hospitalisation. He remains in general poor health in prison, among others having difficulties walking, exacerbated by lack of appropriate medical care.

Similarly to Radi and other journalists, Raissouni was targeted for surveillance by Pegasus spyware over a two-year period, starting in 2017, as reported by the Forbidden Stories media freedom network.

PEN International is campaigning for the release of Radi and Rassouni, and an end to the persecution of writers and journalists solely for their writing and investigations.

PEN ADVOCACY – MOROCCO

October: *Journalists Omar Radi and Soulayman Raissouni must be released pending appeal*

October: *Authorities must ensure prominent journalist Soulayman Raissouni a fair trial and release him pending the outcome of his appeals*

November: *Authorities must ensure prominent journalist Omar Radi a fair trial and release him pending the outcome of his appeals*

◆ Palestine

In May 2021 an escalation of violence in the Israeli-Palestine conflict led PEN International to raise concerns over the mounting violations to freedom of expression and for an immediate end to hostilities. PEN International also called for an investigation into possible Israel's war crimes in Gaza. At the PEN Assembly of Delegates in September 2021, a resolution on Palestine was adopted by the PEN Assembly of Delegates, condemning the mounting violations of freedom of expression in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory during the May conflict and since the following ceasefire.

PEN ADVOCACY – ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

May: *PEN International calls for investigation into possible war crimes in Gaza*

May: *Freedom of expression in OPT and Israel must be respected without discrimination*

◆ Tunisia

In July 2021, Tunisian President Saied announced a series of draconian measures, including the suspension of Parliament and dismissal of Government. In a move described as a *coup*, President Saied said that the measures were necessary to deal with the economic crisis in the country, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In December the President announced there would be a national *referendum* on a revised Constitution in July 2022, and that Parliament would remain shut down until December 2022. There have subsequently been a series of arrests of the President's critics, among them journalists, and the closure of media, including the *Aljazeera* office in Tunis.

◆ Bahrain and UAE

Activists who took part in the 2011-2012 democracy movements that sprang up across the MENA region found themselves arrested, with many still imprisoned over a decade later.

In January 2021, PEN joined an open letter to the Danish Prime Minister to take immediate action to free **Abdul-Hadi Al-Khawaja**, a Danish-Bahraini human rights defender serving a life sentence for organising peaceful protests in 2011. In February 2021, PEN signed a joint Letter to the EU ahead of a planned meeting between the EU External Action Service and the Bahraini Minister of Foreign Affairs, urging the release of political prisoners, an end to torture, and the lifting of bans on opposition parties and media, and the protection of freedom of expression. In July 2021, PEN added to the calls on Bahrain to release **Dr Abduljalil Al Singace**, an academic held since 2011 on a life sentence.

On 30 September 2021, PEN also joined an appeal for UAE to release detained

writers and human rights activists who are among scores of people arrested since 2011 ahead of the October Dubai Expo.

PEN ACTIONS ON BAHRAIN

January: *Open letter to Danish Prime Minister to take immediate action to free Abdul-Hadi Al-Khawaja*

February: *Joint Letter to EU Ahead of Meeting With Bahraini Delegation*

July: *Rights Groups Urge Bahrain to Release Dr Abduljalil Al Singace, Jailed Academic on Hunger Strike*

PEN ACTION ON UAE

September: *Appeal for UAE to release detained human rights activists ahead of Dubai Expo*

'I don't know if, knowing everything I know today, I would have done it again, but to have confirmation that the criminal organisations fear the story – the word! – more than weapons, this is an awareness from which there is no turning back. This is the cornerstone around which my life revolves: the power of the word, of civil commitment, of public condemnation, of the defence of those who have no voice.'

Italian writer, Roberto Saviano, in a letter to Selahattin Demirtaş, imprisoned in Turkey: Day of the Imprisoned Writer, 15 November 2021

'When I was in prison, I never imagined that one day I would get out of it, much less that I would reach the 71 years that I am now, nor that on a day of nightfall and uproar, I would be writing you this letter to tell you that you are not alone, that your music is beautiful and is heard more and more strongly, that you do not cease, that we are waiting for your word made song.'

Writer and president of PEN Chile, Germán Rojas, in a letter to imprisoned Cuban musician, Maykel Osorbo: Day of the Imprisoned Writer, 15 November 2021

'However, whatever the walls are, they cannot restrain a spirit as free and just as yours. For their arrogance and thoughtlessness, those who arrest writers and human rights activists are gravely mistaken. They can crush and destroy us, but they cannot crush our words and our just causes. On the contrary, words are enriched with greater meaning when they come from experiences as cruel as yours.'

Syrian writer and dissident Yassin Alhaj Saleh, in a letter to Mohammad al-Roken, detained since 2011 in the UAE: Day of the Imprisoned Writer, 15 November 2021

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