



**FREEDOM**

**TO WRITE**

**INDEX 2021**

# INDEX



<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>THE GLOBAL PICTURE</b>	<b>6</b>
WRITERS IMPRISONED GLOBALLY: 2021	6
REGIONAL BREAKDOWN	10
<b>TOP TEN COUNTRIES OF CONCERN</b>	<b>13</b>
CHINA	13
SAUDI ARABIA	25
MYANMAR	27
IRAN	37
TURKEY	40
EGYPT	51
BELARUS	53
VIETNAM	59
INDIA	62
ERITREA	67
<b>NEW THREATS AGAINST WRITERS</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>LANGUISHING BEHIND BARS</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>ABOUT THE FREEDOM TO WRITE INDEX</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>87</b>

# INTRODUCTION

On February 1, 2021, a military coup violently disrupted Myanmar’s fragile and uncertain experiment with civilian rule. Writers and filmmakers were among those immediately imprisoned. Protesters and poets were soon shot in the streets. As this report goes to press, the world’s eyes are on Russia’s brutal, devastating assault on Ukraine—its people, language and culture, and democracy. Putin’s unbridled aggression, however, is part of a larger resurgence of authoritarianism around the globe.

The past year has repeatedly seen authoritarian forces seek to reclaim powers and territories that had previously passed outside their control; the echoes of the past are heard not only in Europe, but in Myanmar, where the military’s naked attempt to retrieve its lost power brought shock, horror, and then resistance; and in Afghanistan, where the Taliban’s swift recapture of the country following U.S. military withdrawal seemed to—almost overnight—decimate the progress Afghans had painstakingly made over the last 20 years and are struggling to uphold, including with regard to women’s rights, freedom of expression, cultural and artistic creativity, and the development of independent media. From Tunisia to Sudan to Nicaragua, old forces re-exerted themselves and moved to quash democratic progress. And in Hong Kong, a city with a robust history of vibrant freedoms, the reach of the Chinese government has been extended, most formally in

the application of the National Security Law against writers and independent media. This has not only led to a crackdown, but also created a climate of looming fear and a sense that safety may only lie in silence, or exile. In Russia, a concerted effort to eliminate what remained of independent media and the space for dissent over recent years laid the groundwork for Putin to maintain total information control in wartime.

In democracies as well, authoritarian tactics are being employed. Censorship and intimidation of dissenting voices is rife in India. In the United States, efforts to ban books and enact laws that would bar discussion of certain topics in classrooms spiked in 2021. Much of this debate centered around the freedom to contend with and openly debate the complexities of history. This, too, has echoes around the globe. Just before Russian troops began this latest incursion into Ukraine, Putin gave a speech in which he attempted to rewrite Ukraine’s history to suit his own ends. For years now, Putin has held in prison the historian **Yury Dmitriev** on specious charges of child pornography; Dmitriev’s true crime was uncovering and documenting mass graves from the Stalinist era, a historical truth that contradicted Putin’s attempts to whitewash and glorify the memory of Stalin. Government attempts to silence those who study, document, and debate history are typically also an attempt to exert a sole narrative over the past, one that serves the interests of the present.



Writers and artists—including composer and musician Laurie Anderson and authors Jennifer Egan and Gary Shteyngart—read from the works of Ukrainian thinkers and poets at a candlelight vigil held by PEN America in support of a free Ukraine. Photo by PEN America

Yet in all of these cases, authoritarian regimes have been met with resistance. In Myanmar, widespread and sustained civil disobedience—including the creative resistance of writers and artists—followed the coup. Afghan women refused to be silenced and they, too, have taken to the streets. Belarusians have continued their resistance against a president holding onto power despite an election he seemed to think he could steal without a fight. And today, Putin must contend not only with the fierce resistance of the Ukrainian people, but also Russians inside the country and around the world who persist in speaking the truth.

As truth-tellers, creative visionaries, and documentarians, writers have been at the forefront of these movements to resist authoritarianism, and they have been targeted as a result. The Iranian Writers' Association has become a prime target of its government for its persistence in celebrating literature, condemning censorship, and commemorating past attempts to silence Iranian writers. PEN America's sister organization PEN Belarus, despite being formally dissolved by a Belarusian court in August 2021, perseveres in documenting its government's assaults on writers, artists, and all those who insist on their right to speak freely.<sup>1</sup> Myanmar's creative community has braved brutal violence and used their writing and

<sup>1</sup> PEN America, "Court Formally Dissolves PEN Belarus," press release, August 9, 2021, [pen.org/press-release/court-formally-dissolves-pen-belarus/](https://pen.org/press-release/court-formally-dissolves-pen-belarus/)

artwork to resist the coup and represent the public's demands for freedom.<sup>2</sup> Cuban artists and writers have persisted, despite repeated arrests, in critiquing their government and calling for change.

In these countries and others, and as **PEN America's Freedom to Write Index** documents, writers and public intellectuals have been unjustly locked up for their exercise of free expression; dozens are currently serving sentences of 10 years or more for their words. In countries notorious for poor prison conditions, the mistreatment of political prisoners through solitary confinement or torture has been compounded by the grave threats to their health posed by COVID-19 and its spread inside jails. But governments' attempts to muzzle dissent have failed to extinguish individual writers' voices. In the face of repression, literary communities have come together in defense of writers under threat; writers in prison have gone on hunger strikes—not to call for their own release, but on behalf of others unjustly jailed. Translators have made threatened writers' words available to a global audience. And across the world, advocates and allies have read aloud the words of those whose governments would see them silenced, and shared the work of those whose governments would see it destroyed. And that work has offered hope to all who seek to push back against the forces of repression.

In the face of an authoritarian resurgence, writers are at the forefront of the defense of free expression and also have an essential role to play, pushing back against attempts to control the narrative; sustaining cultures and languages under threat; holding governments to account—on issues as varied as corruption, their response to COVID-19, or upholding basic rights; and envisioning new possibilities for the future. The freedom to write guarantees our collective ability to imagine and to inspire, and it demands our defense.

**During 2021, at least 277 writers, academics, and public intellectuals in 36 countries—in all geographic regions around the world—were unjustly held in detention or imprisoned in connection with their writing, their work, or related advocacy.**

---

<sup>2</sup> "Stolen Freedoms: Creative Expression, Historic Resistance, and the Myanmar Coup," PEN America, December 16, 2021, [pen.org/report/stolen-freedoms-creative-expression-historic-resistance-and-the-myanmar-coup/](https://pen.org/report/stolen-freedoms-creative-expression-historic-resistance-and-the-myanmar-coup/)

# THE GLOBAL PICTURE

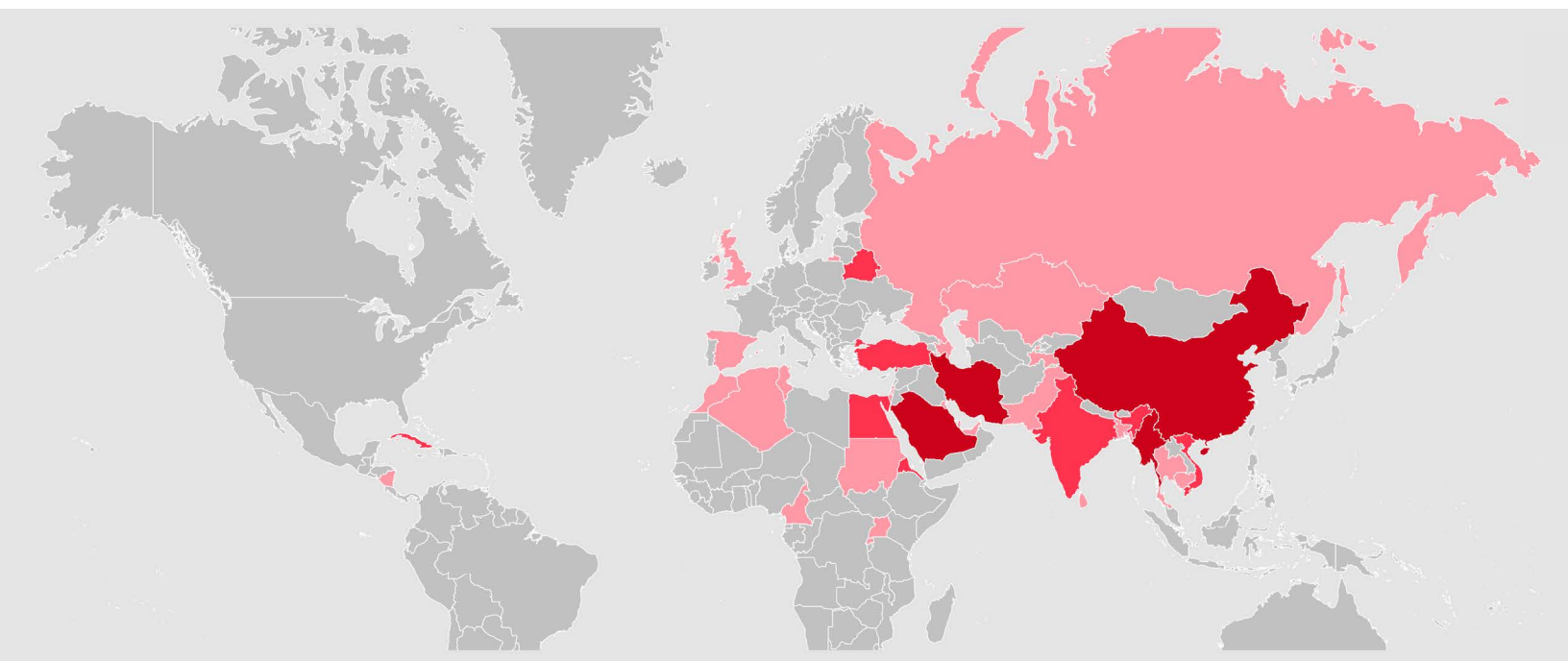
During 2021, according to data collected for the Freedom to Write Index, at least 277 writers, academics, and public intellectuals in 36 countries—in all geographic regions around the world—were unjustly held in detention or imprisoned in connection with their writing, their work, or related advocacy. This number is slightly higher than the 273 individuals counted in the 2020 Freedom to Write Index, and significantly higher than the total in 2019 (238). By far the most significant increase was seen in Myanmar, as a result of the crackdown that followed the military coup there on February 1, 2021, which has included the deliberate targeting of writers and the broader creative community. The numbers of those detained in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Belarus dropped from 2020, although many of those released from prison in Saudi Arabia continue to face draconian, unjust conditions on their release, including constraints on their freedom of movement and expression. In Belarus, the sharp uptick in detentions—many of them short-term—that accompanied the protests after the stolen election of August 2020 dropped off, though 2021 increasingly saw targeted arrests of writers and others who continued to speak out, and longer-term detentions.

## WRITERS IMPRISONED GLOBALLY: 2021

A worsening and in some cases violent closure of civil society in many countries led to a reshuffling of the world's top jailers of writers and public intellectuals. Two countries, however, remained stable in their notoriously high rankings: China and Saudi Arabia remained the first and second-worst jailers of writers, with 85 and 29 writers detained, respectively. Myanmar escalated to the third-worst jailer of writers and public intellectuals, with 20 individuals newly detained in 2021 and 26 total behind bars; Myanmar was jointly ranked ninth last year with 8 detentions. These three countries alone accounted for half of all cases, just over 50 percent of the total. Myanmar catapulted into third place due to a widespread crackdown on civil society and free expression in the wake of the February 2021 coup, in which the military seized power and prevented the elected parliament from forming a new government. Many writers, creative artists, and influential cultural figures were targeted during the first hours of the coup; over the course of 2021, at least 26 detentions of writers and intellectuals were documented.

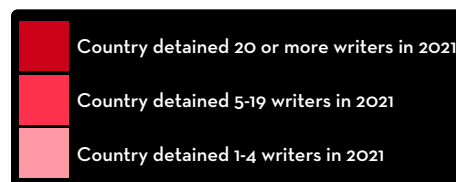
In Iran, a significant uptick was also documented: at least 21 writers were in prison or detention during the year, remaining the fourth-worst jailer of writers around the world as documented in 2020. While some writers counted in Iran in the 2020 Index have been released, at least 8 writers were newly jailed during 2021. Rounding out the top five with 18 writers held in detention—compared to 25 last year—is Turkey, where a decline was documented due to the welcome release of writers; some had been detained for more than four years. Other prevalent threats against writers in Turkey such as physical attacks and protracted legal trials, even against writers in exile, were documented throughout 2021, though not captured in this figure.

As has been documented previously in the Freedom to Write Index, the overwhelming majority of writers and public intellectuals held behind bars during 2021 are men. This disparity has widened: women comprise 12 percent of the 2021 Index count, as compared to 16 percent in 2019. Countries that have detained the highest number of women writers and public intellectuals track closely with those who have jailed the highest total number of writers. Collectively, authorities in China, Myanmar, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey—the top five countries that jailed the most writers during 2021—accounted for 27 of the 33 women writers in the 2021 Index. The remaining six women writers were jailed in Egypt, Belarus, India, and Vietnam, all countries ranking in the top 10 worst jailers of writers.



## Top 10 Countries

- |                             |                        |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. <b>China</b> (85)        | 6. <b>Egypt</b> (14)   |
| 2. <b>Saudi Arabia</b> (29) | 7. <b>Belarus</b> (10) |
| 3. <b>Myanmar</b> (26)      | 8. <b>Vietnam</b> (10) |
| 4. <b>Iran</b> (21)         | 9. <b>India</b> (8)    |
| 5. <b>Turkey</b> (18)       | 10. <b>Eritrea</b> (8) |





Members of the Iranian Writers' Association (IWA), an organization long-persecuted by the Iranian government, gather at the gravesites of prominent writers murdered by the Iranian government. Writer and 2021 PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write honoree Reza Khandan Mahabadi (third from right) has been imprisoned on national security charges for his free expression and leadership in the IWA. *Photo by the Iranian Writers' Association*

While many writers included in the Index hold multiple professional designations and are, for example, both literary writers and poets, the most prevalent professions of those incarcerated in 2021 were literary writers (111), scholars (59), poets (68), singer/songwriters (27), publishers (12), editors (9), translators (8), and dramatists (4). Notably, the number of poets jailed during 2021 increased compared to the 57 jailed during 2020, likely reflecting the bold stance many poets have taken on sensitive political and social themes, as well as the key role they have played in pushing back against authoritarianism in countries like Myanmar. Of the 277 individuals counted in this year's Index, 4 died while in custody and 197—nearly three-quarters—remain in state custody at the time of

this report's publication. By holding these individuals behind bars, their governments are depriving them of their individual right to free speech, while also robbing the broader public of access to their innovative and influential voices of dissent, criticism, creativity, and conscience.

The majority of the writers and intellectuals included in the 2021 count were initially imprisoned or detained prior to 2021, or had faced previous detention or imprisonment. Of the 277 in prison or detention during 2021, roughly 72 percent had also spent multiple days behind bars in 2020. A smaller but significant subset of these writers, roughly 53 percent, were counted in the 2019 and 2020 Indexes as well. In addition to



long-term imprisonments, this percentage includes cases of writers who have been repeatedly detained and released over the course of the past three years, indicating the continued pressure and repression many writers face. This year's count of 277 also includes 15 cases of individuals who were detained or imprisoned prior to 2021 but whose status, or further information about their case and writing only became publicly known during the past year. Such cases are common, especially in environments where there is little transparency to the judicial process, extensive surveillance and self-censorship, and extremely limited access to information or media freedom; for example, China, including Tibet and Xinjiang, accounts for 7 of these 15 cases. In many such cases, detention is not confirmed until formal charges are brought. The 2021 Index includes 60 writers and intellectuals, in 20 different countries and territories, who were newly detained or imprisoned in 2021—a decline in new detentions and imprisonments in comparison to 2020.

Regarding the types of legal charges brought against jailed writers, many of the trends documented in the 2019 and 2020 Freedom to Write Indexes persisted in 2021. Threat to national security remains the primary category of legal charges that authorities around the world use to justify jailing writers and public intellectuals: at least 55 percent of detentions are based on allegations that writers have undermined national security. Examples of these charges include “membership in a banned group,” which are in some cases levied against writers for belonging to writers’ associations or cultural organizations; and “conspiracy to seize” or “subversion of” state power, often levied against writers who analyze politics, participate in public discourse, or write critically about government affairs. Other less widespread but frequent charges wielded against writers and public intellectuals include illegal assembly and organizing; retaliatory

**Arbitrary detentions represent a total lack of due process and deny writers and public intellectuals any recourse to challenge the claims against them; in some cases, they can last for decades**

criminal charges such as tax crimes, fraud, and “resistance”; and criminal insult or defamation laws.

Situations in which charges are undisclosed or have yet to be brought against a writer—otherwise known as arbitrary detentions—made up at least 22 percent of the cases in this year's Index. Arbitrary detentions represent a total lack of due process and deny writers and public intellectuals any recourse to challenge the claims against them; in some cases, they can last for decades. All eight of the cases counted in Eritrea are considered arbitrary, as few details have been disclosed in these cases, and the writers have been held incommunicado, several of them since 2001. Cases of arbitrary detention are also particularly common in Saudi Arabia, where at least 66 percent of the writers and public intellectuals jailed in 2021 were held for no stated reason. This staggering fraction is identical to the percentage documented in 2020, indicating that the prevalence of arbitrary detention has seen no change over the past year. Roughly 53 percent of the writers and public intellectuals in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China have been detained or imprisoned without legal justification. In contrast, China—when excluding autonomous and special administrative regions—has only one case of arbitrary detention: poet **Cui Haoxin**, also known as **An Ran**.

Several places where free expression was severely under threat in 2021 nonetheless do not make a significant appearance in the Index. The return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan has had a

devastating impact on freedom of expression and placed writers, artists, and public intellectuals—especially women and members of ethnic and religious minority groups—in grave danger, yet few detentions have been recorded in the initial months following their takeover. The introduction of the oppressive National Security Law in Hong Kong in 2020 has seemingly only led to a handful of new cases of writers behind bars, and despite the further crackdown on free expression in Russia, it does not appear among the countries most responsible for detaining writers and intellectuals. This illustrates that while these numbers are an important indicator of the gravity of threats writers and intellectuals face for exercising their freedom of expression, they tell only part of the story of how free expression may be chilled.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has not, by and large, led to the more dramatic society-wide crackdowns on free expression that initially seemed possible, it has nonetheless had an insidious effect on writers and public intellectuals around the world, with the introduction of new “fake news” laws targeting dissent, new and subtle forms of surveillance, reduced opportunities for global connection and income, and the erosion of support systems that individuals under threat rely on to continue their work. It has also continued to vastly increase the health risks for writers behind bars. As the difference in the pandemic’s trajectory across countries becomes more stark, it is essential for advocates to keep top of mind the impact it continues to have on writers under threat, and especially those from already vulnerable communities.

## REGIONAL BREAKDOWN

Governments in the Asia-Pacific region continued to jail the most writers and intellectuals for their writing or expression, with their share of the global total increasing in 2021, largely due to the crackdown in Myanmar. In total, 137—or nearly half of the global count—were jailed in countries in the Asia-Pacific, with the vast majority of those, 85, held in China. Following the February 2021 coup, Myanmar catapulted up to second in the region, with 26 held, while significant numbers continued to be jailed in Vietnam (10) and India (8). Countries in the Middle East and North Africa have also jailed significant numbers of writers and intellectuals, most notably Saudi Arabia (29), Iran (21), and Egypt (14). Countries in this region made up nearly 30 percent of the global count of imprisoned and detained writers, at least 82 individuals, in 2021.

Detentions and imprisonments of writers and intellectuals in Europe and Central Asia—accounting for 14 percent of the global total—occurred largely in two countries: Turkey and Belarus. Turkey moved to the fifth-place position, having held 18 of the 39 prisoners and detainees in Europe and Central Asia during 2021. The ongoing crackdown against those who have vocally opposed Belarus’s stolen 2020 presidential election continued to result in arrests and detentions in 2021, placing Belarus in seventh place worldwide, with 10 writers counted in the Index. Countries in sub-Saharan Africa contributed to roughly 4 percent of the 2021 Index, with 11 writers and public intellectuals detained or imprisoned. The vast majority of those were in Eritrea, which placed 10th with 8 writers behind bars. In the Americas, only Nicaragua and Cuba are represented, making up 3 percent of the 2021 Index total. Detentions of writers and public intellectuals in Cuba account for 7 of the 8 writers detained or imprisoned.



The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan placed writers, artists, and public intellectuals in grave danger, despite few recorded detentions in the initial months following their takeover during 2021. *Photo by Ninaras*

## The Taliban's Return to Power in Afghanistan

The space for free expression, which along with media freedom had flowered in Afghanistan in the past two decades of semi-democratic rule, dramatically reversed in 2021. Although this reversal had not yet resulted in the detention of writers and intellectuals by year's end—and thus Afghanistan does not have any cases included in the Index count—it had a chilling effect on writers' ability to express themselves freely, and will make Afghanistan a country to watch going forward. Free expression had become increasingly tenuous in the areas of Afghanistan under Taliban control, and recent years had seen an uptick in targeted killings and other threats against writers, journalists, creative artists, and activists, particularly women and members of ethnic or religious minority groups. In early 2021, as peace talks between the government and Taliban continued, and the United States and other Western forces solidified plans to withdraw from Afghanistan by September 11, the general level of insecurity as well as targeted threats increased, causing many of those at risk to flee the country. The Taliban accelerated its brutal military campaign, and in August 2021, following their sudden takeover of the capital of Kabul and complete withdrawal of U.S. troops, the world watched as the chaotic evacuation process left thousands behind, while the Taliban moved in to embark on the worst crackdown on human rights the country has seen in 20 years.

The risks associated with speaking and writing freely escalated throughout 2021 as the final withdrawal of U.S. troops approached and the Taliban advanced across the country. In the last three months leading up to the takeover, more than 50 media organizations in Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan were shut down. A few weeks before the country's collapse, Taliban forces killed two members of Afghan PEN, **Dawa Khan Menapal**

and **Abdullah Atefi**. A poet and historian, Atefi had made a living cultivating his land and teaching literature at a local secondary school in Uruzgan province. On the night of August 4, 2021, the Taliban took him from his home and shot him in the street.

After seizing control of the country on August 15, 2021, the Taliban dealt a swift and devastating blow to Afghan civil society by announcing a steady stream of new oppressive policies, effectively banning all independent media and cultural outputs, rolling back women's rights, and launching widespread targeted attacks on writers, artists, students, and human rights defenders. Despite Taliban assurances that press freedom and other fundamental rights would be upheld, journalists in Afghanistan were routinely rounded up, beaten, and arbitrarily detained. Once-vibrant bookstores, libraries, and publishers emptied out and closed down amid fears of retaliation. By October 10, 2021, the country had lost more than 70 percent of its media outlets due to the flight of dozens of reporters and media workers and the Taliban's repressive control over those who remained. In November 2021, the regime announced its broad and heavily restrictive media guidelines, worsening an already constrained environment for free expression, and increasing dangers for women especially. Subject to targeted attacks, as well as the closure of entire sectors including media, culture and the arts, and academia, dozens of writers, artists, and journalists have fled the country with their families, undertaking difficult and complicated journeys across the globe. Hundreds more remain within Afghanistan but most are in hiding, unable to speak or write freely.

In a further signal of Afghanistan's grim future under Taliban rule, the General Directorate of Intelligence emerged as an agency devoted to controlling information and shutting down negative reporting about the regime. Early 2022 saw a shift towards arbitrary arrests of scholars and prominent critical voices, such as Kabul University professor **Faizullah Jalal**. A well-known political commentator who had been critical of the regime on social media, Jalal was arrested by Taliban intelligence forces at his home on January 8 in retaliation for "making allegations against some government departments." Sayed Baqir Mohseni, another professor and political commentator, disappeared on March 4, just days after he appeared in several round-table discussions criticizing the Taliban and raising concerns of censorship. Looking ahead, writers in Afghanistan are likely to face severe threats to their safety as the Taliban continues to roll out its restrictive policies, arbitrary arrests and detention, and violent intimidation tactics intended to snuff out free expression.

# TOP 10 COUNTRIES OF CONCERN

China continued to top the list of countries detaining writers and intellectuals, with 85 detained or imprisoned in 2021, far more than any other country. Following China, the other top jailers of writers and intellectuals were Saudi Arabia, Myanmar, and Iran, each of which engaged in a concentrated targeting of dissenting voices in 2021 and held 20 or more writers behind bars. Saudi Arabia's overall numbers decreased slightly from 2020 due to significant numbers of political prisoners being conditionally released during 2021, as did overall numbers in Turkey, where a handful of writers were additionally released upon completion of their years-long sentences. There was a considerable jump in detentions in Myanmar in the wake of the February 2021 coup, after which writers and creative artists were targeted for arrest alongside politicians and other influential figures. A smaller increase was apparent in Iran due to an ongoing crackdown against dissenting voices in which a number of writers were newly detained or summoned to serve previously imposed sentences in 2021.

## CHINA

During 2021, **China** remained stable in its position as the top jailer of writers and public intellectuals

in the world. The total number of writers and public intellectuals in China, which includes the Xinjiang and Tibetan Autonomous Regions and Hong Kong, increased slightly from 81 to 85. The vast majority of these 85 writers have been in prison for at least several years, with 53 of them having been counted in both the 2019 and 2020 Freedom to Write Index reports as well. The myriad reasons that the authorities jail writers in China vary; writers whose words question prevailing public opinions or challenge the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) narratives are especially at risk of detention and imprisonment. And the Chinese government's response to writers and public intellectuals exercising their universal rights to free expression is swift and wide-ranging.

Within China (excluding Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Inner Mongolia<sup>3</sup>), PEN America places the number of imprisoned writers or public intellectuals at 38. This number includes many writers and dissidents who have criticized government policy or the CCP's leadership. The initial rationales for detaining these writers are often unstated or unclear, demonstrating the outsized scope of writing, speech, and other forms of expression that can be potentially considered "criminal." Detained dissident writer **Guo Quan's**

---

<sup>3</sup>The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region has been included in previous publications of the Freedom to Write Index, but PEN America did not identify cases of detained or imprisoned writers or public intellectuals in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region during 2021 according to our methodology.

trial for criticizing the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic online began in September 2021. According to Guo's lawyer, the prosecution cited almost 20 articles Guo wrote in its case against him for "inciting subversion of state power." His articles criticized the CCP's response to the pandemic, but his writings about social injustice and government corruption were also cited as evidence.<sup>4</sup> In 2020, **Xu Zhiyong**, an essayist, legal scholar, and critic of President Xi's policies, was initially detained on the same charge; but during January 2021, authorities escalated the charges from "inciting subversion" to "subversion," increasing his potential sentence to life in prison.<sup>5</sup> Artist, activist, and online writer **Chen Yunfei** was detained on March 25, 2021, on the charge of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble," after he published his thoughts on China's nine-year compulsory education law based on his visits to schools in the Sichuan province. In contrast with President Xi's declared emphasis on "rule of law," the law against "picking quarrels" has been used by authorities as a catch-all criminal provision that is unclear, broad, and confusingly applied.<sup>6</sup> In December 2021, Chen was ultimately convicted of a different crime—he was sentenced to four years in prison for a retaliatory charge of "child molestation."

Chen vehemently rejects the charge as intended to discredit his work and slander his reputation.<sup>7</sup>

In some cases, a writer's mere public stature and past history as a person critical of the government is reason enough for Chinese authorities to jail them. In May 2021, writer and former Guizhou University economics professor Yang Shaozheng went missing. Though no reason has yet been disclosed for his arrest, Yang had been dismissed from Guizhou University in 2018 for writing two articles that questioned the CCP; specifically, the monetary costs of the party's millions of official personnel.<sup>8</sup> In June 2021, Yang was charged with "inciting subversion of state power" and placed under residential surveillance in a designated location (RSDL),<sup>9</sup> a form of extrajudicial detention. At the end of 2021, he was formally arrested and reported to be held at a detention facility in Guiyang City.<sup>10</sup> Outspoken poet **Zhang Guiqi**, also known as **Lu Yang**, was arrested on the same charge for undisclosed reasons. He was detained throughout 2021 in Shandong, after a secret trial in September 2020 in which no sentence was announced.<sup>11</sup> Experts suspect his detention is related to a video in which he called on President Xi to resign, but reiterate that the lack of legal

---

4 Debi Edward, "The missing number behind China's coronavirus crisis," *ITV News*, February 21, 2020, [itv.com/news/2020-02-21/the-missing-number-behind-china-s-coronavirus-crisis](https://www.itv.com/news/2020-02-21/the-missing-number-behind-china-s-coronavirus-crisis); Xue Xiaoshan, "Veteran Chinese Democracy Activist Stands Trial For 'Subversion' Over Articles," *Radio Free Asia*, September 10, 2021, [rfa.org/english/news/china/trial-09102021103820.html](https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/trial-09102021103820.html)

5 PEN America, "Reports: China to Escalate Charges Against PEN America Honoree Xu Zhiyong," press release, January 22, 2021, [pen.org/press-release/reports-china-to-escalate-charges-against-pen-america-honoree-xu-zhiyong/](https://www.pen.org/press-release/reports-china-to-escalate-charges-against-pen-america-honoree-xu-zhiyong/)

6 Guo Rui, "Picking quarrels and provoking trouble: how China's catch-all crime muzzles dissent," *South China Morning Post*, August 25, 2021, [scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3146188/picking-quarrels-and-provoking-trouble-how-chinas-catch-all](https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3146188/picking-quarrels-and-provoking-trouble-how-chinas-catch-all)

7 Sun Chen, "Court in China's Chengdu jails veteran rights activist on 'trumped-up charge,'" *Radio Free Asia*, December 6, 2021, [rfa.org/english/news/china/charge-12062021141519.html](https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/charge-12062021141519.html)

8 Editorial Board, "Opinion: A professor dared tell the truth in China—and was fired," *The Washington Post*, August 23, 2018, [washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-professor-dared-tell-the-truth-in-china--and-was-fired/2018/08/23/9fd81eee-a653-11e8-a656-943eefab5daf\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-professor-dared-tell-the-truth-in-china--and-was-fired/2018/08/23/9fd81eee-a653-11e8-a656-943eefab5daf_story.html)

9 "Locked Up: Inside China's Secret RSDL Jails," *Safeguard Defenders*, October 5, 2021, [safeguarddefenders.com/sites/default/files/pdf/Locked%20Up%20%28High%20Res%20ersion%29.pdf](https://safeguarddefenders.com/sites/default/files/pdf/Locked%20Up%20%28High%20Res%20ersion%29.pdf)

10 "前贵州大学教授杨绍政被正式批捕 (Yang Shaozheng, former professor of Guizhou University and critic of government policies, is formally arrested)," *Radio Free Asia*, November 11, 2021, [rfa.org/mandarin/Xinwen/6-11112021115902.html](https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/Xinwen/6-11112021115902.html)

11 "256. Zhang Guiqi," *Independent Chinese PEN Center*, accessed February 24, 2022, [chinesepen.org/english/256-zhang-guiqi](https://www.chinesepen.org/english/256-zhang-guiqi)



Writer and professor Yang Shaozheng was dismissed from Guizhou University in Guiyang in 2018 after he wrote two articles questioning the monetary costs of the CCP's millions of official personnel. Yang was detained in May 2021 on charges of "inciting subversion of state power" for no apparent reason. *Photo by Olemissus Zhang*

transparency makes the exact reason difficult to discern.<sup>12</sup> Hui Muslim poet **Cui Haoxin**, also known by his pen name An Ran, was arbitrarily detained in early January 2020 and has not been heard from since. Cui used online platforms and poetry to write about and protest the Chinese government's mistreatment of Muslim minorities, including the mass detentions of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.<sup>13</sup> Employing arbitrary detention and vague charges—many of which international jurists have decried as in contravention with rights to free expression and due process—Chinese authorities

continue to demonstrate their sweeping ability to jail writers and public intellectuals.

After being detained even once, writers can face intensified surveillance and restrictions on their travel and must essentially continue to live with targets on their backs, under constant threat of being captured again. Writer and democracy activist **Yang Maodong**, also known by his pen name **Guo Feixiong**, was detained at Pudong International Airport in Shanghai in late January 2021, when he tried to visit

12 "Police in China's Shandong Detain Outspoken Poet For 'Subversion'," *Radio Free Asia*, May 14, 2020, [rfa.org/english/news/china/poet-detained-05142020134933.html](https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/poet-detained-05142020134933.html)

13 "China Detains Hui Muslim Poet Who Spoke Out Against Xinjiang Camps," *Radio Free Asia*, January 27, 2020, [rfa.org/english/news/china/poet-01272020163336.html](https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/poet-01272020163336.html); Associated Press, "Chinese Muslim poet Cui Haoxin fears his people will suffer as history repeats itself in wave of religious repression," *South China Morning Post*, December 28, 2018, [scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/2179831/chinese-muslim-poet-fears-his-people-will-suffer-history-repeats](https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/2179831/chinese-muslim-poet-fears-his-people-will-suffer-history-repeats)



妻子的遭际令我痛彻心肺，  
每延迟一天于我都是精神酷  
刑。诸位公仆亦为人夫，想  
必亦有常人共情同理之心，  
应该能够想象和体谅我的这  
份锥心之痛。

My wife's experience brought deep  
sorrow upon me, and every delay  
of a day is a mental torture. Your  
public servants are also husbands,  
and you must have empathy with  
ordinary people. You should be able  
to imagine and understand my heart-  
wrenching pain.

*Yang Maodong*

his ailing wife in the United States.<sup>14</sup> Authorities in Guangzhou had confiscated Yang's passport after his 2019 release from a politically motivated prison sentence. The day before he planned to fly, Yang had written an open letter to President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang, urging them to allow him to travel on humanitarian grounds. Instead, authorities forcibly disappeared him; a year later—and two days after his wife's death—Yang was formally arrested for “inciting

subversion of state power.”<sup>15</sup> Writer and #MeToo activist **Sophia Huang Xueqin**, who previously served four months in detention for her public support of sexual assault victims, was also forcibly disappeared while trying to leave China, en route to study at the University of Sussex in England in September 2021. Despite returning Huang's passport earlier in 2021 and continuing to surveil her for a year after her release, Chinese authorities secretly detained Huang in RSDL and later transferred her to a Guangzhou detention facility for “inciting subversion of state power.”<sup>16</sup> The trial of writer and poet **Xie Fengxia**, for “picking quarrels and provoking trouble,” began in April 2021. Just two years prior, Xie was released from prison; but he was surveilled, followed by local authorities, and “invited” for questioning at police stations following his release. After posting a poem commemorating Lin Zhao, a dissident of the Cultural Revolution, he was promptly detained again.<sup>17</sup>

In **Hong Kong**, several writers were newly detained in 2021, raising the number of writers and public intellectuals jailed from last year's three to five. The crackdown under the draconian National Security Law borrows a tactic from Beijing's repression of free expression, resting on ambiguously defined national security crimes.<sup>18</sup> Under the law's provisions, Hong Kong authorities have detained columnists, academics, and public intellectuals who have written in support of pro-democracy protests, and levied heavy penalties against the institutions that stand by

14 Chris Buckley, “A Chinese Dissident Tried to Fly to His Sick Wife in the U.S. Then He Vanished,” *The New York Times*, February 2, 2021, [nytimes.com/2021/02/02/world/asia/china-dissident-yang-maodong.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/02/world/asia/china-dissident-yang-maodong.html)

15 Helen Davidson, “Chinese activist told he could not visit dying wife is re-arrested,” *The Guardian*, January 18, 2022, [theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/18/chinese-activist-yang-maodong-told-he-could-not-visit-dying-wife-is-re-arrested](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/18/chinese-activist-yang-maodong-told-he-could-not-visit-dying-wife-is-re-arrested)

16 Alice Su, “They helped Chinese women, workers, the forgotten and dying. Then they disappeared,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 1, 2021, [latimes.com/world-nation/story/2021-12-01/china-disappearances-gender-labor-class](https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2021-12-01/china-disappearances-gender-labor-class)

17 “185. Xie Fengxia,” Independent Chinese PEN Center, accessed February 24, 2022, [chinesepen.org/english/185-xie-fengxia](https://chinesepen.org/english/185-xie-fengxia)

18 Javier C. Hernández, “Harsh Penalties, Vaguely Defined Crimes: Hong Kong's Security Law Explained,” June 30, 2020, [nytimes.com/2020/06/30/world/asia/hong-kong-security-law-explain.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/30/world/asia/hong-kong-security-law-explain.html)





Status: Detained

Writer Yang Maodong, also known by his pen name Guo Feixiong, was released under a travel ban in 2019. *Photo by Voice of America.*

them. A number of individuals who were prominent in the 2014 Occupy Central Movement in Hong Kong were also re-detained or newly charged under the repressive provisions of the National Security Law. Legal scholar and influential pro-democracy writer **Benny Tai Yiu-ting** was re-detained after a revocation of his bail stemming from a 2019 politically motivated detention.<sup>19</sup> Social media activist and writer **Joshua Wong**, who rose to prominence as a youth activist when he was first charged in 2015, faced a slew of new



Yang was detained at Pudong International Airport in late January 2021, when he tried to visit his ailing wife in the United States. *Photo by MNXANL.*

charges brought against him during the year under the National Security Law, in addition to past charges that kept him imprisoned throughout the year.<sup>20</sup>

The highly publicized closure of pro-democracy newspaper *Apple Daily* served as a bellwether of media censorship and arrests of writers. On June 17, 2021, 500 police officers raided the newspaper's office, seized journalistic materials, and froze millions of assets.<sup>21</sup> One of the first targets of the law when

19 Jasmine Siu, "Benny Tai sent back to jail to await Hong Kong court's ruling in Occupy Central appeal," *South China Morning Post*, March 4, 2021, [sg.news.yahoo.com/benny-tai-sent-back-jail-095645191.html](https://sg.news.yahoo.com/benny-tai-sent-back-jail-095645191.html)

20 Reuters, "Hong Kong activist Joshua Wong jailed an additional 10 months over June 4 assembly," *CNBC*, May 6, 2021, [cnbc.com/2021/05/06/hong-kong-activist-joshua-wong-jailed-an-additional-10-months-over-june-4-assembly.html](https://cnbc.com/2021/05/06/hong-kong-activist-joshua-wong-jailed-an-additional-10-months-over-june-4-assembly.html)

21 "HK's Apple Daily raided by 500 officers over national security law," *Reuters*, June 17, 2021, [reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/hong-kongs-apple-daily-newspaper-says-police-arrest-five-directors-2021-06-16](https://reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/hong-kongs-apple-daily-newspaper-says-police-arrest-five-directors-2021-06-16)

it was first implemented in 2020 was *Apple Daily's* founder, publisher, and opinion writer **Jimmy Lai**, who spent the entirety of 2021 in jail. The paper's five most senior staff were eventually arrested.<sup>22</sup> *Apple Daily* chief editorial writer **Yeung Ching-kei** and columnist **Fung Wai-kong** were detained less than 10 days after the raid and arrested on suspicion of violating the National Security Law.<sup>23</sup> Eleven days later, the reader-funded and independent *Stand News* preemptively removed all of its columnists and opinion writing published before May. At the end of 2021, *Stand News* was also raided and shut down by the Hong Kong authorities.<sup>24</sup>

Hong Kong police have also targeted libraries in an attempt to bar access to pro-democracy writing and quash the potential spread of public dissent. When the law was first implemented in the summer of 2020, books by Wong were swiftly removed.<sup>25</sup> In the summer of 2021, an inquiry was launched into Shek Tong Tsui Public Library after it featured books written by **Jimmy Lai** on a "librarian's choice" shelf. The inquiry resulted in one unnamed librarian's suspension and the prohibition of lending any book titles that a government department believed breached the National Security

Law.<sup>26</sup> Later in the summer, five unnamed members of a speech therapists' union were arrested for creating and publishing three electronic children's books that illustrated the 2019 pro-democracy protests using imagery of sheep and wolves.<sup>27</sup> In the face of these detentions and imprisonments, concerns about running afoul of the ambiguously defined crimes of the National Security Law have resulted in a tangible atmosphere of self-censorship. At the 2021 Hong Kong Book Fair—the first since 2019—books that could potentially be considered politically risky were culled from display, as publishers and exhibitors reportedly exercised a new spirit of self-discipline in curating their selections.<sup>28</sup> In preparation for the fair, one participating publisher said, "[W]e self-censor a lot this time. We read through every single book and every single word before we bring it here."<sup>29</sup>

In **Tibet**, the number of writers and public intellectuals detained or imprisoned during 2021 increased from six to eight. Writers and public intellectuals are commonly detained for reasons ranging from critically responding to state encroachments on Tibetan language and education, to alleged displays of support for the Dalai Lama, to broader expressions of support for free

---

22 Iain Marlow, "The Assault on Apple Daily," *Bloomberg*, February 3, 2022, [bloomberg.com/features/2022-apple-daily-china-hong-kong-crackdown](https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2022-apple-daily-china-hong-kong-crackdown)

23 Helen Davidson, "Hong Kong police arrest editorial writer at Apple Daily newspaper," *The Guardian*, June 23, 2021, [theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/23/hong-kong-police-arrest-editorial-writer-at-apple-daily-newspaper](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/23/hong-kong-police-arrest-editorial-writer-at-apple-daily-newspaper); Helen Davidson, "Hong Kong police arrest senior Apple Daily journalist at airport," *The Guardian*, June 27, 2021, [theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/28/hong-kong-police-arrest-apple-daily-journalist-airport-fung-wai-kong](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/28/hong-kong-police-arrest-apple-daily-journalist-airport-fung-wai-kong)

24 "Security law: Stand News opinion articles axed, directors resign amid reported threats to Hong Kong digital outlets," *Hong Kong Free Press*, June 28, 2021, [hongkongfp.com/2021/06/28/security-law-stand-news-opinion-articles-axed-directors-resign-amid-reported-threats-to-hong-kong-digital-outlets/](https://www.hongkongfp.com/2021/06/28/security-law-stand-news-opinion-articles-axed-directors-resign-amid-reported-threats-to-hong-kong-digital-outlets/); "Hong Kong pro-democracy Stand News closes after police raids condemned by U.N., Germany," *Reuters*, December 29, 2021, [reuters.com/business/media-telecom/hong-kong-police-arrest-6-current-or-former-staff-online-media-outlet-2021-12-28](https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/hong-kong-police-arrest-6-current-or-former-staff-online-media-outlet-2021-12-28)

25 Agence France-Presse, "Democracy books disappear from Hong Kong libraries, including title by activist Joshua Wong," *Hong Kong Free Press*, July 4, 2020, [hongkongfp.com/2020/07/04/democracy-books-disappear-from-hong-kong-libraries-including-title-by-activist-joshua-wong](https://www.hongkongfp.com/2020/07/04/democracy-books-disappear-from-hong-kong-libraries-including-title-by-activist-joshua-wong)

26 Ng Kang-chung, "Hong Kong librarian suspended after books by jailed Apple Daily founder Jimmy Lai put on recommended reading shelf," *South China Morning Post*, July 1, 2021, [sg.news.yahoo.com/hong-kong-librarian-suspended-books-114304238.html](https://sg.news.yahoo.com/hong-kong-librarian-suspended-books-114304238.html)

27 Agence France-Presse, "Five arrested in Hong Kong for sedition over children's book about sheep," *The Guardian*, July 22, 2021, [theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/22/five-arrested-in-hong-kong-for-sedition-over-childrens-book-about-sheep](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/22/five-arrested-in-hong-kong-for-sedition-over-childrens-book-about-sheep)

28 Sara Cheng and Joyce Zhou, "Self-censorship expected as Hong Kong book fair held under national security law," *Reuters*, July 13, 2021, [reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/self-censorship-expected-hong-kong-book-fair-held-under-national-security-law-2021-07-13](https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/self-censorship-expected-hong-kong-book-fair-held-under-national-security-law-2021-07-13)

29 Associated Press, "Self-censorship hits Hong Kong book fair in wake of national security law," *The Guardian*, July 15, 2021, [theguardian.com/books/2021/jul/15/self-censorship-hits-hong-kong-book-fair-in-wake-of-national-security-law](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jul/15/self-censorship-hits-hong-kong-book-fair-in-wake-of-national-security-law)

expression or denunciations of censorship. The charges brought against them are often related to spurious national security crimes, or are undisclosed to the public. In March 2021, writer **Gangkye Drubpa Kyab**—a poet, teacher, former political prisoner, and author of books on the 2008 Tibetan unrest—was arrested in Kardze, but his whereabouts and the charges against him remain unknown.<sup>30</sup> Prominent writer **Go Sherab Gyatso** disappeared in October 2020, and later appeared in state custody in the Tibetan Autonomous Region. In 2021 the Chinese government responded to a United Nations request for further information about Go Sherab Gyatso's incommunicado detention and reasons for his arrest, claiming that he was detained for "inciting secession." Four months later, he was sentenced to 10 years in prison on the charge, which rights groups and his relatives believe is in connection with his writing that touched on Tibetan politics and free expression.<sup>31</sup> In a similarly clandestine fashion, poet and writer **Gendun Lhundrub** has remained in detention without trial or public information about his arrest since December 2020.<sup>32</sup>

The majority of cases in Tibet include writers who have been imprisoned for multiple years. Well-known

**The majority of cases in Tibet include writers who have been imprisoned for multiple years.**

online writer and editor of the first-ever Tibetan literary website Chomei, **Kunchok Tsephel Gopey Tsang** had been in prison since 2009 for "leaking state secrets." While no evidence for this charge has been made public, it is likely related to his website and writing focused on Tibetan literature; Chomei had been censored online prior to Kunchok Tsephel Gopey Tsang's imprisonment.<sup>33</sup> Monk and online writer **Jo Lobsang Jamyang** has been serving a seven-year and six-month sentence for "leaking state secrets" since 2015. Tibetans familiar with Jamyang's writing suspect that his articles on free expression and environmental degradation and debates with other Tibetan writers may have led to his imprisonment.<sup>34</sup> Further details are unknown, as Jamyang was convicted in secret by a Wenchuan county court in Ngaba prefecture.<sup>35</sup> Multiple songwriters, including **Trinley Tsekar**, **Khado Tsetan**, and **Lhundrub Drakpa**, also remain detained for writing lyrics that explore Tibetan identity, culture, and critical opinions of the Chinese government's policies.<sup>36</sup>

---

30 Choekyi Lhamo, "Chinese police detain six noted Tibetans in Kardze," *Phayul*, April 15, 2021, [phayul.com/2021/04/15/45489](http://phayul.com/2021/04/15/45489)

31 "Arbitrarily detained Tibetan Scholar, Go Sherab Gyatso covertly sentenced to 10 years," Central Tibetan Administration, December 16, 2021, [tibet.net/arbitrarily-detained-tibetan-scholar-go-sherab-gyatso-covertly-sentenced-to-10-years](http://tibet.net/arbitrarily-detained-tibetan-scholar-go-sherab-gyatso-covertly-sentenced-to-10-years); Lhuboom, "Tibetan writer given 10-year prison term in secret trial," *Radio Free Asia*, December 10, 2021, [rfa.org/english/news/tibet/trial-12102021135859.html](http://rfa.org/english/news/tibet/trial-12102021135859.html); "China: Release Tibetan scholar Gō Sherab Gyatso from arbitrary detention," Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, April 16, 2021, [tchrd.org/china-release-tibetan-scholar-go-sherab-gyatso-from-arbitrary-detention](http://tchrd.org/china-release-tibetan-scholar-go-sherab-gyatso-from-arbitrary-detention)

32 "Qinghai monk writer missing for more than a year after Chinese 'arrest'," *Tibetan Review*, January 26, 2022, [tibetanreview.net/qinghai-monk-writer-missing-for-more-than-a-year-after-chinese-arrest](http://tibetanreview.net/qinghai-monk-writer-missing-for-more-than-a-year-after-chinese-arrest)

33 "Founder of Tibetan cultural website sentenced to 15 years in closed-door trial in freedom of expression case," International Campaign for Tibet, November 16, 2009, [savetibet.org/founder-of-tibetan-cultural-website-sentenced-to-15-years-in-closed-door-trial-in-freedom-of-expression-case](http://savetibet.org/founder-of-tibetan-cultural-website-sentenced-to-15-years-in-closed-door-trial-in-freedom-of-expression-case); "Tibetan Literary Website Founder Sentenced to 15 Years in Prison," *Free Tibet*, accessed March 11, 2022, [freetibet.org/freedom-for-tibet/political-prisoners/case-studies/kunchok-tsephel/](http://freetibet.org/freedom-for-tibet/political-prisoners/case-studies/kunchok-tsephel/)

34 "Lobsang Jamyang," Committee to Protect Journalists, accessed March 22, 2022, [cpj.org/data/people/lobsang-jamyang](http://cpj.org/data/people/lobsang-jamyang)

35 Yeshe Choesang, "Tibetan writer Lomig is handed 7-year term on unknown charges," *The Tibet Post*, May 9, 2016, [thetibetpost.com/en/news/tibet/5000-tibetan-writer-lomig-is-handed-7-year-term-on-unknown-charges](http://thetibetpost.com/en/news/tibet/5000-tibetan-writer-lomig-is-handed-7-year-term-on-unknown-charges); Tenzin Gaphel, "Tibetan writer Lomig arbitrarily arrested in restive Ngaba County," *Tibet Express*, April 22, 2015, [tibetexpress.net/1265/tibetan-writer-lomig-arbitrarily-arrested-in-restive-ngaba-county](http://tibetexpress.net/1265/tibetan-writer-lomig-arbitrarily-arrested-in-restive-ngaba-county)

36 "China imprisons two Tibetans for song praising His Holiness the Dalai Lama," Central Tibetan Administration, July 21, 2020, [tibet.net/china-imprisons-two-tibetans-for-song-praising-his-holiness-the-dalai-lama](http://tibet.net/china-imprisons-two-tibetans-for-song-praising-his-holiness-the-dalai-lama); "China sentences Tibetan singer to six years in prison," Central Tibetan Administration, October 30, 2020, [tibet.net/china-sentences-tibetan-singer-to-six-years-in-prison](http://tibet.net/china-sentences-tibetan-singer-to-six-years-in-prison)

**Legal charges brought against writers in the Tibetan Autonomous Region are often related to spurious national security crimes, or undisclosed to the public.**

In **Xinjiang**, the brutal repression of Uyghur and other Turkic minorities alongside the crackdown on cultural institutions has continued. At least 34 writers and public intellectuals were detained or imprisoned for their writing and work in the region during 2021, almost as many as in the rest of China. However, as noted in previous years' reports, this figure is certainly an incomplete accounting of the actual number. As human rights groups actively work to document the scale of internment in Xinjiang, efforts are stymied by the government's censorship of domestic media, restricted foreign media access, and pervasive surveillance.<sup>37</sup> During 2021, information leaks from a police database in Ürümqi further revealed how Muslims and ethnic minorities—such as Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and Kyrgyz—are systematically surveilled through the collection of online communication, mobile phone data, and location data.<sup>38</sup> Writers who publish in their native languages and support literary institutions have been detained on spurious national

security crimes of “extremism” and “separatism,” or have yet to be given any reason at all for their arrest.

Many writers and public intellectuals at the helm of institutions like magazines and publishing houses have been detained or imprisoned, effectively criminalizing institutions of literature and culture. **Qurban Mamut**, a Uyghur poet and longtime editor of culture journal *Xinjiang Civilization*, went missing in 2017 and was later confirmed to have been detained. Despite working within the confines of state censorship at *Xinjiang Civilization*, Mamut went missing a few months after he visited his son Bahram Sintash, who lives in the United States.<sup>39</sup> **Tashpolat Tiyip**—the former president of Xinjiang University, geography professor, and author of five books—also went missing in 2017 after he left Xinjiang for Germany to attend a conference. Two years after his disappearance, the UN urged the Chinese government to disclose his location and clarify the terms of his imprisonment. He has reportedly been held on separatism charges, and his family has received reports that he received a suspended death sentence, though the Chinese government has refuted this, claiming he was detained under corruption charges and not subject to a death sentence.<sup>40</sup> At least five writers and public intellectuals who worked at the Kashgar Publishing

---

37 For additional information on the detention of writers, intellectuals, and other cultural figures in Xinjiang, see the following reports from the Uyghur Human Rights Project: Detained and Disappeared: Intellectuals Under Assault in the Uyghur Homeland, March 25, 2019, [uhrp.org/report/detained-and-disappeared-intellectuals-under-assault-uyghur-homeland-html](http://uhrp.org/report/detained-and-disappeared-intellectuals-under-assault-uyghur-homeland-html); UHRP Update: The Persecution of the Intellectuals in the Uyghur Region Continues, January 28, 2019, [uhrp.org/report/persecution-intellectuals-uyghur-region-continues-html](http://uhrp.org/report/persecution-intellectuals-uyghur-region-continues-html); UHRP Report: The Persecution of the Intellectuals in the Uyghur Region: Disappeared Forever?, October 2018, [uhrp.org/report/persecution-intellectuals-uyghur-region-disappeared-forever-html](http://uhrp.org/report/persecution-intellectuals-uyghur-region-disappeared-forever-html)

38 Yael Grauer, “Revealed: Massive Chinese Police Database,” *The Intercept*, January 29, 2021, [theintercept.com/2021/01/29/china-uyghur-muslim-surveillance-police](https://theintercept.com/2021/01/29/china-uyghur-muslim-surveillance-police)

39 Austin Ramzy, “China Targets Prominent Uighur Intellectuals to Erase an Ethnic Identity,” *The New York Times*, January 5, 2019, [nytimes.com/2019/01/05/world/asia/china-xinjiang-uyghur-intellectuals.html](https://nytimes.com/2019/01/05/world/asia/china-xinjiang-uyghur-intellectuals.html); “Qurban Mamut, a retired Uyghur editor held incommunicado in China,” Uyghur PEN, accessed March 1, 2022, [uyghurpen.org/qurban-mamut-a-retired-uyghur-editor-held-incommunicado-in-china](http://uyghurpen.org/qurban-mamut-a-retired-uyghur-editor-held-incommunicado-in-china)

40 “China urged to disclose location of Uyghur academic Tashpolat Tiyip,” Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, December 26, 2019, [ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2019/12/china-urged-disclose-location-uyghur-academic-tashpolat-tiyip](https://ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2019/12/china-urged-disclose-location-uyghur-academic-tashpolat-tiyip); Amy Anderson, “Death sentence for a life of service,” *Art of Life in Chinese Central Asia*, January 22, 2019, [u.osu.edu/mclc/2019/01/25/death-sentence-for-a-life-of-service](https://u.osu.edu/mclc/2019/01/25/death-sentence-for-a-life-of-service); “President of Xinxiang University Arrested Four Years Ago. Whereabouts Unknown to This Day,” Committee of Concerned Scientists, May 5, 2021, [concernedsScientists.org/2021/05/president-of-xinxiang-university-arrested-four-years-ago-whereabouts-unknown-to-this-day](https://concernedsScientists.org/2021/05/president-of-xinxiang-university-arrested-four-years-ago-whereabouts-unknown-to-this-day)



**Status: Imprisoned**

Uyghur economist, writer, and 2014 PEN/ Freedom to Write honoree Ilham Tohti has been in a Chinese prison for seven years as of 2021, serving a life sentence for his writings intended to foster understanding between Uyghurs and Han Chinese.

House remained in detention during 2021. Deputy editor-in-chief **Ablajan Siyit**; editor **Memetjan Abliz Boriyar**; two retired editors-in-chief, **Osman Zunun** and **Abliz Ömer**; and retired editor and poet **Haji Mirzahid Kerimi** were all arrested in 2017 and 2018 for their involvement in publishing books deemed “problematic.”<sup>41</sup> Tragically, retired editor Kerimi died on January 9, 2021 while serving his prison sentence.<sup>42</sup>

A sizeable 16 of the 34 writers PEN America documented as detained or imprisoned in Xinjiang in

2021 are also scholars of Uyghur literature, folklore, and politics. Historical researcher, literary critic, and writer **Yalqun Rozi** has been in prison since 2016 and is serving a 15-year sentence for his role in compiling and editing Uyghur literature textbooks that Chinese authorities claimed were “separatist.”<sup>43</sup> Prominent folklorist and ethnographer **Rahile Dawut** has been in detention since 2017 after she attempted to travel from Ürümqi to Beijing. Dawut’s scholarship focuses on minority cultures and sacred Islamic sites in Central Eurasia; she founded the Minorities Folklore Research Centre

41 Shohret Hoshur, “Veteran Editor of Uyghur Publishing House Among 14 Staff Members Held Over ‘Problematic Books,’” *Radio Free Asia*, November 26, 2018, [rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/editor-11262018155525.html](https://rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/editor-11262018155525.html)

42 Shohret Hoshur, “Prominent Uyghur Poet and Author Confirmed to Have Died While Imprisoned,” *Radio Free Asia*, January 25, 2021, [rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/poet-01252021133515.html](https://rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/poet-01252021133515.html)

43 Helen Davidson, “China hands death sentences to Uyghur former officials,” *The Guardian*, April 9, 2021, [theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/09/china-uyghur-death-sentences-xinjiang-education-directors](https://theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/09/china-uyghur-death-sentences-xinjiang-education-directors)

at Xinjiang University and has authored several books and scholarly articles.<sup>44</sup> Former coworkers of Dawut's confirmed her imprisonment in July 2021, while the Chinese government has yet to release information to the public or her family.<sup>45</sup> Reported retaliation for speaking publicly about these cases coupled with a lack of press freedom in Xinjiang results in delayed public knowledge around many cases of jailed writers. In August 2021, three coworkers of another Xinjiang University professor, **Gheyra Osman**, confirmed that Osman was detained in 2018 and currently serving 10 years in prison for "separatism." Osman was a literature professor who published dozens of books and hundreds of scholarly articles on Uyghur language

and folklore.<sup>46</sup> Finally, 2021 marked the seventh year that Uyghur economist, online writer, and 2014 PEN Freedom to Write honoree **Ilham Tohti** has been held in Chinese state custody for his writings intended to foster understanding between Uyghurs and Han Chinese.<sup>47</sup> While Tohti is not imprisoned in Xinjiang, his unjust imprisonment is emblematic of the treatment many Uyghur writers face. He has been imprisoned incommunicado for the last five years and has been permitted no contact with his family or lawyers. Tohti's daughter Jewher Ilham has nevertheless advocated fervently for his release, bringing attention to tragically similar accounts of unjustly detained Uyghurs and other political prisoners in Xinjiang.<sup>48</sup>

---

44 "Uyghur Scholar Rahile Dawut Named Honorary Professor in the Humanities by the Open Society University Network," *Bard News*, December 8, 2020, [bard.edu/news/rahile-dawut-named-first-osun-honorary-professor-in-the-humanities-2020-12-08](http://bard.edu/news/rahile-dawut-named-first-osun-honorary-professor-in-the-humanities-2020-12-08)

45 Shohret Hoshur and Gulchehra Hoja, "Noted Uyghur Folklore Professor Serving Prison Term in China's Xinjiang," *Radio Free Asia*, July 13, 2021, [rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/rahile-dawut-07132021175559.html](http://rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/rahile-dawut-07132021175559.html)

46 "Urgent Actions Needed to Stop Cultural Rights Violations Against Uyghurs," Chinese Human Rights Defenders, October 5, 2021, [nchrd.org/2021/10/urgent-actions-needed-to-stop-cultural-rights-violations-against-uyghurs](http://nchrd.org/2021/10/urgent-actions-needed-to-stop-cultural-rights-violations-against-uyghurs)

47 Andrew Jacobs, "China Charges Scholar With Inciting Separatism," *The New York Times*, February 26, 2014, [nytimes.com/2014/02/27/world/asia/ilham-tohti.html](http://nytimes.com/2014/02/27/world/asia/ilham-tohti.html)

48 Colm Keena, "'We don't know if he is alive': Uighur woman speaks out on jailing of father in Xinjiang," *Irish Times*, April 29, 2021, [irishtimes.com/news/world/asia-pacific/we-don-t-know-if-he-is-alive-uighur-woman-speaks-out-on-jailing-of-father-in-xinjiang-1.4551124](http://irishtimes.com/news/world/asia-pacific/we-don-t-know-if-he-is-alive-uighur-woman-speaks-out-on-jailing-of-father-in-xinjiang-1.4551124)



**Status: Detained**

Xu Zhiyong was arrested after publishing critical online commentaries of Chinese government policies and President Xi Jinping.  
 Photo by AP/Greg Baker

## XU ZHIYONG

**Literary Writer, Activist**

### 📍 China

Xu Zhiyong is a Chinese writer, essayist, legal scholar, and civil rights activist who is well known for numerous essays he wrote about contemporary social issues in China, including access to fair education, governmental mistreatment and repatriation of migrant workers, corruption, and wasteful government spending. He was arrested in February 2020 after publishing online critiques of the Chinese government's response to the COVID-19 outbreak in the country, and then held incommunicado for nearly a year.

A vocal advocate for civil rights in China since the early 2000s, Xu was a founding member of Gongmeng (Open Constitution Initiative), a group of legal scholars and commentators pushing for greater citizens' rights. Authorities banned Gongmeng in 2009 and briefly detained all those involved. In response, in 2010 Xu founded the New Citizens' Movement to organize for the democratic ideals of freedom, happiness, and societal responsibility, and against corruption and human rights violations by the government. To boost his advocacy work, Xu wrote prolifically on these topics, and a few of his essays were read widely: his manifesto of the New Citizens' Movement, an open letter to President Xi Jinping entitled "A Citizen's Thoughts on the Fate of Our Nation," and an essay on Tibetan self-immolations. This democratic activism and prominent anti-government writing threatened the Chinese government, which employs a vast censorship apparatus to regulate critical speech. Xu was previously imprisoned from 2012 to 2017 on

a vaguely defined charge commonly used against activists, but he continued writing when released.

In December 2019, amidst a government crackdown on civil society activists, Xu went into hiding and published an open letter titled “Dear Chairman Xi, It’s Time for You to Go.” Two months later, on February 15, 2020, Xu was detained. He was later charged with “inciting subversion of state power” and formally indicted on September 24, 2021, for plotting a “color revolution” to subvert state power.

---

“The cover-up of the unfolding crisis in Wuhan contributed directly to what is now a national disaster. Stability at any price—at the price of the freedom of the Chinese, their dignity, as well as their pursuit of happiness? For all of that, is the system really all that stable? Because the system is so ill-at-ease and constantly fearful of any and all unexpected developments, it must employ every conceivable means to lash out, crush, and attack.”

– **Dear Chairman Xi, It’s Time for You to Go**

---

PEN America honored Xu with its 2020 PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write Award, and continues to advocate for the Chinese government to release him.



# SAUDI ARABIA

In **Saudi Arabia**, the number of writers either detained or imprisoned during 2021 remained high but stable, with a slight decrease to 29 behind bars and only one new detention counted during the year. Eminent scholar **Saud Al-Sarhan**, who has written commentary on Saudi public affairs and Yemeni politics, went missing in late October 2021. It was revealed only on December 7, 2021, that Al-Sarhan had been held incommunicado by Saudi authorities without published cause.<sup>49</sup> Human rights groups surmise that his arrest was due to an article he wrote commenting negatively on the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.<sup>50</sup>

The majority of cases in Saudi Arabia represent writers and public intellectuals who have been in prison for extended periods of time;<sup>51</sup> many have been in custody for five years or longer. Saudi authorities have held blogger **Fadhel Al-Manasef**, for example, in some form of state custody since 2011 and he is currently serving a 14-year jail sentence, slightly reduced from the original 15 years handed down in 2014.<sup>52</sup> **Raif Badawi**, a blogger and creator of the Free Saudi Liberals website—who was detained in 2012 and eventually sentenced on appeal in 2014 to 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes, as well as handed down a fine

of 1 million Saudi riyals—remained in jail throughout 2021.<sup>53</sup> His sentence expired on February 28, 2022, but Saudi officials refused to release him then; after renewed calls for his release, he was freed on March 11, but remains subject to a 10-year travel ban and restrictions on his professional activities and writing.<sup>54</sup> Online commentator **Fahad Al-Fahad**, arrested in 2016 for tweets that criticized the justice system and government corruption, was sentenced in 2017 to five years' imprisonment, a 10-year travel ban, and a ban on writing and media work that the presiding judge said was for life.<sup>55</sup> A significant portion of jailed writers in the Kingdom are being detained indefinitely without any charge; cases include journalist and online commentator **Adel Banaima**, arrested in September 2017; writer and online commentator **Maha Al-Rafidi Al-Qahtani**, held since September 2019 and subjected to custodial abuse; and journalist and scholar **Zuhair Kutbi**, detained in January 2019.<sup>56</sup>

Despite a flurry of releases in 2021, many of the dissident Saudi writers and intellectuals released then and in the past several years continue to face significant conditions on their speech and movement that have prevented them from enjoying full freedom or returning to their writing or professional life. Threats of significant repercussions hang over them,

---

49 "Saudi academic Saud al-Sarhan missing since October," ALQST, July 12, 2021, [alqst.org/en/post/saudi-academic-saud-al-sarhan-missing](https://alqst.org/en/post/saudi-academic-saud-al-sarhan-missing)

50 Saud Al-Sarhan, "Vision 2030: A dawn that dispels doubts," *Al Arabiya News*, April 26, 2021, [english.alarabiya.net/in-translation/2021/04/26/Vision-2030-A-dawn-that-dispels-doubts](https://english.alarabiya.net/in-translation/2021/04/26/Vision-2030-A-dawn-that-dispels-doubts); "Saudi academic Saud al-Sarhan missing since October," ALQST, July 12, 2021, [alqst.org/en/post/saudi-academic-saud-al-sarhan-missing](https://alqst.org/en/post/saudi-academic-saud-al-sarhan-missing)

51 "Abuses Under Scrutiny: Human Rights in Saudi Arabia," ALQST, accessed March 17, 2021, [alqst.org/uploads/Abuses-Under-Scrutiny-En.pdf](https://alqst.org/uploads/Abuses-Under-Scrutiny-En.pdf)

52 "Case History: Fadhel Mekki Al-Manasef," Front Line Defenders, accessed March 22, 2021, [frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/case-history-fadel-mekki-al-manasef](https://frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/case-history-fadel-mekki-al-manasef)

53 "Raif Badawi," Committee to Protect Journalists, accessed March 18, 2021, [cpj.org/data/people/raif-badawi/](https://cpj.org/data/people/raif-badawi/)

54 "Saudi blogger Raif Badawi still held after completing 10-year jail term," Reporters Without Borders, March 1, 2022, [rsf.org/en/news/saudi-blogger-raif-badawi-still-held-after-completing-10-year-jail-term](https://rsf.org/en/news/saudi-blogger-raif-badawi-still-held-after-completing-10-year-jail-term); "Saudi Arabia confirms 10-year travel ban for freed blogger Raif Badawi," *France 24*, March 12, 2022, [france24.com/en/live-news/20220312-saudi-arabia-confirms-10-year-travel-ban-for-freed-blogger-raif-badawi](https://france24.com/en/live-news/20220312-saudi-arabia-confirms-10-year-travel-ban-for-freed-blogger-raif-badawi)

55 "Saudi Arabia: Activist Marks 2 Years Behind Bars," Human Rights Watch, April 5, 2018, [hrw.org/news/2018/04/05/saudi-arabia-activist-marks-2-years-behind-bars](https://hrw.org/news/2018/04/05/saudi-arabia-activist-marks-2-years-behind-bars)

56 "Adel Banaima," ALQST, accessed March 21, 2022, [alqst.org/en/prisonersofconscience/adel-banaima](https://alqst.org/en/prisonersofconscience/adel-banaima); "Ongoing detention of female journalist and writer Maha al-Rafidi confirmed," ALQST, January 14, 2020, [alqst.org/en/ongoing-detention-female-journalist-writer-maha-al-rafidi-confirmed](https://alqst.org/en/ongoing-detention-female-journalist-writer-maha-al-rafidi-confirmed); "Zuhair Kutbi," Committee to Protect Journalists, accessed March 21, 2022, [cpj.org/data/people/zuhair-kutbi/](https://cpj.org/data/people/zuhair-kutbi/)



Ensaf Haidar, the wife of recently released Saudi blogger Raif Badawi, accepts the 2015 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought on his behalf in Strasbourg, France. *Photo by European Union 2015 - European Parliament*



People walk past a banner showing Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, outside a mall in Jiddah, Saudi Arabia, Friday, December 6, 2019. Arabic reads, "vision of 2030". *Photo by AP/ Amr Nabil*

should they breach the often-broad conditions of their freedom.<sup>57</sup> Many also face lingering legal charges or ongoing trials. These cases include many women who have advocated for women's rights through their writings, such as academic **Hatoon Al-Fassi** and professor and columnist **Eman Al-Nafjan**, both released in 2019, as well as writer-activists **Loujain Al-Hathloul**, **Nouf Abdulaziz**, and **Nassima Al-Sadah**,

released in early 2021 after being jailed for nearly three years.<sup>58</sup> Al-Hathloul, who had been detained since May 2018, was denied her request to appeal her conviction.<sup>59</sup> Upon release, she was placed under strict travel restrictions as well as what amounted to a gag order prohibiting her from speaking about the case or celebrating her release publicly.<sup>60</sup> In March 2021, local human rights groups confirmed the release

57 Arwa Youssef, "Saudi Women's Rights Defenders Released, But Not Free," Human Rights Watch, February 12, 2021, [hrw.org/news/2021/02/12/saudi-womens-rights-defenders-released-not-free](https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/12/saudi-womens-rights-defenders-released-not-free)

58 "Saudi journalist Hatoon al-Fassi freed provisionally," Reporters Without Borders, May 10, 2019, [rsf.org/en/news/saudi-journalist-hatoon-al-fassi-freed-provisionally](https://www.rsf.org/en/news/saudi-journalist-hatoon-al-fassi-freed-provisionally); Stephen Kalin and Sarah Dadouch, "Saudi Arabia temporarily frees three women activists," *Reuters*, March 28, 2019, [reuters.com/article/us-saudi-arrests/saudi-arabia-temporarily-frees-three-women-activists-idUSKCN1R91S6](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-arrests/saudi-arabia-temporarily-frees-three-women-activists-idUSKCN1R91S6); Nadda Osman, "Loujain al-Hathloul: Saudi activist released from prison," *Middle East Eye*, February 10, 2021, [middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-loujain-hathloul-activist-returns-home-prison](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-loujain-hathloul-activist-returns-home-prison); "Saudi Arabia releases two prominent women's rights activists," *Al Jazeera*, June 27, 2021, [aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/27/saudi-arabia-releases-two-prominent-womens-rights-activists](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/27/saudi-arabia-releases-two-prominent-womens-rights-activists)

59 "Saudi appeals court rejects rights activist claim she was tortured in jail, family says," *Reuters*, February 9, 2021, [reuters.com/article/saudi-rights-women-justice-int/saudi-appeals-court-rejects-rights-activist-claim-she-was-tortured-in-jail-family-says-idUSKBN2A91Xo](https://www.reuters.com/article/saudi-rights-women-justice-int/saudi-appeals-court-rejects-rights-activist-claim-she-was-tortured-in-jail-family-says-idUSKBN2A91Xo)

60 "Saudi travel ban on activists and their families stirs unease even as detainees are released," *The Straits Times*, February 24, 2021, [straitstimes.com/world/middle-east/saudi-travel-bans-on-activists-and-families-stir-unease-as-detainees-released](https://www.straitstimes.com/world/middle-east/saudi-travel-bans-on-activists-and-families-stir-unease-as-detainees-released); "Saudi court upholds rights activist al-Hathloul's sentence at appeals hearing," *Reuters*, March 10, 2021, [reuters.com/article/uk-saudi-rights-women-idUKKBN2B2OQW](https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-saudi-rights-women-idUKKBN2B2OQW); "Saudi court confirms Loujain al-Hathloul sentence," *Deutsche Welle*, March 10, 2021, [dw.com/en/saudi-court-confirms-loujain-al-hathloul-sentence/a-56826103](https://www.dw.com/en/saudi-court-confirms-loujain-al-hathloul-sentence/a-56826103)

In general, the environment for free expression in Saudi Arabia remains extremely poor.

of journalist and blogger **Ali Al-Saffar**, journalist and blogger **Thumar Al-Marzouqi**, novelist **Moqbel Al-Saqqar**, and scholar and journalist **Redha Al-Boori**, all of whom had been arrested in an April 2019 sweep.<sup>61</sup> In July, writer and professor **Aql Al-Bahili** and writer and economist **Abdulaziz Al-Dukhail**, two of the three writers detained in April 2020 after expressing condolences online for deceased activist Abdullah Al-Hamid, were released, but it was unclear if any conditions were placed on their freedom.<sup>62</sup>

In general, the environment for free expression in Saudi Arabia remains extremely poor, with little movement on some longstanding cases of political prisoners; continued efforts to intimidate Saudi commentators based abroad through online trolling and threats, surveillance, and hacking; and ongoing impunity for past cases of grave abuse perpetrated by the Saudi state, such as the murder of exiled journalist and columnist **Jamal Khashoggi**.<sup>63</sup>

## MYANMAR

The environment for free expression in **Myanmar** dramatically worsened in 2021 as a result of the February 1 coup, during which the military seized power; prevented the elected parliament from forming; cut off communications channels and banned media outlets; and arrested dozens of senior politicians, including National League for Democracy (NLD) leadership Senior Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint, as well as influential cultural figures and creative artists.<sup>64</sup> During the year, as part of a broad-based crackdown in which thousands of protesters were jailed and hundreds killed, the number of jailed writers and creative artists increased from 8 in 2020 to 26 in 2021, catapulting Myanmar from ninth place in last year's Index to third this year. In addition to detentions, which in most cases have been followed eventually by legal charges and sentences under Myanmar's restrictive laws, writers and public intellectuals have also faced violence, threats, and surveillance, all of which have served to chill expression and the ability to write freely.<sup>65</sup>

Arrests of influential writers and cultural luminaries started as soon as the military junta took over, likely because of their consistent support for human rights, as well as the NLD government and opposition to the military: filmmaker **Min Htin Ko Ko Gyi**, previously detained in 2019, was detained on the first night of the

61 "Saudi Arabia releases prisoners of conscience not known to public," *Middle East Monitor*, March 6, 2021, [middleeastmonitor.com/20210306-saudi-arabia-releases-prisoners-of-conscience-not-known-to-public](https://middleeastmonitor.com/20210306-saudi-arabia-releases-prisoners-of-conscience-not-known-to-public); ALQST for Human Rights (@ALQST\_En), "ALQST has news of further releases of those detained in April 2019," Twitter status, March 12, 2021, [twitter.com/alqst\\_en/status/1370353985719271427](https://twitter.com/alqst_en/status/1370353985719271427); "Saudi Arabia: New wave of arrests targeting human rights community must stop," The Gulf Center for Human Rights, April 4, 2019, [g4hr.org/news/view/2111](https://g4hr.org/news/view/2111)

62 ALQST for Human Rights (@ALQST\_En), "Aql al-Bahili, detained since April 2020 for expressing sympathy over the death of rights activist Abdullah al-Hamid, has been released," Twitter status, July 14, 2021, [twitter.com/alqst\\_en/status/1415366553525174273](https://twitter.com/alqst_en/status/1415366553525174273); "Saudi official released after year-long detention over tweet," *Middle East Eye*, July 9, 2021, [middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-official-released-after-year-long-detention-over-tweet](https://middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-official-released-after-year-long-detention-over-tweet)

63 Stephanie Kirchgaessner, "US finds Saudi crown prince approved Khashoggi murder but does not sanction him," *The Guardian*, February 26, 2021, [theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/26/jamal-khashoggi-mohammed-bin-salman-us-report](https://theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/26/jamal-khashoggi-mohammed-bin-salman-us-report)

64 "Internet disrupted in Myanmar amid apparent military uprising," *NetBlocks*, January 31, 2021, [netblocks.org/reports/internet-disrupted-in-myanmar-amid-apparent-military-uprising-JBZrmlB6](https://netblocks.org/reports/internet-disrupted-in-myanmar-amid-apparent-military-uprising-JBZrmlB6); "Aung San Suu Kyi and other leaders arrested, party spokesman says," *Reuters*, February 1, 2021, [news.trust.org/item/20210131230656-kkg7f](https://news.trust.org/item/20210131230656-kkg7f); "Stolen Freedoms: Creative Expression, Historic Resistance, and the Myanmar Coup," PEN America, accessed March 21, 2022, [pen.org/report/stolen-freedoms-creative-expression-historic-resistance-and-the-myanmar-coup](https://pen.org/report/stolen-freedoms-creative-expression-historic-resistance-and-the-myanmar-coup)

65 "Stolen Freedoms: Creative Expression, Historic Resistance, and the Myanmar Coup," PEN America, accessed March 21, 2022, [pen.org/report/stolen-freedoms-creative-expression-historic-resistance-and-the-myanmar-coup](https://pen.org/report/stolen-freedoms-creative-expression-historic-resistance-and-the-myanmar-coup)

coup, alongside singer-songwriter **Saw Phoe Khwar** and writers **Htin Lin Oo**, **Maung Thar Cho**, **Mya Aye**, and **Than Myint Aung**.<sup>66</sup> Min Htin Ko Ko Gyi had been released from prison less than one year earlier, sentenced on charges related to social media posts critical of the military's constitutional role in politics.<sup>67</sup> He and Htin Lin Oo, who also had a history of organizing against the army's political participation, were both able to post warnings on social media prior to their arrests.<sup>68</sup> The latter wrote on Facebook, "Now our country is under a military coup for the third time. The democracy we arduously built has been crushed."<sup>69</sup> Police staked out Maung Thar Cho's home for hours before detaining him, promising his family that he would only be taken for a short time.<sup>70</sup> Instead he was held on unknown charges for over 10 months, including periods of solitary confinement, and in May 2021, he underwent a military

interrogation in which he was forced to renounce his public remarks in support of the NLD.<sup>71</sup> Prominent '88 Generation activist Mya Aye and writer and NLD representative Than Myint Aung were similarly arrested early in the morning on February 1, 2021.<sup>72</sup> Mya Aye was held incommunicado for months before his location and charges were revealed.<sup>73</sup> All of them remained behind bars at year's end and have since been handed various charges in retaliation for their writing. For example, Min Htin Ko Ko Gyi was charged with incitement, while Mya Aye was sentenced to two years in prison under Section 505(c) of the penal code for "inciting hate towards an ethnicity or a community," a charge related to a 2014 email criticizing ethno-nationalism in Myanmar.<sup>74</sup> Than Myint Aung and Htin Lin Oo were sentenced in December and the following February, respectively, to three years in prison under Section 505(a) of the penal

---

66 "Recent Arrest List Last Updated Feb 4," Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, February 4, 2021, [aappb.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Recent-Arrest-List-Last-Updated-on-Feb-4.pdf](https://aappb.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Recent-Arrest-List-Last-Updated-on-Feb-4.pdf); "Statement on Recent Detainees in Relation to the Military Coup," Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, February 4, 2021, [aappb.org/?p=12997](https://aappb.org/?p=12997); "Three Saffron Revolution monks among those detained in February 1 raids," *Myanmar Now*, February 3, 2021, [myanmar-now.org/en/news/three-saffron-revolution-monks-among-those-detained-in-february-1-raids](https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/three-saffron-revolution-monks-among-those-detained-in-february-1-raids); "Recent Arrest List CSOs Last Updated Feb 4," Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, February 4, 2021, [aappb.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Recent-Arrest-List-CSOsLast-Updated-on-Feb-4.pdf](https://aappb.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Recent-Arrest-List-CSOsLast-Updated-on-Feb-4.pdf)

67 "How Myanmar's junta used a coup to settle old scores," *Myanmar Now*, September 12, 2021, [myanmar-now.org/en/news/how-myanmars-junta-used-a-coup-to-settle-old-scores](https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/how-myanmars-junta-used-a-coup-to-settle-old-scores)

68 Mon Mon Myat, "Myanmar Making Noises for Democracy," *The Irrawaddy*, February 8, 2021, [irrawaddy.com/opinion/myanmar-making-noises-democracy.html](https://irrawaddy.com/opinion/myanmar-making-noises-democracy.html)

69 "Aung San Suu Kyi Urges Protests to Reject Myanmar Military Coup, 1-Year State of Emergency," *Radio Free Asia*, January 31, 2021, [rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/military-arrests-01312021195220.html](https://rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/military-arrests-01312021195220.html)

70 "How Myanmar's junta used a coup to settle old scores," *Myanmar Now*, September 12, 2021, [myanmar-now.org/en/news/how-myanmars-junta-used-a-coup-to-settle-old-scores](https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/how-myanmars-junta-used-a-coup-to-settle-old-scores); Mon Mon Myat, "Myanmar Making Noises for Democracy," *The Irrawaddy*, February 8, 2021, [irrawaddy.com/opinion/myanmar-making-noises-democracy.html](https://irrawaddy.com/opinion/myanmar-making-noises-democracy.html); Helen Regan and Sandi Sidhu, "By day, Myanmar's protesters are defiant dissenters. By night, they're terrified of being dragged from their beds by the junta," *CNN*, February 20, 2021, [edition.cnn.com/2021/02/19/asia/myanmar-protest-voices-coup-intl-dst-hnk/index.html](https://edition.cnn.com/2021/02/19/asia/myanmar-protest-voices-coup-intl-dst-hnk/index.html)

71 "Stolen Freedoms: Creative Expression, Historic Resistance, and the Myanmar Coup," PEN America, accessed March 11, 2022, [pen.org/report/stolen-freedoms-creative-expression-historic-resistance-and-the-myanmar-coup](https://pen.org/report/stolen-freedoms-creative-expression-historic-resistance-and-the-myanmar-coup); "In Military-Ruled Myanmar, Political Detainees Mark 100 Days Behind Bars," *The Irrawaddy*, May 11, 2021, [irrawaddy.com/news/burma/in-military-ruled-myanmar-political-detainees-mark-100-days-behind-bars.html](https://irrawaddy.com/news/burma/in-military-ruled-myanmar-political-detainees-mark-100-days-behind-bars.html)

72 "How Myanmar's junta used a coup to settle old scores," *Myanmar Now*, September 12, 2021, [myanmar-now.org/en/news/how-myanmars-junta-used-a-coup-to-settle-old-scores](https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/how-myanmars-junta-used-a-coup-to-settle-old-scores); Aditi Bhandari, Wa Lone, and Poppy McPherson, "Politicians, doctors and a fortune-teller: Myanmar's new wave of detainees," *Reuters*, March 1, 2021, [graphics.reuters.com/MYANMAR-POLITICS/DETENTIONS/jbyvrdaznve](https://graphics.reuters.com/MYANMAR-POLITICS/DETENTIONS/jbyvrdaznve)

73 "How Myanmar's junta used a coup to settle old scores," *Myanmar Now*, September 12, 2021, [myanmar-now.org/en/news/how-myanmars-junta-used-a-coup-to-settle-old-scores](https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/how-myanmars-junta-used-a-coup-to-settle-old-scores)

74 "Myanmar Junta Jails Celebrity for Anti-Coup Protests," *The Irrawaddy*, December 28, 2021, [irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-jails-celebrity-for-anti-coup-protests.html](https://irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-jails-celebrity-for-anti-coup-protests.html); Esther J, "Democracy activist Mya Aye receives two-year prison sentence on his birthday," *Myanmar Now*, March 10, 2022, [myanmar-now.org/en/news/democracy-activist-mya-aye-receives-two-year-prison-sentence-on-his-birthday](https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/democracy-activist-mya-aye-receives-two-year-prison-sentence-on-his-birthday); Esther J, "Jailed 1988 veteran admitted to hospital with 'life-threatening' infection from wound," *Myanmar Now*, November 5, 2021, [myanmar-now.org/en/news/jailed-1988-veteran-admitted-to-hospital-with-life-threatening-infection-from-wound](https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/jailed-1988-veteran-admitted-to-hospital-with-life-threatening-infection-from-wound);



In the week following the military's violent overthrow of Myanmar's civilian government, crowds of protesters gathered in downtown Yangon to resist the military coup. *Photo by Voice of America Burmese*

code for allegedly opposing the coup online and inciting anti-military sentiments.<sup>75</sup> In February 2022, Maung Thar Cho was sentenced to two years in prison with hard labor, also under Section 505(a), reportedly stemming from two articles that were published a year before the coup took place.<sup>76</sup>

Within weeks of the coup, a broad-based, countrywide civil disobedience movement (known as the CDM) emerged involving thousands of protesters, who

continue to challenge the military's illegal takeover and fight for their country's future. As writers' groups and other creative artists have played a key role in the CDM, they have been targeted for arrest and legal charges—and in some cases, they have been killed—for their civic activism and for inspiring others to join the movement.<sup>77</sup> At least six poets were arrested and detained for their participation in poet-led protests in downtown Yangon on Pansodan Road, where they held poetry recitals and sold art to support civil resistance in the weeks

75 Han Thit, "Junta hits author and model with three-year prison sentences," *Myanmar Now*, December 29, 2021, [myanmar-now.org/en/news/junta-hits-author-and-model-with-three-year-prison-sentences](https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/junta-hits-author-and-model-with-three-year-prison-sentences); Esther J, "Writer Htin Lin Oo sentenced to three years in prison," *Myanmar Now*, February 22, 2022, [myanmar-now.org/mm/news/1053](https://myanmar-now.org/mm/news/1053)

76 "Writers Maung Thar Cho and Htin Lin Oo sentenced to hard labor," *The Irrawaddy*, February 22, 2022, [burma.irrawaddy.com/news/2022/02/22/250081.html](https://burma.irrawaddy.com/news/2022/02/22/250081.html)

77 The leading role of writers and creative artists in the CDM can be explored further in PEN America's December 2021 report, *Stolen Freedoms: Creative Expression, Historic Resistance, and the Myanmar Coup*, available at: [pen.org/report/stolen-freedoms-creative-expression-historic-resistance-and-the-myanmar-coup](https://pen.org/report/stolen-freedoms-creative-expression-historic-resistance-and-the-myanmar-coup)

immediately after the coup.<sup>78</sup> **Wai Moe Naing**, a writer and activist also known as Monywa Panda, was attacked and then arrested at a protest in April, and later charged with incitement under Section 505(a) of the penal code, and nine other serious charges, including treason, armed robbery, and murder.<sup>79</sup> Poet **Khet Thi**, who had rallied protesters with his words and writings, was detained and reportedly tortured to death after being taken into custody in central Myanmar.<sup>80</sup> According to his wife, after his detention his body was returned to his family with missing organs.<sup>81</sup>

Civil resistance to the coup continued despite the military's violent repression, which escalated after the first few weeks following the coup; reactive and preemptive arrests of writers continued as well. **Maung Yu Py**, a well-known poet from Myeik, was detained on March 9 alongside several dozen activists amid widespread reports of torture in custody.<sup>82</sup> On April 6, the prominent satirist and film director **Zarganar**

was arrested under unknown charges; like **Htin Lin Oo**, Zarganar had also written critically about the coup on Facebook after the military first seized power in February.<sup>83</sup> On April 24, fiction writer and journalist **Tu Tu Tha** was arrested in a home raid by at least 10 military soldiers.<sup>84</sup> Both Tu Tu Tha and Zarganar were released in a general amnesty in October 2021, just days after the announcement of the exclusion of coup leader Min Aung Hlaing from the ASEAN summit.<sup>85</sup> Despite being released by the military, political prisoners in Myanmar remain at risk of being rearrested any moment; many of those freed in the October general amnesty were swiftly detained once more, while others—including Zarganar—report continued restrictions on their liberties.<sup>86</sup> Maung Yu Py, however, was sentenced in a makeshift prison court for unlawful assembly and spreading false news under Section 505A to two years in prison, later reduced to one year.<sup>87</sup> This vague provision of “spreading false news” was added as Section 505A of the penal code within several weeks of the coup and was used to charge

---

78 Mon Mon Myat, “Is Civil Disobedience Myanmar’s New Normal?,” *The Irrawaddy*, February 15, 2021, [irrawaddy.com/opinion/civil-disobedience-myanmars-new-normal.html](https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/civil-disobedience-myanmars-new-normal.html); Tommy Walker, “How Myanmar’s Civil Disobedience Movement Is Pushing Back Against the Coup,” *Voice of America*, February 27, 2021, [voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific-how-myanmars-civil-disobedience-movement-pushing-back-against-coup/6202637.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific-how-myanmars-civil-disobedience-movement-pushing-back-against-coup/6202637.html); “PEN America Condemns Myanmar Military Regime’s Deadly Use of Force,” *PEN America*, March 4, 2021, [pen.org/press-release/pen-america-condemns-myanmar-military-regimes-deadly-use-of-force](https://www.pen.org/press-release/pen-america-condemns-myanmar-military-regimes-deadly-use-of-force)

79 “Wai Moe Naing, prominent leader of anti-coup movement, detained in Monywa,” *Myanmar Now*, April 15, 2021, [myanmar-now.org/en/news/wai-moe-naing-prominent-leader-of-anti-coup-movement-detained-in-monywa](https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/wai-moe-naing-prominent-leader-of-anti-coup-movement-detained-in-monywa); “Detained protest leader Wai Moe Naing meets with his lawyer for the first time, says mother,” *Myanmar Now*, May 29, 2021, [myanmar-now.org/en/news/detained-protest-leader-wai-moe-naing-meets-with-his-lawyer-for-the-first-time-says-mother](https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/detained-protest-leader-wai-moe-naing-meets-with-his-lawyer-for-the-first-time-says-mother)

80 “Torture Suspected in Death of Myanmar Poet Called a Voice of Resistance,” *Radio Free Asia*, May 11, 2021, [rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/poet-05112021185408.html](https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/poet-05112021185408.html)

81 “Body of arrested Myanmar poet Khet Thi returned to family with organs missing,” *The Guardian*, May 9, 2021, [theguardian.com/world/2021/may/10/body-of-arrested-myanmar-poet-khet-thi-returned-to-family-with-organs-missing](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/10/body-of-arrested-myanmar-poet-khet-thi-returned-to-family-with-organs-missing)

82 Mark Frary, “Myanmar keeps its poets locked up despite prisoner release,” *Index on Censorship*, July 2, 2021, [indexoncensorship.org/2021/07/myanmar-keeps-it-poets-locked-up-despite-prisoner-release](https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2021/07/myanmar-keeps-it-poets-locked-up-despite-prisoner-release); “More than 30 youth sentenced in closed court hearing inside Myeik Prison,” *Myanmar Now*, June 10, 2021, [myanmar-now.org/en/news/more-than-30-youth-sentenced-in-closed-court-hearing-inside-myeik-prison](https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/more-than-30-youth-sentenced-in-closed-court-hearing-inside-myeik-prison)

83 “Comedian Zarganar arrested by junta,” *Myanmar Now*, April 6, 2021, [myanmar-now.org/en/news/comedian-zarganar-arrested-by-junta](https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/comedian-zarganar-arrested-by-junta);

84 “Myanmar’s Junta Continues to Arrest Journalists,” *The Irrawaddy*, April 26, 2021, [irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmars-junta-continues-arrest-journalists.html](https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmars-junta-continues-arrest-journalists.html)

85 “Senior NLD Official, Prominent Myanmar Comedian Freed Alongside Activists, Journalists,” *The Irrawaddy*, October 19, 2021, [irrawaddy.com/news/burma/senior-nld-official-prominent-myanmar-comedian-freed-alongside-activists-journalists.html](https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/senior-nld-official-prominent-myanmar-comedian-freed-alongside-activists-journalists.html)

86 “Myanmar Amnesty Ends in Tears as Regime Rearrests Political Prisoners,” *The Irrawaddy*, October 21, 2021, [irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-amnesty-ends-in-tears-as-regime-rearrests-political-prisoners.html](https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-amnesty-ends-in-tears-as-regime-rearrests-political-prisoners.html)

87 Mark Frary, “Myanmar keeps its poets locked up despite prisoner release,” *Index on Censorship*, July 2, 2021, [indexoncensorship.org/2021/07/myanmar-keeps-it-poets-locked-up-despite-prisoner-release](https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2021/07/myanmar-keeps-it-poets-locked-up-despite-prisoner-release); “More than 30 youth sentenced in closed court hearing inside Myeik Prison,” *Myanmar Now*, June 10, 2021, [myanmar-now.org/en/news/more-than-30-youth-sentenced-in-closed-court-hearing-inside-myeik-prison](https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/more-than-30-youth-sentenced-in-closed-court-hearing-inside-myeik-prison)

a number of writers, public intellectuals, and journalists in 2021, including Maung Yu Py and American journalist Danny Fenster.<sup>88</sup>

Six members of the satirical poetry troupe Peacock Generation made up the bulk of Myanmar's cases counted in the Index prior to 2021, having been charged with incitement against the military and online defamation in 2019.<sup>89</sup> Three were released in 2020, and in a wave of pardons traditionally undertaken to mark *Thingyan* (the Burmese Buddhist New Year festival), **Paing Pyo Min**, **Zay Yar Lwin**, and **Paing Ye Thu** were released along with hundreds of other political prisoners in April 2021.<sup>90</sup> Regardless of this show of amnesty, even those previously released faced continued harassment: troupe member **Zaw Lin Htut**, released in October 2020, was arrested again in December 2021 and faces new charges of incitement.<sup>91</sup>

Apart from targeted arrests, lengthy detentions, and legal charges, writers and other prominent creative voices faced myriad threats in the fraught post-coup environment. After the first few weeks, as the police and military escalated their use of lethal violence against the



Though I have different views than you,  
I'll lay down my life for you all.

**K Za Win**

public during street demonstrations, at least three poets were killed as they were caught up in protests during the spring of 2021.<sup>92</sup> Poets **K Za Win** and **Myint Myint Zin** were murdered in March when the military opened fire on protests in which they were taking part, while poet, politician, and charity fundraiser Sein Win was doused in gasoline and burned to death by an unknown perpetrator in May.<sup>93</sup> In the years preceding the coup, Monywa poet and former Buddhist monk K Za Win was a land rights activist who was critical of the NLD; in 2015 he spent a year in prison for taking part in a rally for education reform.<sup>94</sup> In the wake of the coup, K Za Win was a leading figure in protests, defending the election results. Prior to his death, he wrote on Facebook, "Though I have different views than you, I'll lay down my life for you all."<sup>95</sup> Dozens more writers have had to

88 The Penal Code amendment adds a new crime under Section 505A of "causing fear" or "spreading false news" with a maximum sentence of three years in prison and a fine. "Myanmar Ruling Council Amends Treason, Seditious Laws to Protect Coup Makers," *The Irrawaddy*, February 16, 2021, [irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-ruling-council-amends-treason-sedition-laws-protect-coup-makers.html](http://irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-ruling-council-amends-treason-sedition-laws-protect-coup-makers.html); Han Thit, "Detained American journalist Danny Fenster hit with new charge under Immigration Act," *Myanmar Now*, November 4, 2021, [myanmar-now.org/en/news/detained-american-journalist-danny-fenster-hit-with-new-charge-under-immigration-act](http://myanmar-now.org/en/news/detained-american-journalist-danny-fenster-hit-with-new-charge-under-immigration-act)

89 "Freedom to Write Index 2020," PEN America, accessed March 21, 2022, [pen.org/report/freedom-to-write-index-2020](http://pen.org/report/freedom-to-write-index-2020); "Peacock Generation: Satirical poets jailed in Myanmar," *BBC News*, October 30, 2019, [bbc.com/news/world-asia-50238031](http://bbc.com/news/world-asia-50238031)

90 Zaw Zaw Htwe, "Jailed Satirical Performer Faces Extra Charge from Myanmar's Military," *The Irrawaddy*, December 16, 2020, [irrawaddy.com/news/burma/jailed-satirical-performer-faces-extra-charge-myanmars-military.html](http://irrawaddy.com/news/burma/jailed-satirical-performer-faces-extra-charge-myanmars-military.html); "Nine activists among more than 23,000 freed as part of Thingyan amnesty," *Myanmar Now*, April 17, 2021, [myanmar-now.org/en/news/nine-activists-among-more-than-23000-freed-as-part-of-thingyan-amnesty](http://myanmar-now.org/en/news/nine-activists-among-more-than-23000-freed-as-part-of-thingyan-amnesty)

91 Han Thit, "Two Yangon activists charged and sent to Insein Prison," January 17, 2022, <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/two-yangon-activists-charged-and-sent-to-insein-prison>

92 "Cities terrorised as junta escalates lethal violence against public on Armed Forces Day," *Myanmar Now*, March 27, 2021, [myanmar-now.org/en/news/cities-terrorised-as-junta-escalates-lethal-violence-against-public-on-armed-forces-day](http://myanmar-now.org/en/news/cities-terrorised-as-junta-escalates-lethal-violence-against-public-on-armed-forces-day); Hannah Beech, "Where Poets Are Being Killed and Jailed After a Military Coup," *The New York Times*, May 25, 2021, [nytimes.com/2021/05/25/world/asia/myanmar-poets.html](http://nytimes.com/2021/05/25/world/asia/myanmar-poets.html)

93 Rebecca Ratcliffe, "'Revolution dwells in the heart': Myanmar's poets cut down by the military," *The Guardian*, May 16, 2021, [theguardian.com/global-development/2021/may/17/revolution-dwells-in-the-heart-myanmars-poets-cut-down-by-the-military](http://theguardian.com/global-development/2021/may/17/revolution-dwells-in-the-heart-myanmars-poets-cut-down-by-the-military)

94 Joe Freeman, "Poets Are Among the 'Martyrs' in Myanmar Coup Protests," *Vice News*, March 10, 2021, [vice.com/en/article/xgzj94/poets-are-among-the-martyrs-in-myanmar-coup-protests](http://vice.com/en/article/xgzj94/poets-are-among-the-martyrs-in-myanmar-coup-protests)

95 Joe Freeman, "Poets Are Among the 'Martyrs' in Myanmar Coup Protests," *Vice News*, March 10, 2021, [vice.com/en/article/xgzj94/poets-are-among-the-martyrs-in-myanmar-coup-protests](http://vice.com/en/article/xgzj94/poets-are-among-the-martyrs-in-myanmar-coup-protests)



Protesters have publicly resisted military rule in creative and non-traditional ways since the February 1 coup. *Photo by Maung Sun*

flee into hiding within Myanmar, or into temporary exile outside the country, for their safety and to ensure they remain free to continue their writing and anti-coup activism.

Broad restrictions on free expression and the ability to access and share information and commentary, particularly online, have cast a chill on public discourse since the coup. Widespread and lengthy internet and communications shutdowns, coupled with increased surveillance and the ramped up use of laws criminalizing online activity, were also used to silence influential voices. The military demonstrated its willingness to

wield internet shutdowns as a means of control the first day of the coup, on February 1, implementing a nationwide shutdown just as the news of the military coup started to break.<sup>96</sup> The junta then blocked social media platforms and websites, including widely used platforms such as Facebook and Twitter; took control of telecommunications infrastructure, including mobile service operators; and dramatically ramped up its surveillance capabilities.<sup>97</sup> Many of these restrictions remained in place at year's end, with plans in place to further criminalize the use of applications to evade censorship and surveillance.

96 "Internet disrupted in Myanmar amid apparent military uprising," *NetBlocks*, January 31, 2021, [netblocks.org/reports/internet-disrupted-in-myanmar-amid-apparent-military-uprising-JBZrmlB6](https://netblocks.org/reports/internet-disrupted-in-myanmar-amid-apparent-military-uprising-JBZrmlB6)

97 "Myanmar: Freedom on the Net 2021," *Freedom House*, accessed March 15, 2022, [freedomhouse.org/country/myanmar/freedom-net/2021](https://freedomhouse.org/country/myanmar/freedom-net/2021)





**Status: Imprisoned**

Poet, political satirist, and professor Maung Thar Cho has been detained since day one of the military coup in Myanmar.

## MAUNG THAR CHO

**Literary Writer, Scholar**

### 📍 Myanmar

Maung Thar Cho is a writer, professor, and political satirist who is widely known for his use of satire as a way to address contentious political and social issues in Myanmar. A professor of literature and history at the Yangon Training College, he is a prolific writer, having authored over 70 books, including poetry, essays, and short stories, sometimes publishing under the pseudonym Jack (Kungyangon). Maung Thar Cho had gained a reputation in recent years for his literary speeches delivered across the country that became popular on social media. He was one of several writers and creative artists to be detained on the first day of the coup, at the start of what has become an ongoing crackdown on free expression and civil liberties in Myanmar.

In the early morning of February 1, 2021, before the military had officially announced its takeover of Myanmar's government, plainclothes military authorities sat for three hours in an unmarked van outside the suburban home of Maung Thar Cho. At approximately 7:30 a.m., soldiers came to the door, blindfolded him, and arrested him, telling his family that he would only be taken for a short while. More than a year later, he continues to be held in Insein Prison, undergoing periods of solitary confinement and denied access to adequate medical care.

On February 22, 2022, Maung Thar Cho was sentenced to two years in prison with hard labor under section

505(a) of Myanmar's penal code, a section that criminalizes comments that “cause fear” or spread “false news,” frequently used by the military junta to punish those who criticize the coup. The charge reportedly stems from two articles that were published in 2020, a year before the coup took place—which, according to his lawyer, he denies writing.

---

ကမ္ဘာတွင် သောသောညံ့လျက်။ သို့သော် မြန်မာစာနယ်ဇင်းတွေ အပေါ်မှာတော့ ဖော်ပြ ဖို့ရာ မဖြစ်နိုင်သေး။ မုန်တိုင်းသားကောင် လူထု၏ မယုံကြည်နိုင်လောက်စရာ ပြိုလဲနေ သည့် လူမှုဘဝမြင်ကွင်းများ၊ လူ့အဖြစ် ဆက်လက်ရှင်သန်နေဖို့ ကျားကုတ်ကျားခဲ ဖက် တွယ်ရုန်းကန်နေရပုံများကို ဓာတ်ပုံကလေးတစ်ပုံ ဖော်ပြလိုက်ဖို့၊ သတင်းကလေးတစ်ပုဒ် ရေးသားလိုက်ဖို့ ဆိုသည်ကပင်လျှင် အဟန့်အတား အပိတ်အဆို့များနှင့် မုန်တိုင်းထန်သော ကာလကြီးပဲ မဟုတ်ပါလား။ (စာ- ၂၃၀)

မောင်သာချို တစ္ဆေလှိုင်းများ (စိတ်ကူးချိုချိုစာပေ၊ ၂၀၂၀၊ ဒီဇင်ဘာလ၊ ပထမအကြိမ်)

*What happened makes ‘woe’ to the world. However, it is not yet possible to cover it at the Burmese press. Incredible collapsing scenes of the cyclone victims who are hardly struggling to survive as human beings! Isn’t it a great obstacles for writing a piece of this kind of news itself in the times of cyclone?*  
– Maung Thar Cho

---

Maung Thar Cho is one on a growing list of writers, poets, and activists who have been jailed for their peaceful criticism of the military junta and its violent crackdown on free expression. Also detained on the first day of the coup were writers Than Myint Aung and Htin Lin Oo, who have both been handed sentences of three years in prison under Section 505(a) of the penal code for allegedly criticizing the junta online. Other writers jailed for their peaceful expression of political views in opposition to the coup include Mya Aye, who was sentenced to two years in prison under section 505(c) for incitement, and Wai Moe Naing, who is currently held in unjust detention.



**Status: Imprisoned**

Arash Ganji was targeted for his membership in the Iranian Writers' Association and imprisoned for translating a Kurdish history book.

## ARASH GANJI

**Literary Writer, Translator**

### 📍 Iran

Arash Ganji is an Iranian writer and translator imprisoned in October 2021 and sentenced to 11 years on national security charges related to his translation of a book about a Kurdish-led uprising in northern Syria titled *A Small Key Can Open a Big Door*. He was targeted by the Iranian government due to his membership in the Iranian Writers' Association (IWA), which advocates for freedom of expression and an end to censorship.

The IWA was originally founded in 1968 and grew in membership to 10,000 writers before being banned shortly after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Hundreds of IWA members were executed in state-sanctioned serial murders from 1988–98. In the 1990s, a group of writers revived the IWA; from the beginning, the government has targeted its members with persecution, harassment, and even targeted murders.

---

“All of us, who are not linked to reactionary powers, know that freedom of expression in the mass media of these countries is only allowed when the point of view expressed, or the voices heard, match the interests of those in power.”

– Interview with PEN Sydney

---

At the time of his arrest on December 22, 2019, Ganji was serving as secretary of the IWA. Agents from the Ministry of Intelligence raided his apartment and brought him to the notorious Evin Prison, where political dissidents are often detained and interrogated with abusive techniques. At Evin, Ganji was interrogated and held in solitary confinement for a month and released in early January. In June 2020, at his first court hearing, the judge increased his bail to 3 billion toman (approximately 700,000 USD), forcing him to return to Evin Prison for six days until he could afford to post bail.

On December 28, 2020, he was sentenced to 11 years in prison: five years for “colluding against national security,” five years for “membership and cooperation with an anti-regime group,” and one year for “spreading propaganda against the regime.” After 10 months of knowing that he could be imprisoned on these convictions at any moment, he was formally summoned to report to Evin Prison on October 28, 2021.

Arash Ganji is one of dozens of Iranian writers targeted by the government for their writing. They have little legal recourse to fight these unjust convictions: the judge in Ganji’s trial, Judge Mohammadreza Amoozad, is known for issuing sentences violating the human rights of protesters and civil rights activists. On January 24, 2022, PEN America submitted a complaint with the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention seeking a ruling finding the unjust detention of Arash Ganji and other IWA leaders to be in violation of Iranian domestic and international law and asking for their immediate release and compensation.

# IRAN

In **Iran**, the number of jailed writers in 2021 increased from 19 to 21, but there was movement in a number of cases, with the releases—either temporary or permanent—of a number of political prisoners, while other writers and intellectuals were either newly detained or summoned to start serving sentences already imposed previously. PEN America’s 2011 Freedom to Write Award honoree **Nasrin Sotoudeh**, who undertook a grueling hunger strike in late 2020 to protest poor prison conditions, was released on medical parole on July 21, 2021, and remained out of prison at year’s end due to her precarious health condition, though this dispensation is subject to regular review.<sup>98</sup> Prison also remains a revolving door for prominent critical voices such as journalist and activist **Narges Mohammadi**, who was released on October 8, 2020, after enduring eight and a half years in prison for “forming an illegal group.”<sup>99</sup> An Iranian court again convicted Mohammadi not six months later, in late May 2021, on new propaganda and defamation charges, and sentenced her to 30 months in prison, 80 lashes, and a fine.<sup>100</sup> Nevertheless, she continued to speak out

at public virtual events facilitated by organizations based overseas, as well as engaging in activism in Iran.<sup>101</sup> She was arrested while attending a peaceful commemoration in November and held in Evin Prison in solitary confinement through year’s end; additional charges were levied against her in December.<sup>102</sup> After being transferred to Qarchak Prison in January 2022, Mohammadi was handed down an additional sentence of eight years in prison and 70 lashes.<sup>103</sup>

Throughout the year, the crackdown on the independent Iranian Writers’ Association (IWA) continued; the IWA has been targeted in the past due to their insistence on upholding the rights to free expression and association, as well as standing in solidarity with other writers under threat. IWA leaders **Baktash Abtin**, a poet and filmmaker, writer **Keyvan Bajan**, and writer **Reza Khandan Mahabadi**, were convicted of threatening national security in May 2019 and summoned into prison in September 2020.<sup>104</sup> They remained in Evin prison throughout the year, battling COVID-19 infections and medical maltreatment.<sup>105</sup> In September 2021 PEN America awarded the 2021 PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write

---

98 “PEN Honors Nasrin Sotoudeh with the 2011 PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award,” PEN America, October 26, 2012, [pen.org/multimedia/pen-honors-nasrin-sotoudeh-with-the-2011-penbarbara-goldsmith-freedom-to-write-award](https://pen.org/multimedia/pen-honors-nasrin-sotoudeh-with-the-2011-penbarbara-goldsmith-freedom-to-write-award); “Jailed Iran human rights lawyer hospitalised after hunger strike,” *Al Jazeera*, September 20, 2020, [aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/20/jailed-iran-human-rights-lawyer-hospitalised-after-hunger-strike](https://aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/20/jailed-iran-human-rights-lawyer-hospitalised-after-hunger-strike); “Iran Releases Rights Lawyer Sotoudeh For Five-Day Health Treatment Leave,” *Radio Free Europe*, July 22, 2021, [rferl.org/a/iran-sotoudeh-health-release/31371837.html](https://rferl.org/a/iran-sotoudeh-health-release/31371837.html)

99 “Iran rights activist Narges Mohammadi freed from jail,” *Al Jazeera*, October 8, 2020, [aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/8/iran-rights-activist-mohammadi-freed-after-sentence-cut](https://aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/8/iran-rights-activist-mohammadi-freed-after-sentence-cut)

100 “Iran sentences activist to 30 months jail, flogging,” *France 24*, May 27, 2021, [france24.com/en/live-news/20210527-iran-sentences-activist-to-30-months-jail-flogging](https://france24.com/en/live-news/20210527-iran-sentences-activist-to-30-months-jail-flogging)

101 “White Torture: The Infamy of Solitary Confinement in Iran,” Stanford University Iranian Studies Program, accessed March 22, 2022, [iranian-studies.stanford.edu/events/lecture-series/white-torture-infamy-solitary-confinement-iran](https://iranian-studies.stanford.edu/events/lecture-series/white-torture-infamy-solitary-confinement-iran)

102 “Narges Mohammadi Arrested by Security Forces in Karaj During Ceremony Honoring Ebrahim Ketabdar,” *Human Rights Activist News Agency*, November 16, 2021, [en-hrana.org/narges-mohammadi-arrested-by-security-forces-in-karaj-during-ceremony-honoring-ebrahim-ketabdar](https://en-hrana.org/narges-mohammadi-arrested-by-security-forces-in-karaj-during-ceremony-honoring-ebrahim-ketabdar); “Iranians Launch Twitter Campaign For Activist In Solitary Confinement,” *Iran International*, December 28, 2021, [iranintl.com/en/202112288671](https://iranintl.com/en/202112288671)

103 “Narges Mohammadi Transferred to Qarchak Prison,” *Human Rights Activist News Agency*, January 20, 2022, [en-hrana.org/narges-mohammadi-transferred-to-qarchak-prison](https://en-hrana.org/narges-mohammadi-transferred-to-qarchak-prison); “Rights Activist Narges Mohammadi Sentenced to Another Eight Years in Prison,” *Center for Human Rights in Iran*, January 24, 2022, [iranhumanrights.org/2022/01/rights-activist-narges-mohammadi-sentenced-to-another-eight-years-in-prison](https://iranhumanrights.org/2022/01/rights-activist-narges-mohammadi-sentenced-to-another-eight-years-in-prison)

104 “Three Writers Tried in Iran on ‘National Security’ Charges,” *Center for Human Rights in Iran*, May 3, 2019, [iranhumanrights.org/2019/05/three-writers-tried-in-iran-on-national-security-charges](https://iranhumanrights.org/2019/05/three-writers-tried-in-iran-on-national-security-charges); “Three Iranian Authors Imprisoned In Tehran’s Notorious Jail,” *Radio Farda*, September 27, 2020, [en.radiofarda.com/a/three-iranian-authors-imprisoned-in-tehran-s-notorious-jail/30860892.html](https://en.radiofarda.com/a/three-iranian-authors-imprisoned-in-tehran-s-notorious-jail/30860892.html)

105 Niloufar Rostami, “Weekly Review of Censorship: Jailed Writers Denied Medical Help,” *IranWire*, February 15, 2021, [iranwire.com/en/features/68946](https://iranwire.com/en/features/68946); PEN America, “After COVID-19 Infection, PEN America Demands Iran Release Imprisoned Writers,” press release, December 9, 2021, [pen.org/press-release/after-covid-19-infection-pen-america-demands-iran-release-imprisoned-writers](https://pen.org/press-release/after-covid-19-infection-pen-america-demands-iran-release-imprisoned-writers)

Award to these three writers, calling attention to their unjust imprisonment and increasingly dangerous prison conditions. Iran refused to release these writers, and after Abtin contracted COVID-19 in early December, authorities refused him urgently needed medical care.<sup>106</sup> That delay would prove fatal; Abtin was hospitalized and battling for his life on a ventilator by year's end, and died in the hospital—but still in state custody—on January 8, 2022, his death a tragic testament to the costs of the Iranian state's callous repression.<sup>107</sup> Writer and translator **Arash Ganji**, also an IWA member, was sentenced in December 2020 to 11 years in prison on national security charges related to his translation of a book on a Kurdish-led uprising in northern Syria.<sup>108</sup> He was summoned to begin his prison term in October 2021.<sup>109</sup> **Alireza Nouri**, an IWA member sentenced in 2017 on a blasphemy charge for his poetry, was arrested by police in the city of Hamedan in February 2021 to start serving his two-year sentence.<sup>110</sup> Meanwhile, IWA members and poets **Milad Jannat** and **Amin Moradi** were conditionally released in July and December 2020, respectively.<sup>111</sup>

Writers who focus on advocating for ethnic or religious minority rights continue to be particularly

Writers who focus on advocating for ethnic or religious minority rights continue to be particularly targeted in Iran.

targeted in Iran. Examples include **Akbar Azad**, a poet, journalist, and advocate for Azeri language and culture, who was arrested in August 2021 after attempting to renew his bail on a previous charge; he was eventually conditionally released after posting a 500 million tomans (US\$118,300) bail in September.<sup>112</sup> Meanwhile, the courts upheld a five-year sentence on national security charges against **Zahra Mohammadi**, a Kurdish-language rights advocate, in February 2021; she was summoned to prison to begin serving this sentence in January 2022.<sup>113</sup> Religious minorities were also targeted. **Touraj Amini**, a Baha'i writer and scholar sentenced on charges of "propaganda against the regime" in June 2020, was summoned to serve his six-month sentence in January 2021 and served his time in Karaj Prison before being released in July.<sup>114</sup> **Yasin Qasemi Bajd**, a Sunni Muslim writer and scholar, was arrested in Zahedan in February and held for about a month before being released on bail,

106 "Open Letter to Supreme Leader of Iran on Baktash Abtin," PEN America, January 7, 2022, [pen.org/open-letter-supreme-leader-iran-baktash-abtin](https://pen.org/open-letter-supreme-leader-iran-baktash-abtin)

107 PEN America, "PEN America Mourns 'Utterly Preventable Death' of Baktash Abtin," press release, January 8, 2022, [pen.org/press-release/pen-america-mourns-utterly-preventable-death-of-baktash-abtin](https://pen.org/press-release/pen-america-mourns-utterly-preventable-death-of-baktash-abtin)

108 "Arash Ganji, a Member of the Iranian Writers' Association, was Sentenced to 11 Years in Prison," The Campaign to Defend Political and Civil Prisoners, January 1, 2021, [campaign.info/archive/52050.html](https://campaign.info/archive/52050.html)

109 PEN America, "Writer and Translator Arash Ganji Summoned to Serve Prison Sentence in Latest Assault on Free Expression in Iran," press release, October 19, 2021, [pen.org/press-release/arash-ganji-summoned-serve-prison-sentence-iran](https://pen.org/press-release/arash-ganji-summoned-serve-prison-sentence-iran)

110 "Alireza Nouri," Journalism Is Not a Crime, accessed March 22, 2022, [journalismisnotacrime.com/en/wall/alirezanouri](https://journalismisnotacrime.com/en/wall/alirezanouri)

111 "Milad Jannat, a member of the Writers' Association, was released on bail," The Campaign to Defend Political and Civil Prisoners, July 29, 2020, [campaign.info/archive/47806.html](https://campaign.info/archive/47806.html); Niloufar Rostami, "Weekly Review of Censorship: Jailed Writers Denied Medical Help," *IranWire*, February 15, 2021, [iranwire.com/en/features/68946](https://iranwire.com/en/features/68946)

112 "Akbar Azad was sent on leave from Greater Tehran Prison," Human Rights Activist News Agency, September 25, 2021, [hra-news.org/2021/hranews/a-31479](https://hra-news.org/2021/hranews/a-31479)

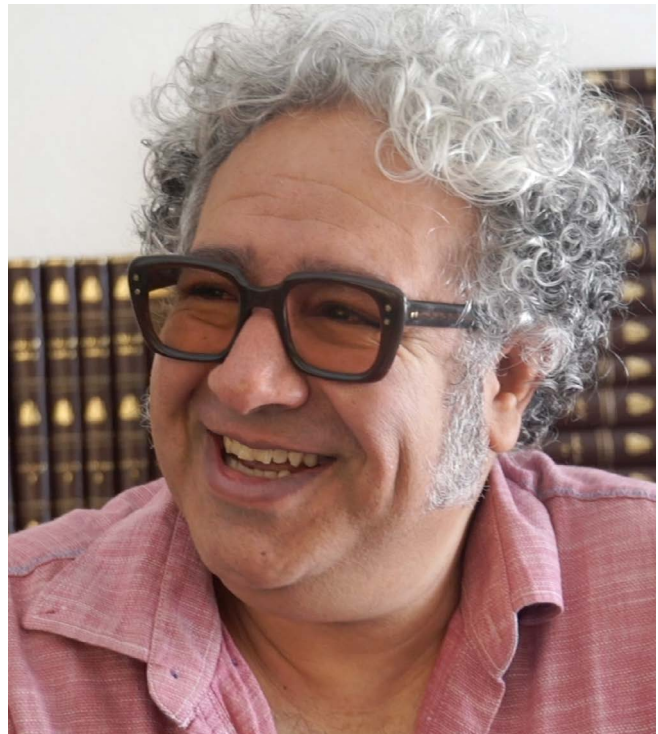
113 "Zara Mohammadi's 5 Year Sentence Upheld for Teaching Kurdish Language," Iran Human Rights, February 14, 2021, [iranhr.net/en/articles/4620](https://iranhr.net/en/articles/4620); "Kurdish language teacher Zahra Mohammadi, civil activist Shadi Gilak taken to prison," The Women's Committee of the National Council of Resistance of Iran, January 8, 2022, [women.ncr-iran.org/2022/01/08/kurdish-language-teacher-zahra](https://women.ncr-iran.org/2022/01/08/kurdish-language-teacher-zahra)

114 "Baha'i researcher and writer Touraj Amini sentenced to imprisonment and exile," Human Rights Activist News Agency, June 24, 2020, [hra-news.org/2020/hranews/a-25104](https://hra-news.org/2020/hranews/a-25104); Niloufar Rostami, "Weekly Review of Censorship: A Baha'i Historian Jailed Because of His Faith," *IranWire*, February 1, 2021, [iranwire.com/en/features/68792](https://iranwire.com/en/features/68792); "With the end of the sentence period; Touraj Amini was released from Karaj Central Prison," Human Rights Activist News Agency, July 28, 2021, [hra-news.org/2021/hranews/a-31114](https://hra-news.org/2021/hranews/a-31114)



**Status (left to right): Conditional Release, Death in Custody, Imprisoned**

Writers, IWA board members, and 2021 PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write honorees Keyvan Bajan, Baktash Abtin, and Reza Khandan Mahabadi were imprisoned for peaceful opposition to Iranian state censorship. *Photo by Iranian Writers' Association*



**Status: Death in Custody**

Poet and filmmaker Baktash Abtin died on January 8, 2022 after a fatal delay in medical care for COVID-19, which he contracted in Evin Prison in late December 2021. *Photo by Iranian Writers' Association*

facing a slew of charges that included blasphemy and also propaganda against the state.<sup>115</sup> His trial started in May, and by September he had been acquitted of some of the pending charges, while others remained.<sup>116</sup>

Criticism of Iranian authorities or government policies can also bring about harsh penalties; the charges most commonly brought in such cases are of threatening national security or “propaganda against the state.”

**Toomaj Salehi**, a songwriter and rapper known for his songs protesting state repression and injustice, was arrested in September 2021 and detained for a week before being charged with propaganda and then released on bail.<sup>117</sup> In January, he was handed a fine and six months’ imprisonment, suspended for a year.<sup>118</sup> Similarly, **Aram Fathi**, a writer, poet, and activist who had previously faced harassment from the authorities, was arrested in June 2021, reportedly

115 “Sunni writer Yasin Qasemi Bajd was released on bail after a court hearing,” *IranWire*, February 8, 2021, [iranwire.com/az/special-features-1/68869](https://iranwire.com/az/special-features-1/68869); “Announcing the date of Yasin Ghasemi Bejd’s trial,” *Rissmaan*, accessed March 22, 2022, [rissmaan.com/fa/id-18487/?lang=en](https://rissmaan.com/fa/id-18487/?lang=en)

116 “Daily Brief of Human Rights Violation in Iran May 11, 2021,” *Javanehha*, May 11, 2021, [en.javanehha.com/2021/05/daily-brief-of-human-rights-violation-in-iran-may-11-2021](https://en.javanehha.com/2021/05/daily-brief-of-human-rights-violation-in-iran-may-11-2021); Human Rights Activist News Agency (@hra\_news), “#ياسين\_قاسمي\_بجِد”, writer, poet and translator, was acquitted by Branch 102 of the Criminal Court,” Twitter status, [twitter.com/hra\\_news/status/1433397471074467842?s=20&t=4zmmhDhVHZs7X9WmpZVnRIQ](https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1433397471074467842?s=20&t=4zmmhDhVHZs7X9WmpZVnRIQ)

117 “Protest rapper Tomaj Salehi ‘arrested at home,’” *Radio Farda*, September 23, 2021, [radiofarda.com/a/iranian-rapper-toomaj-salehi-arrest/31459906.html](https://radiofarda.com/a/iranian-rapper-toomaj-salehi-arrest/31459906.html); Golnaz Esfandiari, “‘We Are The Dead Who Can’t Think Of Dying’: Iranian Rapper Charged For Criticizing Regime,” *Radio Free Europe*, September 22, 2021, [rferl.org/a/iran-rapper-charged-propaganda/31473007.html](https://rferl.org/a/iran-rapper-charged-propaganda/31473007.html); “Iran Releases Dissident Rapper On Bail After Social Media Outcry,” *Iran International*, September 22, 2021, [old.iranintl.com/en/iran-in-brief/iran-releases-dissident-rapper-bail-after-social-media-outcry](https://old.iranintl.com/en/iran-in-brief/iran-releases-dissident-rapper-bail-after-social-media-outcry)

118 “Dissident rapper Toomaj Salehi sentenced to prison and fine,” *Iran Human Rights Monitor*, January 25, 2022, [iran-hrm.com/2022/01/25/dissident-rapper-toomaj-salehi-sentenced-to-prison-and-fine](https://iran-hrm.com/2022/01/25/dissident-rapper-toomaj-salehi-sentenced-to-prison-and-fine)

because he called for a boycott of the presidential elections.<sup>119</sup> He was subject to mistreatment and denied a lawyer while in detention, but was released on bail after 11 days; he still faces trial on charges of national security and propaganda against the state.<sup>120</sup>

**Nima Ghasemi**, a writer and scholar, was arrested in February 2021 and held in solitary confinement for just over a month before being released on bail.<sup>121</sup> In November he was handed down a sentence of four years and eight months on charges of propaganda against the state, for his articles on sensitive political and social themes, including foreign policy and economic corruption.<sup>122</sup>

A common pattern across many cases in Iran involves an initial period of detention before being charged, during which an individual is often held incommunicado and without access to legal counsel or their family members; in a number of cases, there is also a lag between a sentence being handed down by a judge and the convicted individual being summoned to serve their sentence in prison. Those serving prison terms remained at high risk to their health due to poor prison conditions, ongoing COVID-19 outbreaks inside Iran's jails in which many political prisoners have been infected, and inadequate medical care being given to prisoners, even those with serious

existing health conditions such as Baktash Abtin and Arash Ganji.<sup>123</sup> A number of dissident voices, such as Narges Mohammadi and the IWA, were seemingly penalized for expressing their solidarity with other activists, including those killed during street protests, or those who had died in prison.<sup>124</sup> In these cases, their only "crime" was seemingly commemorating the actions and words of other writers and activists. As the year came to an end and into early 2022, movement on the talks to resurrect the Iran nuclear agreement led to new threats against writers and scholars, as political prisoners who are dual nationals and who had previously been conditionally released were summoned back to prison.<sup>125</sup>

A number of dissident voices, such as Narges Mohammadi and members of the Iranian Writers' Association, were seemingly penalized for expressing solidarity. Their only apparent "crime" was commemorating the actions and words of other writers and activists.

## TURKEY

In **Turkey**, 18 writers were detained or imprisoned during 2021—a decrease from 2020, when the government imprisoned 25 writers—making Turkey the

---

119 "Aram Fathi," Journalism Is Not a Crime, accessed March 22, 2022, [journalismisnotacrime.com/en/wall/aramfathi](https://journalismisnotacrime.com/en/wall/aramfathi); "Kurdish poet and writer, Aram Fathi from Marivan arrested by Iranian Security Services," Hengaw Organization for Human Rights, June 17, 2021, [hengaw.net/en/news/kurdish-poet-and-writer-aram-fathi-from-marivan-arrested-by-iranian-security-services](https://hengaw.net/en/news/kurdish-poet-and-writer-aram-fathi-from-marivan-arrested-by-iranian-security-services)

120 "Aram Fathi," Journalism Is Not a Crime, accessed March 22, 2022, [journalismisnotacrime.com/en/wall/aramfathi](https://journalismisnotacrime.com/en/wall/aramfathi); "Kurdish poet and writer, Aram Fathi from Marivan arrested by Iranian Security Services," Hengaw Organization for Human Rights, June 17, 2021, [hengaw.net/en/news/kurdish-poet-and-writer-aram-fathi-from-marivan-arrested-by-iranian-security-service](https://hengaw.net/en/news/kurdish-poet-and-writer-aram-fathi-from-marivan-arrested-by-iranian-security-service)

121 "Nima Ghasemi," Journalism Is Not a Crime, accessed March 22, 2022, [journalismisnotacrime.com/en/wall/nimaghasemi](https://journalismisnotacrime.com/en/wall/nimaghasemi); "Nima Ghasemi was released on bail," *IranWire*, March 14, 2021, [iranwire.com/fa/jinac/47066](https://iranwire.com/fa/jinac/47066)

122 "Writer and Philosophy Researcher Nima Ghasemi Sentenced to Four years and Eight Months," Human Rights Activists News Agency, November 5, 2021, [en-hrana.org/writer-and-philosophy-researcher-nima-ghasemi-sentenced-to-four-years-and-eight-months](https://en-hrana.org/writer-and-philosophy-researcher-nima-ghasemi-sentenced-to-four-years-and-eight-months)

123 "The Writers' Association of Iran demanded the release of Arash Ganji," Human Rights Activists News Agency, December 25, 2019, [hra-news.org/statements/a-447](https://hra-news.org/statements/a-447); "Baktash Abtin went to 'artificial coma'; Iranian Writers Association: The government is responsible for his life," BBC News, January 2, 2022, [bbc.com/persian/iran-59850987](https://bbc.com/persian/iran-59850987)

124 "Narges Mohammadi Arrested by Security Forces in Karaj During Ceremony Honoring Ebrahim Ketabdar," Human Rights Activists News Agency, November 16, 2021, [en-hrana.org/narges-mohammadi-arrested-by-security-forces-in-karaj-during-ceremony-honoring-ebrahim-ketabdar](https://en-hrana.org/narges-mohammadi-arrested-by-security-forces-in-karaj-during-ceremony-honoring-ebrahim-ketabdar)

125 "Nuclear deal unlikely unless Iran releases US prisoners: Report," *Al Jazeera*, January 24, 2022, [aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/24/iran-nuclear-deal-unlikely-without-us-prisoner-release-report](https://aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/24/iran-nuclear-deal-unlikely-without-us-prisoner-release-report); "Iran: French academic Fariba Adelkhah back to jail, supporters say, as Paris urges immediate release," *The New Arab*, January 12, 2022, [english.alaraby.co.uk/news/french-academic-adelkhah-back-iran-jail-supporters](https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/french-academic-adelkhah-back-iran-jail-supporters)



fifth-worst jailer of writers and public intellectuals in 2021.<sup>126</sup> This drop in detentions represents a change in tactics to punish writers for their work, as writers and artists still reported a closed space for free expression during 2021.<sup>127</sup> Turkish authorities remain highly litigious, frequently retrying cases previously acquitted or slapping defendants with additional charges. While legal defense and court appearances are costly, these retrials have thankfully proceeded without detentions. However, as illuminated in the leak of an alleged “hit list” discovered by German police, Turkish writers and columnists have reason to fear physical threats orchestrated by the Turkish government.<sup>128</sup>

In a large part, the writers jailed in Turkey during 2021 were those first targeted five years ago in the crackdown on academics, writers, journalists, and human rights activists that followed the failed July 2016 coup against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.<sup>129</sup> Writers and columnists from the newspapers *Zaman* and *Taraf* continue to face accusations of association with the U.S.-based religious leader Fethullah Gülen, a former ally of Erdoğan who Erdoğan has systematically blamed for the coup attempt.<sup>130</sup> At least eight writers and columnists spent time in jail

during 2021 as part of these accusations. In June, PEN America released *Cracking Down on Creative Voices: Turkey’s Silencing of Writers, Intellectuals, and Artists Five Years After the Failed Coup (2021)*, exploring the ongoing repression of writers and the creative community in the country. Even five years after the coup attempt, Turkish writers and artists reported a continued environment of looming threats and uncertainty, in which they are forced to wonder if their current writing—or even years-old social media posts—will suddenly land them in jail.<sup>131</sup>

Despite the Turkish government denying imprisoning any journalist for their writing or opinions, a leaked government document from May 2021 contained a list of journalists imprisoned in the country during the year.<sup>132</sup> Former *Bugün* columnist **Gültekin Avcı** remained behind bars serving a 2020 sentence of life imprisonment, and columnists associated with the newspaper *Zaman* continued to serve their sentences handed down in 2018, including **Ali Ünal**.<sup>133</sup> Other *Zaman* columnists completed their prison sentences in 2021 and were released, including writers **Emre Soncan**, **Hanım Büşra Erdal**, and **Mustafa Erkan Acar**.<sup>134</sup> Still other writers have been caught in protracted trials extending into their fifth year, with

---

126 “Freedom to Write Index 2020,” PEN America, accessed March 21, 2022, [pen.org/report/freedom-to-write-index-2020](https://pen.org/report/freedom-to-write-index-2020)

127 To read testimonials and interviews with writers and artists on the situation for free expression in Turkey, see: “Cracking Down on Creative Voices: Turkey’s Silencing of Writers, Intellectuals, and Artists Five Years After the Failed Coup,” PEN America, accessed March 22, 2022, [pen.org/cracking-down-creative-voices-turkey](https://pen.org/cracking-down-creative-voices-turkey)

128 Mitchell Prothero, “German Prosecutors Launch Investigation After ‘Hit List’ of Turkish Dissidents Discovered,” VICE News, July 30, 2021, [vice.com/en/article/k78k39/german-prosecutors-investigate-organised-criminals-after-hit-list-of-turkish-dissidents-discovered](https://www.vice.com/en/article/k78k39/german-prosecutors-investigate-organised-criminals-after-hit-list-of-turkish-dissidents-discovered)

129 “Cracking Down on Creative Voices: Turkey’s Silencing of Writers, Intellectuals, and Artists Five Years After the Failed Coup,” PEN America, accessed March 22, 2022, [pen.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/cracking-down-creative-voices-turkey-FINAL.pdf](https://pen.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/cracking-down-creative-voices-turkey-FINAL.pdf)

130 See e.g., Dexter Filkins, “Turkey’s Thirty-Year Coup,” *The New Yorker*, October 10, 2016, [newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/17/turkeys-thirty-year-coup](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/17/turkeys-thirty-year-coup)

131 “Cracking Down on Creative Voices: Turkey’s Silencing of Writers, Intellectuals, and Artists Five Years After the Failed Coup,” PEN America, accessed March 14, 2022, [pen.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/cracking-down-creative-voices-turkey-FINAL.pdf](https://pen.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/cracking-down-creative-voices-turkey-FINAL.pdf)

132 “In a secret document, Turkey admitted jailing dozens of journalists while sticking to policy of denial in public,” Stockholm Center for Freedom, May 12, 2021, [stockholmcf.org/in-a-secret-document-turkey-admitted-jailing-dozens-of-journalists-while-sticking-to-policy-of-denial-in-public](https://stockholmcf.org/in-a-secret-document-turkey-admitted-jailing-dozens-of-journalists-while-sticking-to-policy-of-denial-in-public)

133 “Gültekin Avcı,” Committee to Protect Journalists, accessed March 22, 2022, [cpj.org/data/people/gultekin-avci](https://cpj.org/data/people/gultekin-avci); “Ali Ünal,” Committee to Protect Journalists, accessed March 22, 2022, [cpj.org/data/people/ali-unal](https://cpj.org/data/people/ali-unal)

134 “Freedom of Expression and the Press in Turkey - 312,” Expression Interrupted, accessed March 22, 2022, [expressioninterrupted.com/freedom-of-expression-and-the-press-in-turkey-312](https://expressioninterrupted.com/freedom-of-expression-and-the-press-in-turkey-312); “Hanım Büşra Erdal,” Expression Interrupted, accessed March 22, 2022, [expressioninterrupted.com/hanim-busra-erdal](https://expressioninterrupted.com/hanim-busra-erdal); “Mustafa Erkan Acar,” Committee to Protect Journalists, accessed March 22, 2022, [cpj.org/data/people/mustafa-erkan-acar](https://cpj.org/data/people/mustafa-erkan-acar)

**A number of dissident voices, such as Narges Mohammadi and members of the Iranian Writers' Association, were seemingly penalized for expressing solidarity. Their only apparent "crime" was commemorating the actions and words of other writers and activists.**

retrials and hearing dates repeatedly rescheduled in order to harass the writers in court and impede their ongoing writing. Two columnists **Cemal Azmi Kalyoncu** and **Gökçe Fırat Çulhaoğlu**, who were released in 2020 after an Istanbul High Court overturned their convictions for a lack of evidence, continue to face retrials into 2022.<sup>135</sup> One author was able to escape this yearslong vicious cycle after an external intervention: when the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled that the detention of writer and journalist **Ahmet Altan**, first arrested in 2016, violated his right to free expression, Turkey's Court of Cassation immediately overturned Altan's guilty verdict and released him the next day, on April 14, 2021.<sup>136</sup> Despite this, Altan has had to appear for

hearings during 2021 in a separate case: he faces charges for "insulting a public official" in his 2008 column article published in now-defunct *Taraf*.<sup>137</sup>

A number of other Turkish writers and public intellectuals have been targeted for their work and writings on cultural exchange. Prominent philanthropist and publisher **Mehmet Osman Kavala** has been detained since late 2017, when he was arrested while setting up a cultural center for integrating Syrian refugees into the local community.<sup>138</sup> His trial extended through 2021, despite international condemnation of Kavala's ongoing persecution escalating since 2019.<sup>139</sup> By December 2021, the Council of Europe voted to launch infringement proceedings against Turkey for ignoring their 2019 ruling demanding Kavala's release.<sup>140</sup> Another author targeted for her work on cultural heritage, Kurdish writer and poet **Meral Şimşek**, has written about the social realities for Kurds in Turkey in four published works and, most notably, her short story "Arzela."<sup>141</sup> This short story is part of the *Kurdistan + 100* anthology exploring how contemporary Kurdish writers envision what a Kurdish state could look like in 2046.<sup>142</sup> Turkish authorities sentenced Şimşek to 15

135 "Turkey releases 6 journalists after top appeals court overturns sentences," Stockholm Center for Freedom, June 15, 2020, [stockholmcf.org/turkey-releases-6-journalists-after-top-appeals-court-overturns-sentences](https://stockholmcf.org/turkey-releases-6-journalists-after-top-appeals-court-overturns-sentences); "Court decides to remove judicial supervision measures on 7 journalists," *Turkish Minute*, October 26, 2021, [turkishminute.com/2021/10/26/rt-decides-to-remove-judicial-supervision-measures-on-7-journalists](https://turkishminute.com/2021/10/26/rt-decides-to-remove-judicial-supervision-measures-on-7-journalists)

136 Ahmet Hüsrev Altan v. Turkey, European Court of Human Rights, April 13, 2021, <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng/?i=002-13215>; Expression Interrupted (@ExInt24), "Turkey's Court of Cassation just ordered the release of journalist and novelist Ahmet Altan from prison after nearly 4.5 years behind bars," Twitter status, April 14, 2021, [twitter.com/ExInt24/status/1382365051055702029](https://twitter.com/ExInt24/status/1382365051055702029)

137 "Freedom of Expression and the Press in Turkey - 298," Expression Interrupted, accessed March 16, 2022, [expressioninterrupted.com/freedom-of-expression-and-the-press-in-turkey-298](https://expressioninterrupted.com/freedom-of-expression-and-the-press-in-turkey-298)

138 "Public Outcry as Leading Cultural Figure Detained at Turkish Airport," *Artnet*, October 20, 2017, [news.artnet.com/art-world/osman-kavala-arrested-1122659](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/osman-kavala-arrested-1122659)

139 Carlotta Gall, "Turkish Philanthropist Goes to Trial Again in a Widely Condemned Case," *The New York Times*, October 8, 2021, [nytimes.com/2021/10/08/world/middleeast/osman-kavala-turkey.html](https://nytimes.com/2021/10/08/world/middleeast/osman-kavala-turkey.html); Agence France Presse, "Europe Rights Body Warns Turkey Over Failure To Free Philanthropist," *Barron's*, June 10, 2021, [barrons.com/news/europe-rights-body-warns-turkey-over-failure-to-free-philanthropist-01623322812](https://barrons.com/news/europe-rights-body-warns-turkey-over-failure-to-free-philanthropist-01623322812); "The Court finds a violation of Articles 5 and 18 of the Convention and calls for the immediate release of Mr Kavala, a businessman and human-rights defender who is detained in prison," European Court of Human Rights, press release, December 10, 2019, [hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng-press?i=003-6587080-8727102](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng-press?i=003-6587080-8727102)

140 "Execution of the judgment of the European Court of Human Rights: Kavala against Turkey," European Court of Human Rights, December 2, 2021, [rm.coe.int/0900001680a4b3d4](https://rm.coe.int/0900001680a4b3d4)

141 Zeynep Kuray, "Meral Şimşek: I will not remain silent," September 18, 2021, Firat News Agency, [anfenglish.com/culture/meral-simsek-i-will-not-remain-silent-54964](https://anfenglish.com/culture/meral-simsek-i-will-not-remain-silent-54964)

142 Orsola Casagrande and Mustafa Gundogdu, *Kurdistan + 100*, trans. Amy Spangler, Nicholas Glastonbury, Andrew Penny, Mustafa Gundogdu, Rojin Hamo, Harriet Paintin & Kate Ferguson, (Manchester: Comma Press, 2022), [commapress.co.uk/books/kurdistan-100/](https://commapress.co.uk/books/kurdistan-100/)

**The decreased number of detentions of writers in Turkey during 2021 is welcomed, but the figure represents a change in tactics to punish and threaten writers for their work.**

months in prison for this short story, calling it “terrorist propaganda.”<sup>143</sup> While on trial, Şimşek attempted to flee Turkey to escape the inevitable prison sentence, and was caught at the border.<sup>144</sup> She was detained for eight days and now faces a possible additional five years in prison.<sup>145</sup> Şimşek was the only writer in Turkey newly detained in 2021, and her case reflects Turkey’s ongoing focus on criminalizing Kurdish heritage. As a target for such repression, she joins journalist **Nedim Türfent**, imprisoned over 2,000 days for writing about Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) clashes with the Turkish army in 2016.<sup>146</sup>

Writers in Turkey have also been caught up in the increasing numbers of people targeted for crimes of insult.<sup>147</sup> It is illegal in Turkey to insult the president, public officials, the Turkish nation, the Turkish people, Turkish government institutions, or Turkish national heroes.<sup>148</sup> As PEN America’s recent report *Cracking Down on Creative Voices* explains, the European Court of Human Rights has explicitly held that affording special protection to heads of state for “insult” crimes contravenes the European Convention on Human Rights.<sup>149</sup> In 2016, however, Turkey’s Constitutional Court upheld the law in denial of its obligations under the European Convention.<sup>150</sup> In 2021, two authors faced these charges of insult in increasingly stretched-out trials. After three years of hearings over charges of insulting the President over social media, prolific author **Mustafa Sönmez** was finally acquitted in June 2021.<sup>151</sup> Author-columnist **Ahmet Sever** has been on trial since 2019 over charges of insulting a public official and the president in his book *My Testimony*, which

143 “Turkey: Verdict expected in trial of writer and Kurdish PEN member Meral Şimşek,” PEN International, October 5, 2021, [pen-international.org/news/turkey-verdict-expected-in-trial-of-meral-simsek](https://pen-international.org/news/turkey-verdict-expected-in-trial-of-meral-simsek)

144 Evrim Kepenek, “Kurdish writer Meral Şimşek tortured with strip search by police in Greece,” *Bianet*, July 8, 2021, [bianet.org/english/migration/246938-kurdish-writer-meral-simsek-tortured-with-strip-search-by-police-in-greece](https://bianet.org/english/migration/246938-kurdish-writer-meral-simsek-tortured-with-strip-search-by-police-in-greece)

145 “Turkey: Verdict expected in trial of writer and Kurdish PEN member Meral Şimşek,” PEN International, October 5, 2021, [pen-international.org/news/turkey-verdict-expected-in-trial-of-meral-simsek](https://pen-international.org/news/turkey-verdict-expected-in-trial-of-meral-simsek)

146 International Press Institute, “Turkey: Global appeal marks 2000 days in prison for Nedim Türfent,” IFEX, November 3, 2021, [ifex.org/turkey-global-appeal-marks-2000-days-in-prison-for-nedim-turfent](https://ifex.org/turkey-global-appeal-marks-2000-days-in-prison-for-nedim-turfent)

147 “Erdoğan sued 38,581 people for ‘insulting the president’ in six years,” *Bianet*, August 27, 2021, [bianet.org/5/94/249380-erdogan-sued-38-581-people-for-insulting-the-president-in-six-years](https://bianet.org/5/94/249380-erdogan-sued-38-581-people-for-insulting-the-president-in-six-years)

148 “Penal Code of Turkey,” European Commission for Democracy through Law, February 15, 2016, [legislationline.org/download/id/6453/file/Turkey\\_CC\\_2004\\_am2016\\_en.pdf](https://legislationline.org/download/id/6453/file/Turkey_CC_2004_am2016_en.pdf)

149 Colombani et al v. France, Pakdemirli v. Turkey, Otegi Mondragon v. Spain; see also Cem Tecimer, “The Curious Case of Article 299 of the Turkish Penal Code: Insulting the Turkish President,” *Verfassungsblog*, July 20, 2018, [verfassungsblog.de/the-curious-case-of-article-299-of-the-turkish-penal-code-insulting-the-turkish-president](https://verfassungsblog.de/the-curious-case-of-article-299-of-the-turkish-penal-code-insulting-the-turkish-president); “Cracking Down on Creative Voices: Turkey’s Silencing of Writers, Intellectuals, and Artists Five Years After the Failed Coup,” PEN America, accessed March 22, 2022, [pen.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/cracking-down-creative-voices-turkey-FINAL.pdf](https://pen.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/cracking-down-creative-voices-turkey-FINAL.pdf)

150 “Annual Report 2016,” The Constitutional Court of the Republic of Turkey, 2016, [ayam.anayasa.gov.tr/media/2742/annualreport2016.pdf](https://ayam.anayasa.gov.tr/media/2742/annualreport2016.pdf), p. 109–112; Ümit Kardaş, “Insulting the Turkish President: Article 299 and why Europe says its illegal,” *Ahval News*, November 16, 2018, [ahvalnews.com/turkey-democracy/insulting-turkish-president-article-299-and-why-europe-says-its-illegal](https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-democracy/insulting-turkish-president-article-299-and-why-europe-says-its-illegal); see also Cem Tecimer, “The Curious Case of Article 299 of the Turkish Penal Code: Insulting the Turkish President,” *Verfassungsblog*, July 20, 2018, [verfassungsblog.de/the-curious-case-of-article-299-of-the-turkish-penal-code-insulting-the-turkish-president](https://verfassungsblog.de/the-curious-case-of-article-299-of-the-turkish-penal-code-insulting-the-turkish-president)

151 “Journalist Mustafa Sönmez acquitted of ‘insulting the president,’” *Bianet*, June 23, 2021, [bianet.org/english/freedom-of-expression/246192-journalist-mustafa-sonmez-acquitted-of-insulting-the-president](https://bianet.org/english/freedom-of-expression/246192-journalist-mustafa-sonmez-acquitted-of-insulting-the-president)



Demonstrators hold placards and copies of the Cumhuriyet daily newspaper as they stage a protest outside a court where the trial of about a dozen employees of the newspaper on charges of aiding terror groups, continued in Istanbul, Tuesday, October 31, 2017. Photo by AP/Leferis Pitarakis

was published that year.<sup>152</sup> Journalist and publisher **Deniz Yücel** is also on trial for allegedly insulting the president, Turkish nation, and Turkish people in three articles he wrote in 2016.<sup>153</sup> He was first arrested in 2017, but was able to escape to Germany in 2018, and he was sentenced in absentia.<sup>154</sup>

Yücel is one of numerous writers forced to flee Turkey

to escape prosecution or abuse—and the Turkish government continues to persecute them outside of its borders. Physical threats and lengthy trials against Turkish journalists, both in the country and in exile, are intensifying. Despite the decrease from 25 writers detained in 2020 to 18 writers detained in 2021, free expression is under ever-escalating attack in the country, in defiance of both international human rights

152 “Ahmet Sever – trial for ‘insulting the President of the Republic,’” *Bianet Media Monitoring Database*, last updated December 23, 2021, [mediamonitoringdatabase.org/the-lawsuit-against-ahmet-sever-the-author-at-t24-and-the-then-chief-advisor-of-the-11th-president-abdullah-gul-for-allegedly-insulting-the-president-of-the-republic](https://mediamonitoringdatabase.org/the-lawsuit-against-ahmet-sever-the-author-at-t24-and-the-then-chief-advisor-of-the-11th-president-abdullah-gul-for-allegedly-insulting-the-president-of-the-republic); “Ankara investigates over terrorism ex-Gul advisor, author of book on AKP,” *Alarabiya*, December 22, 2018, [english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2018/12/22/Ankara-investigates-over-terrorism-ex-senior-official-who-wrote-a-book-on-AKP](https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2018/12/22/Ankara-investigates-over-terrorism-ex-senior-official-who-wrote-a-book-on-AKP).

153 “New lawsuit against journalist Deniz Yücel for ‘insulting Erdoğan,’” *Bianet*, June 15, 2021, [bianet.org/english/law/245705-new-lawsuit-against-journalist-deniz-yucel-for-insulting-erdogan](https://bianet.org/english/law/245705-new-lawsuit-against-journalist-deniz-yucel-for-insulting-erdogan)

154 “Deniz Yücel elected as the President of PEN Germany,” *Bianet*, October 27, 2021, [bianet.org/english/world/252430-deniz-yucel-elected-as-the-president-of-pen-germany](https://bianet.org/english/world/252430-deniz-yucel-elected-as-the-president-of-pen-germany)



Opening an investigation because of articles that can't be elements of a crime is a threat against all journalists. This means, “We can put you on trial here because of an article that is published in Germany, France, the US.”

*Deniz Yücel, interview with Bianet*

laws and pressure from the international community. On February 2, 2022, the Council of Europe began infringement procedures against Turkey for breaching its obligation to implement European Court of Human Rights judgments in **Mehmet Osman Kavala**'s case—making it the second country in history to be subjected to the sanction process.<sup>155</sup> Disregarding the international body, Turkish court ruled less than three weeks later to keep Kavala in detention.<sup>156</sup>



During 2021, the Council of Europe mulled launching infringement proceedings against Turkey for its breach of obligation to the European Court of Human Rights judgements in the case of Osman Kavala. *Photo by Congress of local and regional authorities*

155 “Turkey: Council of Europe Votes for Infringement Process,” Human Rights Watch, February 2, 2022, [hrw.org/news/2022/02/02/turkey-council-europe-votes-infringement-process](https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/02/turkey-council-europe-votes-infringement-process)

156 “Turkish court rules to keep Osman Kavala in jail,” *Al Jazeera*, February 21, 2022, [aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/21/turkish-court-keeps-kavala-in-jail-despite-council-of-europe-move](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/21/turkish-court-keeps-kavala-in-jail-despite-council-of-europe-move)



Even when writers flee their countries to seek safety abroad, the threat of persecution from their governments may follow them.

## The Long Arm of Repression: Threats to Exiled Writers

Even when writers flee their countries to seek safety abroad, the threat of persecution from their governments may follow them. Turkey, China, Pakistan, Belarus, and Iran stand out with some of the most high-profile attacks on exiled writers in 2021, ranging from actual and attempted kidnapping, to physical threats to the writers and their family members, to mounting legal charges and extradition attempts. Transnational repression that targets individuals across borders is becoming a new and alarming norm.

In July 2021, a social media account “Jitemkurt”—referencing the notorious Turkish gendarmerie intelligence unit JITEM—published an execution list on Twitter containing the names of journalists, writers, and dissidents living abroad. It included writer **Gökhan Yavuzel** and columnists **Erk Acarer**, **Can Dündar**, and **Hayko Bağdat**. Yavuzel was attacked two months later, in July 2021, by four unknown assailants in Wales. In the same month, Acarer was attacked twice outside of his home in Berlin by assailants he claimed to know from the ruling Justice and Development Party and the Nationalist Movement Party. Turkey is not the only government singling out exiled writers in hit lists: Pakistani blogger **Ahmad Waqass Goraya** was informed by the FBI in 2018 that he was on a “kill list.” He has received death threats since 2020, when he was attacked outside of his family home. In July 2021, a hired killer who might have had ties to Pakistan’s intelligence agency ISI attempted to assassinate the blogger.

The repatriation of dissidents is another prominent example of the illegitimate transnational efforts by repressive regimes. In July 2021, the U.S. Justice Department charged individuals tied to the Iranian government with plotting to kidnap journalist-activist Masih Alinejad, who was living in assumed safety on American soil. The

Justice Department also charged five individuals with working with the Chinese government in 2021 to surveil and target dissidents. These individuals allegedly included a candidate for Congress who was previously a Tiananmen Square protester, a pro-democracy activist living in New York, and a sculpture artist who created a mimicry of Chinese president Xi Jinping. Turkish exiles also fear that they will be extradited against their will to face sham charges by their government: in the case of **Can Dündar**, who was also on the Turkish hit list, a Turkish court sentenced the columnist to more than 27 years in jail on terrorism-related charges in December 2020 after a five-year trial. In June 2021, a Turkish court requested his extradition from Germany so he could stand trial for an additional charge based on his writing. Spanish rapper Valtònc (birth name: **Josep Miquel Arenas Beltrán**) fled to exile in Belgium after being convicted of slander, lèse-majesté, and glorifying terrorism in his lyrics in 2018. The Spanish government issued a European Arrest Warrant to have him extradited back to Spain, but he has been protected by Belgian courts. In June 2021, a Spanish court began calling for four additional years to be added to his sentence based on lyrics he rapped in a March 2018 concert, which was around the time of his original sentencing.

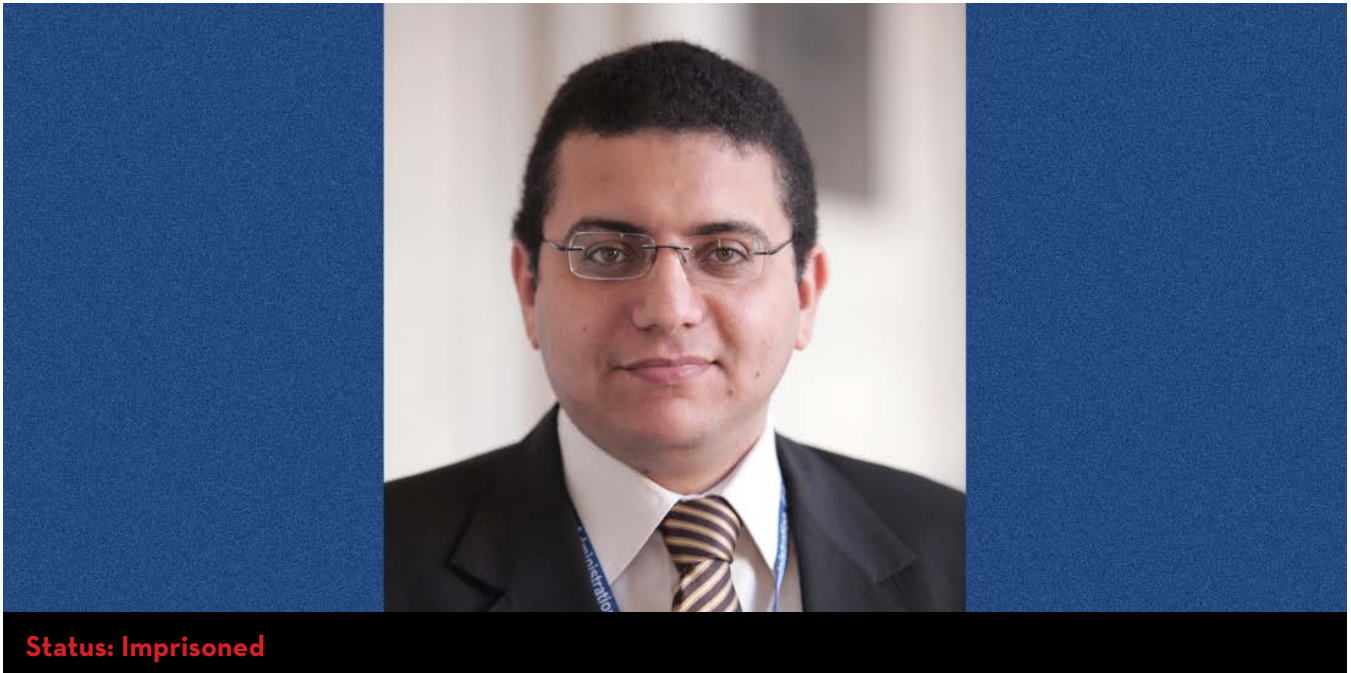
Hong Kong writer-activist **Nathan Law** fled Hong Kong for Britain in July 2020 following the passage of the National Security Law. He has been doggedly pursued by the Chinese government since then. The first warrant for his arrest went out in October 2020, followed by another in February 2021. In April 2021 Britain officially granted Law political asylum, but the Chinese government continued to harass him: in June the Hong Kong police requested Wix—a company offering cloud-based website development—to take down his website, and a third warrant went out for his arrest in December 2021. Turkey also pursues legal charges against exiled writers: in May 2021, an indictment was prepared against **Gökhan Yavuzel** for insulting the president, and the writer faced an additional case in October 2021 for “inciting hate and enmity” over an article he wrote. Turkish writer **Aslı Erdoğan**, who lives in Germany in exile, faced new charges in 2021 ostensibly tied to her past writings in the pro-Kurdish daily *Özgür Gündem*, which she was previously acquitted for in 2020 after a lengthy legal procedure. After discovering that the same print articles had been published on the internet following the newspaper’s shuttering, a Turkish court charged Erdoğan again in 2021 for the same crime. In early 2022, Erdoğan was acquitted of these redundant charges, demonstrating the blatant legal harassment that was the true goal of this second case.

While some countries want to silence their dissident writers in prison, other countries force them into exile to dampen their reach within the country. Belarusian online commentator **Anastasiya Zakharevich** was the first writer in 2021 forced to emigrate due to legal and economic pressure from her country, and she received political asylum in Latvia in May 2021. Cuba gives its dissidents a binary choice: since 2017, dozens of dissidents have reportedly been given the choice between long prison sentences and exile. Cuban songwriter-rapper **Denis Solís González**, who was released from prison in July 2021, made the difficult choice to leave Cuba for Serbia three months after his release along with a few members of his family. The Vietnamese and Iranian governments also integrate exile into their legal systems: Iranian poet **Akbar Azad** was sentenced to two years in prison and two years in exile in 2020; and blogger **Ho Van Hai** (also known as DrHoho or Ho Hai) was relocated to Texas while under house arrest in Vietnam under a reported agreement between the American and Vietnamese governments.

Writers flee their home countries when it becomes too dangerous to stay—but there is increasingly limited safety abroad. Increased digital surveillance capability and geopolitical considerations may make a country of refuge less of a haven than anticipated. International arrest warrants (if enforced) allow countries to “legally” kidnap dissidents and writers to face dubious charges. In an extreme and egregious example, in May 2021 Belarus forced the landing of a commercial flight in its airspace in order to capture Raman Pratasevich, a Belarusian dissident blogger and journalist who was living in exile in Poland. Pratasevich’s case shows exiled writers just how unsafe they—and their ability to engage in free expression—may be. Even if they are based in more open, tolerant countries, they can still face extraterritorial harassment by intelligence services or those operating at the behest of a repressive government within the borders of another country. Exiled writers also have to contend with the possibility that in their absence, their family members will be harassed or imprisoned instead. In one of a number of publicly reported examples, Masih Alinejad’s brother, Alireza Alinejad, was detained in 2019 and sentenced to eight years in prison for refusing to denounce his sister. Alireza was released from Evin Prison on parole in August 2021 after serving two-thirds of the enforceable sentence. Other cases are not made public by dissidents out of fear for their relatives’ safety, but do lead exiled dissidents to practice self-censorship or curtail their critical expression.

The brazen violations of international norms by authoritarian governments to silence their opponents—wherever they may be—demand a vigorous and coordinated response by democracies. Democratic governments must send a clear, unified message that acts of repression, whether within or across borders, will be aggressively confronted in a coordinated and multilateral way. PEN America is advocating for additional attention and support—by executive, legislative, and multilateral action—on behalf of those threatened by or subjected to the long arm of authoritarianism, and to hold those behind such violations to account.





Ismail Alexandrani has been jailed since 2015 for researching topics the Egyptian government wanted to keep under wraps. *Photo by Wilson Center*

## ISMAIL ALEXANDRANI

**Journalist, Scholar**

### 📍 Egypt

Ismail Alexandrani is an Egyptian freelance journalist and researcher sentenced to 10 years in prison on specious charges of obtaining and publishing military secrets, joining a banned group, and spreading false news abroad. No evidence has been presented in court to substantiate his guilt, and the Egyptian government probably targeted him for his critical research and reporting on extremism in Sinai and uncovering the government's often brutal response to it.

Alexandrani's work focuses on counterterrorism in the North Sinai. He has published papers on the state-religion relationship in Egypt, terrorism in Sinai, and the Egyptian government's repression of 2013 citizen protests. Alexandrani used his many contacts in the Sinai region to substantiate his research and reporting, and his high degree of specialization and expertise in the region and on Islamic groups threatened the Egyptian government's ability to control the public view of these topics. For example, despite the Egyptian government banning discussion of its problematic military response to radical terrorists in Sinai, Alexandrani wrote extensively on the topic for independent newspapers.

---

“Egypt [is] exploiting violence in Sinai to serve the rule of fear . . . There is no talk of compromise this time, nor is there any consideration of the human and social harm that will result from the mass forced displacement.”

– December 29, 2014, article for independent newspaper Al-Modon

---

In December 2014, Alexandrani left Egypt for his safety, but returned in November 2015 from Berlin, reportedly for a family emergency. He was arrested at the airport when entering the country. Authorities continually extended Alexandrani’s pretrial detention past the legal two-year limit until his case was transferred to a military court in December 2017.

Five months later, in May 2018, Alexandrani was convicted of obtaining and publishing military secrets, publishing false news abroad, and being a member of the banned Muslim Brotherhood group. This last indictment stands in stark contrast to the truth: that Alexandrani has published multiple articles expressing his vocal opposition to the group; but such charges are wielded broadly by the Egyptian government against its critics. He was given a 10-year prison sentence in absentia and without any evidence proving his guilt. He found out about his conviction from his wife, who visited him the following day. Then Egyptian authorities muddied the story by first denying his conviction and later going silent. On December 24, 2018, after another seven months in legal limbo, a military court ratified Alexandrani’s conviction, the final step necessary to begin his prison sentence.

In May 2021 his mother passed away, and authorities denied Alexandrani furlough to attend her funeral. After her death, Alexandrani began to suffer from depression and diabetes. His wife described Tora Prison, where he is serving his sentence, as “absolute paralysis, complete isolation and utterly impoverishing.”

# EGYPT

**Egypt** remains the sixth-highest detainer of writers and public intellectuals globally, with 14 detained in 2021 as the regime of Abdel Fattah El-Sisi continues its brutal crackdown on free expression. The regime's intolerance for dissent and its penchant for pushing the bounds of its own criminal justice system has resulted in some 60,000 political prisoners since 2013.<sup>157</sup> The release-reimprisonment cycle in Egypt is so common that it has its own nickname: Tadweer, or "the recycling."<sup>158</sup>

With dissent quashed and Egyptians subjected to a harsh surveillance program that monitors their social media usage and doles out associated criminal penalties, a number of the 2021 cases involve people whose engagement in civic debate, writing about El-Sisi, and/or commenting on issues of policy led to their detention or imprisonment.<sup>159</sup> These cases include that of **Ashraf Hamdi**, who was arrested on January 25, 2021, after reposting a video to his original political cartoon channel, Egyptoon, marking the 10-year anniversary of the 2011 uprising which

led to the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak.<sup>160</sup> Hamdi was charged with misusing social networking sites and spreading false news.<sup>161</sup> He spent at least 150 days in prison, and was quietly released in the fall of 2021.<sup>162</sup> As a political commentator and cartoonist, Hamdi continues to be active on social media.<sup>163</sup> A well-known critic of President El-Sisi's policies, freelance columnist **Gamal Al-Gamal** was arrested at the Cairo International Airport on February 22, 2021, upon returning from Turkey, where he had been living since 2017.<sup>164</sup> Al-Gamal was detained and charged with spreading false news, joining a terrorist organization, and inciting public opinion against the state. Released on bail on July 17, 2021, prior to Eid Al-Adha celebrations, Al-Gamal's health deteriorated while jailed.<sup>165</sup>

Egyptian authorities continue to detain writers critical of El-Sisi and his policies in long, repeated cycles of pretrial detention. Well-known columnist and online writer **Abdel Nasser Salama**, the former editor-in-chief of the Egyptian daily *Al Ahram*, is reportedly in solitary confinement in the notorious Tora Prison in Cairo, where his medical conditions—high blood

---

157 "Egypt: 'What do I care if you die?': Negligence and denial of health care in Egyptian prisons," Amnesty International, January 25, 2021, [amnesty.org/en/documents/mde12/3538/2021/en](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde12/3538/2021/en); "'We Are in Tombs' Abuses in Egypt's Scorpion Prison," Human Rights Watch, September 28, 2016, [hrw.org/report/2016/09/28/we-are-tombs/abuses-egypts-scorpion-prison](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/09/28/we-are-tombs/abuses-egypts-scorpion-prison)

158 "The re-cycling of political prisoners 'Tadweer': the Judiciary in Egypt is injustice," EgyptWatch, January 2, 2021, [egyptwatch.net/2021/01/02/the-recycling-of-political-prisoners-tadweer-the-judiciary-in-egypt-is-injustice](https://egyptwatch.net/2021/01/02/the-recycling-of-political-prisoners-tadweer-the-judiciary-in-egypt-is-injustice)

159 "Egyptian authorities detain journalist Abdel Nasser Salama on terrorism and false news charges," Committee to Protect Journalists, July 19, 2021, [cpj.org/2021/07/egyptian-authorities-detain-journalist-abdel-nasser-salama-on-terrorism-and-false-news-charges](https://www.cpj.org/2021/07/egyptian-authorities-detain-journalist-abdel-nasser-salama-on-terrorism-and-false-news-charges); "Egypt: Detained journalist on hunger strike must be released immediately," International Federation of Journalists, October 1, 2021, [ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-freedom/article/egypt-detained-journalist-on-hunger-strike-must-be-released-immediately.html](https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-freedom/article/egypt-detained-journalist-on-hunger-strike-must-be-released-immediately.html)

160 "Egyptian police arrest cartoonist on 10th anniversary of uprising," *Al Jazeera*, January 25, 2021, [aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/25/egyptian-police-arrest-cartoonist-on-10th-anniversary-of-uprising](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/25/egyptian-police-arrest-cartoonist-on-10th-anniversary-of-uprising)

161 "Egypt arrests cartoonist on 10th anniversary of uprising, sources say," *Reuters*, January 25, 2021, [reuters.com/article/uk-egypt-uprising-anniversary-arrests/egypt-arrests-cartoonist-on-10th-anniversary-of-uprising-sources-say-idUSKBN29U1NI](https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-egypt-uprising-anniversary-arrests/egypt-arrests-cartoonist-on-10th-anniversary-of-uprising-sources-say-idUSKBN29U1NI)

162 "Alert Egypt - Ashraf Hamdi," *Cartooning for Peace*, June 24, 2021, [cartooningforpeace.org/en/alert-egypt-ashraf-hamdi](https://www.cartooningforpeace.org/en/alert-egypt-ashraf-hamdi); Ashraf Hamdi, "I love you," Facebook post, October 3, 2021, [facebook.com/Dr.AshrafHamdi2/posts/1527484930942486](https://www.facebook.com/Dr.AshrafHamdi2/posts/1527484930942486)

163 See Ashraf Hamdi's personal Facebook account, accessed March 22, 2022, [facebook.com/Dr.AshrafHamdi2](https://www.facebook.com/Dr.AshrafHamdi2)

164 "Egyptian columnist Gamal al-Gamal arrested, charged with terrorism, false news," Committee to Protect Journalists, March 1, 2021, [cpj.org/2021/03/egyptian-columnist-gamal-al-gamal-arrested-charged-with-terrorism-false-news](https://www.cpj.org/2021/03/egyptian-columnist-gamal-al-gamal-arrested-charged-with-terrorism-false-news)

165 "CPJ calls for immediate release of seriously ill Egyptian journalist Gamal al-Gamal," Committee to Protect Journalists, May 26, 2021, [cpj.org/2021/05/cpj-calls-for-immediate-release-of-seriously-ill-egyptian-journalist-gamal-al-gamal](https://www.cpj.org/2021/05/cpj-calls-for-immediate-release-of-seriously-ill-egyptian-journalist-gamal-al-gamal); "Leading Egyptian activists freed after nearly two years without trial," *Middle East Eye*, July 18, 2021, [middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-esraa-abdel-fattah-activist-freed-two-years-without-trial](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-esraa-abdel-fattah-activist-freed-two-years-without-trial)

pressure, high cholesterol, muscle cramps—go untreated.<sup>166</sup> Salama has been particularly outspoken about the El-Sisi regime’s handling of a highly contentious land and water dispute with Ethiopia.<sup>167</sup> His most recent arrest, on July 19, 2021, took place six days after publishing a Facebook post called “Do It, President,” which harshly criticized El-Sisi and called for him to step down due to the dispute.<sup>168</sup>

The ongoing crackdown on freedom of thought and artistic expression in Egypt also manifests in increased penalties under military and emergency courts, which operate to extend both detention and imprisonment. As noted in the 2020 Index, political opinion writer and deputy newspaper editor **Amer Abdel Moneim** was detained at the end of 2020 and placed in pretrial detention, where he remained throughout 2021.<sup>169</sup> In a continuous cycle, the court has repeatedly ordered the renewal of his pretrial detention, extending it for another 45 days.<sup>170</sup> Moneim suffers from an untreated viral eye

infection, which threatens his vision, as well as from diabetes; he has been denied medically necessary hygienic items, including the sterilizer necessary for his insulin injector pens.<sup>171</sup> Blogger **Alaa Abd El Fattah** had been on conditional release for only six months, after serving a previous five-year sentence for organizing a political protest, when he was again arrested on September 29, 2019.<sup>172</sup> Abd El Fattah was tortured repeatedly and held for over two years in pretrial detention, with the courts rubber-stamping 45-day renewals of his detention all the while.<sup>173</sup> On December 20, 2021, he was convicted of “false news” charges stemming from his sharing of a social media post in 2019 about the torture and death of another Egyptian prisoner, and sentenced to five years in prison.<sup>174</sup> The sentence does not include the 27 months Abd El Fattah spent in pretrial detention, and cannot be appealed.<sup>175</sup>

A similar timeline befell press freedom advocate and Mada Masr columnist **Hisham Fouad**. Fouad

---

166 “Abdel Naser Salama,” Committee to Protect Journalists, last accessed March 14, 2022, [cpj.org/data/people/abdel-naser-salama](https://cpj.org/data/people/abdel-naser-salama)

167 “Sisi must step down over Ethiopia dam crisis, ex-editor of Al-Ahram says,” *Middle East Eye*, July 13, 2021, [middleeastmonitor.com/20210713-sisi-must-step-down-over-ethiopia-dam-crisis-ex-editor-of-al-ahram-says](https://middleeastmonitor.com/20210713-sisi-must-step-down-over-ethiopia-dam-crisis-ex-editor-of-al-ahram-says)

168 “Egypt detains former al-Ahram editor after he called on Sisi to step down,” *Middle East Eye*, July 19, 2021, [middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-ahram-nasser-salama-sisi-criticism-ethiopia-dam-detained](https://middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-ahram-nasser-salama-sisi-criticism-ethiopia-dam-detained)

169 “Two more arrests in Egypt,” Reporters Without Borders, December 23, 2020, [rsf.org/en/news/two-more-arrests-egypt](https://rsf.org/en/news/two-more-arrests-egypt); “Freedom to Write Index 2020,” PEN America, accessed March 10, 2022, [pen.org/report/freedom-to-write-index-2020/](https://pen.org/report/freedom-to-write-index-2020/)

170 “Criminal Court renews Journalist Amer Abdel-Moneim’s detention for 45 days, despite the deterioration of his health conditions,” Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression, June 10, 2021, [afteegypt.org/en/legal-updates-en/legal-news-en/2021/06/10/22877-afteegypt.html](https://afteegypt.org/en/legal-updates-en/legal-news-en/2021/06/10/22877-afteegypt.html)

171 “ناسنالا قووقحل ةيصرملا ةكبشلا” Egyptian Network For Human Rights ENHR, “..... ي فكت ال ةدحاو ةي ناطب,” Facebook, October 14, 2021, [facebook.com/106524561326800/posts/277193777593210/?d=n](https://facebook.com/106524561326800/posts/277193777593210/?d=n)

172 “Egyptian activist Alaa Abdel Fattah rearrested amid crackdown,” *Al Jazeera*, September 29, 2019, [aljazeera.com/news/2019/9/29/egyptian-activist-alaa-abdel-fattah-rearrested-amid-crackdown](https://aljazeera.com/news/2019/9/29/egyptian-activist-alaa-abdel-fattah-rearrested-amid-crackdown); “Egyptian activist Alaa Abdel Fattah released after five-year prison term,” *Straits Times*, March 30, 2019, [straitstimes.com/world/middle-east/egyptian-activist-alaa-abdel-fattah-released-after-five-year-prison-term](https://straitstimes.com/world/middle-east/egyptian-activist-alaa-abdel-fattah-released-after-five-year-prison-term)

173 “Egyptian activist Alaa Abdel Fattah beaten and threatened in prison, say lawyers,” *Middle East Eye*, October 10, 2019, [middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-activist-alaa-abdel-fattah-beaten-and-threatened-prison-say-lawyers](https://middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-activist-alaa-abdel-fattah-beaten-and-threatened-prison-say-lawyers); “Egyptian activist Alaa Abdel Fattah has detention extended, says could commit suicide,” *New Arab*, September 14, 2021, [english.alaraby.co.uk/news/egyptian-activist-alaa-abdel-fattah-has-detention-extended](https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/egyptian-activist-alaa-abdel-fattah-has-detention-extended)

174 “Egypt jails leading activist Alaa Abdel Fattah for five years,” *Al Jazeera*, December 20, 2021, [aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/20/egypt-jails-leading-activist-alaa-abdel-fattah-for-five-years](https://aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/20/egypt-jails-leading-activist-alaa-abdel-fattah-for-five-years)

175 Mona Seif (@Monasosh), “ي ت قاط عم جت س ا ة ف راع شم روهش ، يس فنللا روتكدلل حورا لواحاب روهش ي لاقب,” Twitter status, February 22, 2022, [twitter.com/Monasosh/status/1496096534332645384](https://twitter.com/Monasosh/status/1496096534332645384)

was detained in June 2019, tortured, and held in arbitrary detention.<sup>176</sup> In July 2021, after beginning a hunger strike, he was moved to solitary confinement and denied medical treatment for his deteriorating health; he was sentenced to four years in prison on November 17, 2021, stemming from conspiracy charges and allegations he had participated in a Muslim Brotherhood plot to overthrow the El-Sisi regime.<sup>177</sup> Fouad's sentence was handed down by an emergency court and may not be appealed.<sup>178</sup> Military courts in Egypt require that a sentence be ratified before it may be appealed, but provide no required timeframe for ratification. In practice, then, courts can circumvent the appeals process by simply failing to ratify their decisions.<sup>179</sup> Thus, researcher and journalist **Ismail Alexandrani**, currently serving a 10-year sentence after being detained and held since 2015, may not appeal his sentence, as it has yet to be ratified by the military court.<sup>180</sup> Alexandrani's sentence was handed down on or about May 22, 2018.<sup>181</sup>

## BELARUS

In **Belarus**, at least 10 writers and public intellectuals spent time behind bars during 2021. This number decreased from 18 in 2020, when mass protests and crackdowns on civil society broke out in response to the illegitimate election of Alexander Lukashenka.<sup>182</sup> In 2020, the Belarusian government represented the single largest increase by country during the year.<sup>183</sup> The comparatively smaller number of writers detained or imprisoned during 2021, however, does not reflect a freer space for expression in Belarus.

Many writers, artists, and other members of civil society who were arrested during 2020 were released after periods of one- to two-week-long sentences of administrative detention. Some writers have since been jailed again or have been targeted with rearrest following an initially short detention. For example, blogger, author, and political analyst **Mikola Dziadok** was sentenced in November 2021 to five years in a penal colony on spurious national security crimes related to his writings.<sup>184</sup> Dziadok was detained

176 "Arrests target political figures involved in new coalition to run in 2020 parliamentary elections," *Mada Masr*, June 25, 2019, [madasmasr.com/en/2019/06/25/feature/politics/arrests-target-political-figures-involved-in-new-coalition-to-run-in-2020-parliamentary-elections](https://madasmasr.com/en/2019/06/25/feature/politics/arrests-target-political-figures-involved-in-new-coalition-to-run-in-2020-parliamentary-elections); Freedom for Hisham Fouad (@FreeHisham), "Quoting Madiha Hussein, wife of Hisham Fouad," Facebook, July 14, 2019, [facebook.com/FreeHisham/posts/2335853260007574](https://facebook.com/FreeHisham/posts/2335853260007574); Ekram Yousef, "عقوبة نجل يسف دايز ذرايز نم الاح انجرخ," Facebook, July 9, 2019, [facebook.com/ekram.yousef.77/posts/10156026672411331](https://facebook.com/ekram.yousef.77/posts/10156026672411331)

177 International Federation of Journalists, "Egypt: Health of detained journalist Hisham Fouad deteriorates following hunger strike," press release, August 6, 2021, [ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/egypt-health-of-detained-journalist-hisham-fouad-deteriorates-following-hunger-strike.html](https://ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/egypt-health-of-detained-journalist-hisham-fouad-deteriorates-following-hunger-strike.html); "Egyptian ex-lawmaker and journalists get prison sentences," *Associated Press*, November 17, 2021, [apnews.com/article/middle-east-africa-religion-egypt-cairo-820d9bdb57f31cc562c4c9ba62f6523](https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-africa-religion-egypt-cairo-820d9bdb57f31cc562c4c9ba62f6523)

178 "Egyptian ex-lawmaker and journalists get prison sentences," *Associated Press*, November 17, 2021, [apnews.com/article/middle-east-africa-religion-egypt-cairo-820d9bdb57f31cc562c4c9ba62f6523](https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-africa-religion-egypt-cairo-820d9bdb57f31cc562c4c9ba62f6523)

179 "Egypt: Wave of Unjust 'Emergency' Trials Prosecutions Fast-Tracked Despite End to State of Emergency," Human Rights Watch, December 19, 2021, [hrw.org/news/2021/12/19/egypt-wave-unjust-emergency-trials](https://hrw.org/news/2021/12/19/egypt-wave-unjust-emergency-trials)

180 "Ismail Alexandrani," Committee to Protect Journalists, accessed March 22, 2022, [cpj.org/data/people/ismail-alexandrani](https://cpj.org/data/people/ismail-alexandrani)

181 "Military court sentences journalist Ismail Alexandrani to 10 years in prison," *Mada Masr*, May 22, 2018, [madasmasr.com/en/2018/05/22/news/u/military-court-sentences-journalist-ismail-alexandrani-to-10-years-in-prison](https://madasmasr.com/en/2018/05/22/news/u/military-court-sentences-journalist-ismail-alexandrani-to-10-years-in-prison)

182 Ivan Nechepurenko, "You Cannot Say No: The Reign of Terror That Sustains Belarus's Leader," *The New York Times*, November 11, 2021, [nytimes.com/2020/11/14/world/europe/belarus-lukashenko-protests-crackdown.html](https://nytimes.com/2020/11/14/world/europe/belarus-lukashenko-protests-crackdown.html)

183 "Freedom to Write Index 2020," PEN America, accessed March 21, 2022, [pen.org/report/freedom-to-write-index-2020](https://pen.org/report/freedom-to-write-index-2020)

184 "Pillow-stifling, tear gas, threats of rape: Mikalai Dzyadok gives statement about torture by police," *Belsat*, July 1, 2021, [belsat.eu/en/news/01-07-2021-pillow-stifling-tear-gas-threats-of-rape-mikalai-dzyadok-gives-statement-about-torture-by-police](https://belsat.eu/en/news/01-07-2021-pillow-stifling-tear-gas-threats-of-rape-mikalai-dzyadok-gives-statement-about-torture-by-police)



Mada Masr columnist and press freedom advocate Hisham Fouad was jailed in 2019 and sentenced by an emergency court to four years in prison on specious national security charges. Photo by Hossam el-Hamalawy

throughout his trial, despite testifying to being tortured by Belarusian authorities.<sup>185</sup> **Ihar Bancer**, a lyricist and singer for punk rock band Mister X, was

sentenced to over a year of hard labor in an open-type penal colony in early 2021.<sup>186</sup> The court later claimed that Bancer had violated the parameters of the penal colony—which reportedly included his falling asleep in a chair—and ordered Bancer’s transfer to a more restricted penal colony.<sup>187</sup> Bancer was forced to spend his final days in prison in solitary confinement, and was released in December 2021.<sup>188</sup>

In the year following Belarus’s stolen 2020 election, the authorities have taken severe and preemptive actions to jail prominent writers and civil society figures who have been critical of Alexander Lukashenka in the past. Writer, journalist, and minority Polish activist **Andrzej Poczobut** was arrested in March 2021 in a home raid and crackdown on the Union of Poles in Belarus, a rights organization that Lukashenka has targeted and of which Poczobut is a prominent member.<sup>189</sup> Poczobut remains in detention for “inciting ethnic hatred,” a farcical charge seeming to scapegoat the minority Polish community in Belarus.<sup>190</sup> Poczobut also has a history of critically analyzing and writing about Lukashenka: he was prosecuted for criminal “insult” and “libel” charges back in 2011 for his critical columns, and he is the author of *The Belarus System*, a book about Lukashenka’s presidency and

185 “Pillow-stifling, tear gas, threats of rape: Mikalai Dzyadok gives statement about torture by police,” *Belsat*, July 1, 2021, [belsat.eu/en/news/01-07-2021-pillow-stifling-tear-gas-threats-of-rape-mikalai-dzyadok-gives-statement-about-torture-by-police](https://belsat.eu/en/news/01-07-2021-pillow-stifling-tear-gas-threats-of-rape-mikalai-dzyadok-gives-statement-about-torture-by-police)

186 Orlando Crowcroft, “Belarus punk rocker faces 1.5 years hard labour for semi-naked dance protest,” *Euronews*, June 4, 2021, [euronews.com/my-europe/2021/04/05/meet-belarus-most-notorious-punk-who-faces-hard-labour-sentence-after-semi-naked-dance-pro](https://euronews.com/my-europe/2021/04/05/meet-belarus-most-notorious-punk-who-faces-hard-labour-sentence-after-semi-naked-dance-pro)

187 “Political prisoner Ihar Bantser put in disciplinary cell again. He spent 70 days there since summer,” *Belsat*, July 12, 2021, [belsat.eu/en/news/07-12-2021-political-prisoner-ihar-bantser-put-in-disciplinary-cell-again-he-spent-70-days-there-since-summer](https://belsat.eu/en/news/07-12-2021-political-prisoner-ihar-bantser-put-in-disciplinary-cell-again-he-spent-70-days-there-since-summer); “‘Violating rules’: Court orders to transfer activist Ihar Bantser from correctional facility to penal colony,” *Belsat*, September 30, 2021, [belsat.eu/en/news/30-09-2021-violating-rules-court-orders-to-transfer-activist-ihar-bantser-from-correctional-facility-to-penal-colony](https://belsat.eu/en/news/30-09-2021-violating-rules-court-orders-to-transfer-activist-ihar-bantser-from-correctional-facility-to-penal-colony)

188 “Hrodna activist and musician Ihar Bantser goes at large,” *Belsat*, December 17, 2021, [belsat.eu/en/news/17-12-2021-hrodna-activist-and-musician-ihar-bantser-goes-at-large](https://belsat.eu/en/news/17-12-2021-hrodna-activist-and-musician-ihar-bantser-goes-at-large)

189 “Andrzej Poczobut,” *Viasna*, accessed March 15, 2022, [prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/andrei-paczobut](https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/andrei-paczobut); Maria Wilczek, “Lukashenko plays the Poland card and ratchets up tensions with Warsaw,” *Politico*, March 30, 2021, [politico.eu/article/alexander-lukashenko-belarus-poland-activists-arrests-tension](https://politico.eu/article/alexander-lukashenko-belarus-poland-activists-arrests-tension)

190 “Criminal Case Opened Against Head Of Union of Poles In Belarus Andżelica Borys,” *Charter’97*, March 25, 2021, [charter97.org/en/news/2021/3/25/416102](https://charter97.org/en/news/2021/3/25/416102)

his impact on the country.<sup>191</sup> In April 2021, political commentator, author, and literary critic **Alexander Feduta** was arrested in Moscow for “suspicion of committing a crime” on allegations that he plotted to assassinate Lukashenka and stage a coup.<sup>192</sup> Thousands of international writers and several PEN Centers have written open letters supporting his innocence.<sup>193</sup> Feduta is a former member of Lukashenka’s 1994 political campaign and was briefly head of government media policy before resigning in 1994 and renouncing his support after Lukashenka twice unilaterally censored the press.<sup>194</sup> Though he was imprisoned in 2010 for supporting opposition candidates, Feduta has continued to vocally oppose Lukashenka’s rule and has written critically about the crackdown on protesters of the 2020 election. In the month following the initial crackdown, Feduta wrote, “The yearning for freedom always looks insane. Lukashenka truly does not understand why anyone would care about freedom.”<sup>195</sup>

Whereas in 2020, those who joined protests or spoke

out about the electoral fraud were often swept up en masse, in 2021 there were more targeted arrests seemingly intended to silence dissidents, analysts, and critics of Lukashenka’s rule. On June 30, KGB officers unexpectedly raided the apartment of political analyst **Valeria Kostyugova** in an attempt to “mop up the space of producing ideas and thoughts,” according to Kostyugova’s colleague.<sup>196</sup> Kostyugova has been a longtime moderator of Our Opinion, a website for political experts to post and share commentary, and has written scholarly works with the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies.<sup>197</sup> And in July 2021, the police raided the offices of human rights groups, NGOs, their founders, and independent public intellectuals in what many commentators have described as “black week” and a “total purge of civil society.”<sup>198</sup> The offices of the leading human rights organization Viasna were raided on July 14, 2021, and its founder, also a prominent writer and literary critic, **Ales Bialacki** was arrested and later charged with retaliatory tax evasion charges in connection with Viasna’s financials.<sup>199</sup> Three weeks later, on August 4, noted philosopher, essayist, and political analyst

---

191 “Andrzej Poczobut presents his book ‘System Belarus’ in Warsaw (photo),” *Euroradio*, October 24, 2013, [euroradio.fm/en/andrzej-poczobut-presents-his-book-system-belarus-warsaw-photo](http://euroradio.fm/en/andrzej-poczobut-presents-his-book-system-belarus-warsaw-photo); “Andrzej Poczobut has trial today 2,” *Charter’97*, September 23, 2013, [charter97.org/en/news/2013/9/23/76147](http://charter97.org/en/news/2013/9/23/76147); “Information Hero: Andrzej Poczobut,” Reporters Without Borders, accessed March 15, 2022, [rsf.org/en/hero/andrzej-poczobut](http://rsf.org/en/hero/andrzej-poczobut)

192 “Belarus: Two men accused of planning coup arrested in Moscow,” *Deutsche Welle*, April 17, 2021, [dw.com/en/belarus-two-men-accused-of-planning-coup-arrested-in-moscow/a-57241861](http://dw.com/en/belarus-two-men-accused-of-planning-coup-arrested-in-moscow/a-57241861)

193 Sergei Kuznetsov, “Russia alleges assassination plot against Belarus leader Lukashenko,” *Politico*, April 18, 2021, [politico.eu/article/russia-alleges-assassination-plot-against-belarus-leader-lukashenko-putin-tkhanovskaya](http://politico.eu/article/russia-alleges-assassination-plot-against-belarus-leader-lukashenko-putin-tkhanovskaya); Елизавета Фомина “Режим дошел до полного озверения”: филологи - в защиту Федуты,” *Deutsche Welle*, May 5, 2021, [dw.com/ru/rezhim-doshel-do-polnogo-ozvereniya-filologi-v-zashchitu-feduty/a-57420101](http://dw.com/ru/rezhim-doshel-do-polnogo-ozvereniya-filologi-v-zashchitu-feduty/a-57420101); “Statement of PEN Ukraine in support of Belarusian literary scholar Aliaksandr Fiaduta,” PEN Ukraine, April 20, 2021, [pen.org.ua/en/zayava-ukrayinskogo-pen-na-pidtrymku-biloruskogo-literaturoznavtsya-alyaksandra-fyaduty](http://pen.org.ua/en/zayava-ukrayinskogo-pen-na-pidtrymku-biloruskogo-literaturoznavtsya-alyaksandra-fyaduty)

194 Emil Filtenborg and Stefan Weichert, “He stopped listening... and became cruel: Lukashenko remembered by former campaign manager,” *Euronews*, September 28, 2020, [euronews.com/my-europe/2020/09/24/he-stopped-listening-and-became-cruel-lukashenko-remembered-by-former-campaign-manager](http://euronews.com/my-europe/2020/09/24/he-stopped-listening-and-became-cruel-lukashenko-remembered-by-former-campaign-manager)

195 Alexander Feduta, “The Insanity of Freedom: Aleksandr Feduta on Belarus,” *Culture.pl*, September 23, 2020, [culture.pl/en/article/the-insanity-of-freedom-aleksandr-feduta-on-belarus](http://culture.pl/en/article/the-insanity-of-freedom-aleksandr-feduta-on-belarus)

196 “Minsk: Reputed political analyst Valeryia Kastsyuhova placed in pre-trial detention centre,” *Belsat*, July 2, 2021, [belsat.eu/en/news/02-07-2021-minsk-reputed-political-analyst-valeryia-kastsyuhova-placed-in-pre-trial-detention-centre](http://belsat.eu/en/news/02-07-2021-minsk-reputed-political-analyst-valeryia-kastsyuhova-placed-in-pre-trial-detention-centre)

197 “Valeria Kostyugova,” Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, accessed March 15, 2022, [belinstitute.com/en/author/valeria-kostiugova](http://belinstitute.com/en/author/valeria-kostiugova)

198 Andrew Roth, “Belarus NGOs condemn government crackdown after ‘black week’ of raids,” *The Guardian*, July 23, 2021, [theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/23/belarus-ngos-condemn-government-crackdown-after-black-week-of-raids](http://theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/23/belarus-ngos-condemn-government-crackdown-after-black-week-of-raids)

199 “Belarus police raid activists’ offices, homes, rights groups say,” *Reuters*, July 14, 2021, [reuters.com/world/europe/belarusian-police-raid-offices-homes-rights-activists-groups-say-2021-07-14](http://reuters.com/world/europe/belarusian-police-raid-offices-homes-rights-activists-groups-say-2021-07-14); “Court dismisses complaint of Ales Byaliatski about his detention,” *Belsat*, January 29, 2022, [belsat.eu/en/news/29-01-2022-court-dismisses-complaint-of-ales-byaliatski-about-his-detention](http://belsat.eu/en/news/29-01-2022-court-dismisses-complaint-of-ales-byaliatski-about-his-detention)

**Uladzimir Matskevich** was arrested in a spurious national security case; Matskevich has described the charges against him as akin to a “thoughtcrime.”<sup>200</sup> Matskevich, a well-known political commentator in Belarus who also founded the independent Flying University, was later charged with “organizing actions that grossly violate public order.”<sup>201</sup> These deliberate arrests differ from the authorities’ more chaotic, reactive response to mass protests in 2020. Over a year later, Lukashenka and Belarusian authorities appear to have further systematized efforts to stamp out dissent by jailing thought leaders and criminalizing their work.



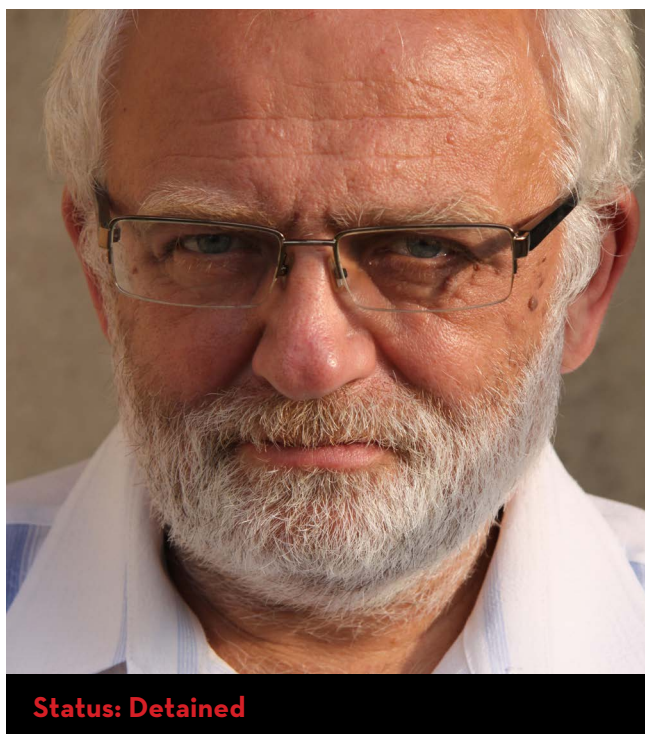
I understand that I was arrested because of my articles, statements, ideas, and thoughts, that is, I’m going to be tried for ‘malice’ according to Orwell. This is what best characterizes the current regime in Belarus.

*Uladzimir Matskevich*



**Status: Detained**

Ales Bialacki, prominent writer and founder of well-known Belarusian human rights group Viasna, was arrested July 14, 2021 and charged with retaliatory tax evasion charges. *Photo by Michał Józefaciuk*



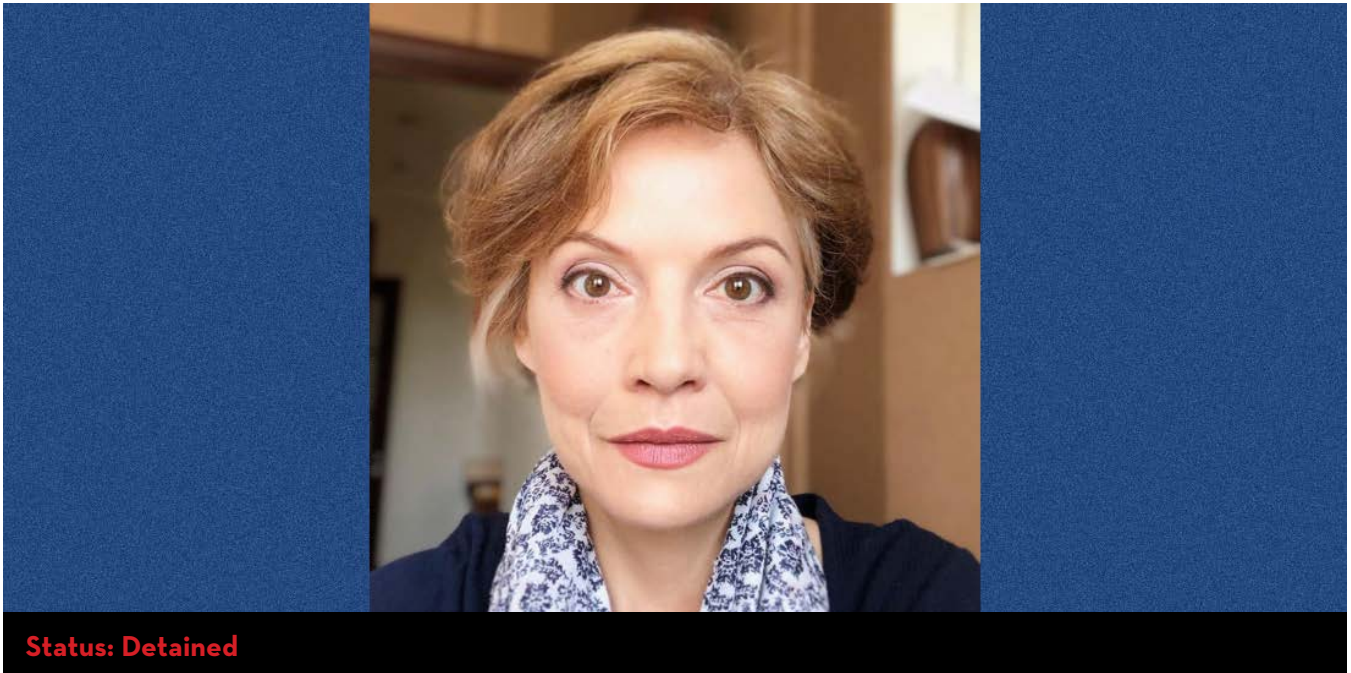
**Status: Detained**

Uladzimir Matskevich, a philosopher and essayist, has been detained since August 4, 2021 in a baseless national security case. Matskevich has called a “thoughtcrime.” *Photo by Andrei Schutt*

200 “Public figure Uladzimir Matskevich to be tried for Orwellian ‘thoughtcrime,’” *Belsat*, August 27, 2021, [belsat.eu/en/news/27-08-2021-public-figure-uladzimir-matskevich-to-be-tried-for-orwellian-crimes](https://belsat.eu/en/news/27-08-2021-public-figure-uladzimir-matskevich-to-be-tried-for-orwellian-crimes)

201 Paula Borowska, “Non-Formal Education in Belarus: Unleashing the Civil Society Potential,” *Belarus Digest*, November 18, 2014, [belarusdigest.com/story/non-formal-education-in-belarus-unleashing-the-civil-society-potential](https://belarusdigest.com/story/non-formal-education-in-belarus-unleashing-the-civil-society-potential); “Charge brought against philosopher Uladzimir Matskevich,” *Belsat*, August 18, 2021, [belsat.eu/en/news/18-08-2021-charge-brought-against-philosopher-uladzimir-matskevich](https://belsat.eu/en/news/18-08-2021-charge-brought-against-philosopher-uladzimir-matskevich); See e.g., “Scores detained after defying Belarus protest ban,” *Al Jazeera*, March 25, 2017, [aljazeera.com/news/2017/3/25/scores-detained-after-defying-belarus-protest-ban](https://aljazeera.com/news/2017/3/25/scores-detained-after-defying-belarus-protest-ban); “Who is Uladzimir Matskevich?,” *Лятучы ўніверсітэт*, accessed March 15, 2022, [fly-uni.org/who-is-uladzimir-matskevich](https://fly-uni.org/who-is-uladzimir-matskevich)





**Status: Detained**

Valeria Kostyugova has been in pre-trial detention in Belarus since June 2021 for her academic research and longstanding analysis of Belarusian-Russian relations.

## VALERIA KOSTYUGOVA

**Online Commentator, Scholar, Journalist, Literary Writer**

### 📍 Belarus

Valeria Kostyugova is an expert analyst on Belarusian-Russian relations. She was detained in June 2021, shortly following the airing of a television interview in which she discussed the release of political prisoners and a possible rapprochement with Russia. Before her arrest, Kostyugova was incredibly active in the academic community, editing the Belarusian Yearbook, a compilation of political writings by experts; running the online expert community Our Opinion; and serving as head of the Agency of Policy Expertise at the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, head of the Lithuanian Agency of Social and Political Expertise, and head of "Belarus in Focus," a group of political monitoring experts. Kostyugova has written opinion pieces on Belarusian trade and economics and has published countless articles for Our Opinion since 2003 on topics ranging from the role of women in protests to Belarusians' quality of life and adopting the ruble.

---

“Today, Belarusian citizens share the confidence that it is Svetlana Tikhonovskaya who is the true winner of the presidential elections, and perhaps soon we will be able to talk about overcoming a whole group of attitudes, stereotypes, and clichés related to the topic of women in politics.”

– “How women became the main force of protest” for Our Opinion

---

In June 2021, she was arrested and detained in a home raid and was later transferred to pretrial detention center No. 1 in Minsk. On July 26, 2021, her daughter confirmed that Kostyugova was charged with “conspiracy or other actions committed with the aim of seizing state power” and “calls for actions aimed at the detriment of the external security of the Republic of Belarus, its sovereignty, territorial inviolability, national security, and defense capability.”

Kostyugova’s daughter, Nastasya, has stated publicly that her mother’s lawyer signed a nondisclosure agreement with Belarusian authorities, which is one reason why there is limited information about the case.

Kostyugova suffered from COVID-19 in prison; however, her daughter says that Kostyugova has kept up her spirits. She reportedly keeps her mind sharp by studying the theory of small groups within her prison cell, which she shares with several other women. Her arrest is part of a broad crackdown in Belarus on free expression and dissent, including detentions and intimidation of politicians, journalists, writers, artists, and intellectuals.

# VIETNAM

The number of writers detained in **Vietnam** fell only slightly—from 11 in 2020 to 10 in 2021—although the government continues to tighten restrictions on freedom of expression. The country saw manipulation of discourse and increased censorship of anti-government commentary online ahead of the January 2021 congress of the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam, in addition to authorities conducting politically motivated investigations into writers, journalists, and human rights defenders.<sup>202</sup> Although the expanded freedom of one imprisoned writer in Vietnam was a welcome development in 2021, freedom came at the cost of going into exile; meanwhile, others who spoke out against the government continued to face police intimidation, harassment, and arbitrary arrest and detention.

An ongoing trend over the last several years has involved informal negotiations or formal agreements between the United States and Vietnamese governments in which jailed writers were released in exchange for exile after enduring several years of arbitrary detention. Formerly imprisoned blogger **Ho Van Hai** was forced to leave his homeland in 2021 after serving three years and five months in prison over a series of blog posts criticizing the government.<sup>203</sup> He was released to a

two-year house arrest in 2020, then in May 2021, he left Vietnam for exile in the United States following U.S. State Department negotiations.<sup>204</sup> The situation mimics similar examples in recent years, as in the case of **Tran Thi Nga**, a writer and activist forced into exile in January 2020 thanks to an agreement between the U.S. and Vietnamese governments. Blogger **Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh**—better known as Mother Mushroom—has been living in exile since 2018, her sudden release secured shortly after the U.S. Defense Secretary met with top government officials in Vietnam.<sup>205</sup>

At the same time, Vietnam continued to detain writers in 2021, often handing out lengthy sentences under Article 117 of the country's criminal code, an overly broad law frequently used to criminalize criticism of the government's authoritarian rule. For instance, **Pham Chi Thanh**, an author and a member of the Independent Journalists' Association of Vietnam, was arrested on May 21, 2020, for his book criticizing the Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong.<sup>206</sup> He was held in pretrial detention for over a year before he was allowed to meet with a lawyer for the first time.<sup>207</sup> On July 9, 2021, under Article 117, a Hanoi court sentenced him to five years and six months in prison, plus five years of probation.<sup>208</sup>

---

202 Elizabeth Dwoskin, Tory Newmyer, and Shibani Mahtani, "The case against Mark Zuckerberg: Insiders say Facebook's CEO chose growth over safety," *The Washington Post*, October 25, 2021, [washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/10/25/mark-zuckerberg-facebook-whistleblower/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/10/25/mark-zuckerberg-facebook-whistleblower/); "Persecution of Activists and Journalists Continues Following Rubber Stamp Elections," CIVICUS, July 14, 2021, [monitor.civicus.org/updates/2021/07/14/persecution-activists-and-journalists-continues-following-rubber-stamp-elections-vietnam](https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2021/07/14/persecution-activists-and-journalists-continues-following-rubber-stamp-elections-vietnam)

203 "Ho Van Hai," *Freedom Now*, accessed March 10, 2022, [freedom-now.org/cases/ho-van-hai](https://freedom-now.org/cases/ho-van-hai)

204 "Dissident doctor Ho Hai left Vietnam for the US," *Voice of America Vietnamese*, May 26, 2021, [voatiengviet.com/a/bac-si-bat-dong-chinh-kien-roi-viet-nam-den-my/5904962.html](https://voatiengviet.com/a/bac-si-bat-dong-chinh-kien-roi-viet-nam-den-my/5904962.html)

205 Shawn W. Crispin, "Freedom at a high cost for Vietnamese blogger Tran Thi Nga," *Committee to Protect Journalists*, February 24, 2020, [cpj.org/2020/02/vietnam-blogger-jail-exile-tran-thi-nga](https://cpj.org/2020/02/vietnam-blogger-jail-exile-tran-thi-nga); Paul Eckert, "Vietnamese Blogger Mother Mushroom Released, Exiled to US," *Radio Free Asia*, October 17, 2018, [rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/mushroom-exile-10172018085458.html](https://rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/mushroom-exile-10172018085458.html); "U.S. Secretary of Defense Makes Second Visit to Vietnam in 2018, Highlights Growing U.S.-Vietnam Partnership," U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Vietnam, October 17, 2018, [usembassy.gov/u-s-secretary-of-defense-makes-second-visit-to-vietnam-in-2018-highlights-growing-u-s-vietnam-partnership/](https://usembassy.gov/u-s-secretary-of-defense-makes-second-visit-to-vietnam-in-2018-highlights-growing-u-s-vietnam-partnership/)

206 "Vietnamese Dissident Writer Arrested on Subversion Charge," *Radio Free Asia*, May 21, 2020, [rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/writer-05212020135521.html](https://rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/writer-05212020135521.html)

207 "Vietnam: Free Prominent Novelist," *Human Rights Watch*, July 8, 2021, [hrw.org/news/2021/07/08/vietnam-free-prominent-novelist](https://hrw.org/news/2021/07/08/vietnam-free-prominent-novelist)

208 "Writer Pham Thanh was sentenced to 5 years and 6 months in prison," *BBC News Vietnamese*, July 9, 2021, [bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam-57774093](https://bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam-57774093)

Vietnam's prosecution of dissidents consistently fell short of fair trial standards, jettisoning defendants' rights to due process during notably hasty trials. In December 2021, in a span of three days, four Vietnamese human rights defenders were sentenced to prison for alleged anti-state propaganda, including celebrated writer **Pham Doan Trang**.<sup>209</sup> A leading voice for human rights and democracy, Pham Doan Trang has been in prison since October 2020, when authorities arrested her for the alleged dissemination of anti-state propaganda.<sup>210</sup> Charged under Articles 88 and 117 of Vietnam's criminal code, she was held incommunicado for over a year, until finally being allowed to meet with one of her lawyers for the first time in October 2021.<sup>211</sup> Also that month, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) released an opinion deeming her detention arbitrary and calling for her immediate release.<sup>212</sup> On December 14, 2021, Pham Doan Trang was sentenced to nine years in prison—two years longer than requested by the prosecutor. She was only notified of her trial date one day before it took place, and the hearing lasted only a few hours. Her writing on human rights themes and interviews with international media used as

**The majority of writers and public intellectuals jailed in Vietnam are serving lengthy sentences of over 10 years in prison for their free expression.**

evidence of her alleged crimes.<sup>213</sup> In February 2022, she was named as a recipient of the 2022 Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders—the first activist from Vietnam to receive the award.<sup>214</sup>

Other key cases include that of **Huynh Thuc Vy**, a blogger and women's rights activist who was arrested after she posted a photo online of herself with a Vietnamese flag defaced with spray paint. Sentenced to nearly three years in prison in November 2018, the execution of her imprisonment was postponed until her infant child was no longer nursing.<sup>215</sup> On December 1, 2021, she was arrested to fulfill her sentence—a few months later, prison officials transferred her to Gia Trung prison, hundreds of kilometers away from her home, without notifying her family.<sup>216</sup> **Nguyen Tuong Thy** is another critic who blogged about civil rights and press freedom issues in Vietnam until his arrest

---

209 Ravina Shamdasani, "Press briefing notes on Vietnam," United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, December 17, 2021, [previous.ohchr.org/en/newsevents/pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27977&LangID=E](https://www.ohchr.org/en/newsevents/pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27977&LangID=E)

210 RFA Vietnamese, "Rights Groups Deplore Arrest of Vietnam Writer and Activist Pham Doan Trang," *Voice of America*, October 8, 2020, [voanews.com/press-freedom/rights-groups-deplore-arrest-vietnam-writer-and-activist-pham-doan-trang](https://www.voanews.com/press-freedom/rights-groups-deplore-arrest-vietnam-writer-and-activist-pham-doan-trang)

211 "Viet Nam: Immediately release independent journalist and human rights defender Pham Doan Trang," Human Rights Watch, October 26, 2021, [hrw.org/news/2021/10/26/vietnam-immediately-release-independent-journalist-and-human-rights-defender-pham-o](https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/26/vietnam-immediately-release-independent-journalist-and-human-rights-defender-pham-o)

212 "Viet Nam: release writer held on 'propaganda' charges - UN experts," United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, October 28, 2021, [previous.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27734&LangID=E](https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27734&LangID=E); Chris Humphrey, "Vietnam jails its 'most famous activist' for nine years," *The Washington Post*, December 14, 2021, [washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/vietnam-press-freedom-pham-doan-trang/2021/12/14/8ed0f008-57e4-11ec-8396-5552bef55c3c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/vietnam-press-freedom-pham-doan-trang/2021/12/14/8ed0f008-57e4-11ec-8396-5552bef55c3c_story.html)

213 "Vietnamese journalist who is RSF laureate gets nine years in prison," Reporters Without Borders, December 14, 2021, [rsf.org/en/news/vietnamese-journalist-who-rsf-laureate-gets-nine-years-prison](https://www.rsf.org/en/news/vietnamese-journalist-who-rsf-laureate-gets-nine-years-prison); "Viet Nam: Crackdown on dissent continues with 'egregious' nine-year sentence for Pham Doan Trang," Amnesty International, December 14, 2021, [amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/12/vietnam-pham-doan-trang-conviction/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/12/vietnam-pham-doan-trang-conviction/)

214 "Jailed Vietnamese journalist wins human rights award," *Radio Free Asia*, January 20, 2022, [rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/award-01202022155751.html](https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/award-01202022155751.html)

215 "Vietnamese Blogger to Serve Almost Three Years For Defacing Flag," *Radio Free Asia*, November 30, 2018, [rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/flag-11302018141521.html](https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/flag-11302018141521.html)

216 "Activist Huynh Thuc Vy was arrested by the police after announcing the cancellation of the decision to postpone serving the sentence," *Radio Free Asia*, December 1, 2021, [rfa.org/vietnamese/news/vietnamnews/activist-huynh-thuc-vy-arrested-after-3-years-stay-of-execution-12012021071654.html](https://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/news/vietnamnews/activist-huynh-thuc-vy-arrested-after-3-years-stay-of-execution-12012021071654.html); "Prisoner of conscience Huynh Thuc Vy was transferred to a prison away from home right after Tet," *Radio Free Asia*, February 18, 2022, [rfa.org/vietnamese/news/vietnamnews/poc-huynh-thuc-vy-was-transferred-to-another-prison-away-from-home-02182022025002.html](https://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/news/vietnamnews/poc-huynh-thuc-vy-was-transferred-to-another-prison-away-from-home-02182022025002.html)



Author Pham Doan Trang was arrested in Ho Chi Minh City (pictured) in October 2020. She was sentenced to nine years in prison a year later. Photo by Steffen Schmitz

in May 2020.<sup>217</sup> On January 5, 2021, he was convicted of disseminating “anti-state propaganda,” along with journalists **Le Huu Minh Tuan** and **Pham Chi Dung**.<sup>218</sup> All three writers were given heavy sentences as punishment for their critical views—both Nguyen Tuong Thuy and Le Huu Minh Tuan were sentenced to 11 years in prison, and Pham Chi Dung was handed 15 years behind bars.<sup>219</sup> Such extreme sentences

for writers are distressingly common; essayist **Tran Anh Kim** and author **Tran Huynh Duy Thuc** were both accused and convicted on politically-motivated charges of attempting to overthrow the state for their pro-democracy views. They are each currently serving sentences of 13 years and 16 years in prison, respectively.<sup>220</sup> **Tran Duc Thach**, a poet and novelist who will likely reach his 70th birthday in jail, is

217 “Vietnamese Blogger Nguyen Tuong Thuy Arrested For Holding ‘Anti-State’ Documents,” *Radio Free Asia*, May 23, 2020, [rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/blogger-arrest-05232020112257.html](https://rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/blogger-arrest-05232020112257.html)

218 “US, EU Demand Release of Vietnamese RFA Blogger and Others Jailed For ‘Peaceful Expression’ of Views,” *Radio Free Asia*, January 6, 2021, [rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/demand-01062021170023.html](https://rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/demand-01062021170023.html)

219 “Viet Nam: Arrests send chilling message before key Party meeting – UN experts,” United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, January 14, 2021, [ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26661](https://ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26661)

220 “Viet Nam: Serious health concerns for prisoner of conscience: Tr n Anh Kim,” Amnesty International, May 16, 2018, [amnesty.org/en/documents/asa41/8432/2018/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa41/8432/2018/en/); “Jailed Vietnamese Democracy Advocate Vows Hunger Strike to His Death,” *Radio Free Asia*, August 2, 2021, [rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/strike-08022021144250.html](https://rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/strike-08022021144250.html)



I've worked in a number of organizations, and I recognize that people will speak up, and only speak up, when they see themselves as part of the organization. People only strongly attach themselves to the nation when they feel they have shared visions for the future; only then will they feel inspired to turn these visions into reality.

*Pham Doan Trang on her blog, translated by The Vietnamese*

imprisoned on a 12-year sentence, recently upheld on appeal in March 2021.<sup>221</sup> The consistent execution of lengthy sentences in Vietnam sent a chilling message to writers in 2021, as authorities carried on with their systematic approach to extinguishing dissent through intimidation and fear tactics.

## INDIA

In the context of continued threats to free expression in the country, the number of writers behind bars in **India** in 2021 declined marginally, with eight cases counted in the Index for 2021.<sup>222</sup> The majority of these individuals are connected to the ongoing Elgar Parishad case, which concerned a deadly inter-caste altercation in the village of Bhima Koregaon in 2018. In the aftermath of the violence—in which one person was killed and five injured—both state- and national-level authorities detained and aggressively pursued charges against a broad swathe of leftist writers and intellectuals, accusing them of inciting the violence and of links to banned groups.<sup>223</sup> In August 2021, after years of delay, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) finally submitted 17 charges under the penal code and sections of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) in the case.<sup>224</sup> Health concerns have beset a number of the detained writers, and they have been subjected to restrictions on sending and receiving letters and on accessing reading materials while in prison.<sup>225</sup> The majority remain detained and are awaiting trial, including writers **Hany Babu, Arun Ferreira, Vernon Gonsalves, Gautam Navlakha,** and **Anand Teltumbde.**<sup>226</sup>

221 "Vietnamese Dissident Writer Sent Back to Serve 12-Year Term After Losing Appeal," *Radio Free Asia*, March 24, 2021, [rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/writer-03242021165252.html](https://rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/writer-03242021165252.html)

222 "Freedom to Write Index 2020," PEN America, accessed March 21, 2022, [pen.org/report/freedom-to-write-index-2020](https://pen.org/report/freedom-to-write-index-2020)

223 Sukanya Shantha, "Bhima Koregaon: In 5,000-Page Chargesheet, Pune Police Say Activists Incited Violence," *The Wire*, November 16, 2018, [thewire.in/rights/bhima-koregaon-case-pune-police-chargesheet](https://thewire.in/rights/bhima-koregaon-case-pune-police-chargesheet)

224 Vidya, "NIA submits 17 draft charges against accused in Elgar Parishad case. Here are the details," *India Today*, August 23, 2021, [indiatoday.in/india/story/nia-charges-bhima-koregaon-elgar-parishad-accused-mumbai-1844058-2021-08-22](https://indiatoday.in/india/story/nia-charges-bhima-koregaon-elgar-parishad-accused-mumbai-1844058-2021-08-22)

225 Sukanya Shantha, "Jail Authorities Are Blocking Letters From Elgar Parishad Arrested to Their Loved Ones," *The Wire*, October 6, 2021, [thewire.in/rights/jail-authorities-are-blocking-letters-from-elgar-parishad-arrested-to-their-loved-ones](https://thewire.in/rights/jail-authorities-are-blocking-letters-from-elgar-parishad-arrested-to-their-loved-ones); Sonam Saigal, "NIA court reject medical bail pleas of four Bhima-Koregaon case accused," *The Hindu*, September 21, 2021, [thehindu.com/news/national/nia-court-rejects-medical-bail-of-shoma-sen-anand-teltumbde-gautam-navlakha-and-vernon-gonsalves/article36598726.ece](https://thehindu.com/news/national/nia-court-rejects-medical-bail-of-shoma-sen-anand-teltumbde-gautam-navlakha-and-vernon-gonsalves/article36598726.ece)

226 "Elgar Parishad case: NIA court rejects bail pleas of Prof Hany Babu, 3 other accused," *The News Minute*, February 15, 2022, [thenewsminute.com/article/elgar-parishad-case-nia-court-rejects-bail-pleas-prof-hany-babu-3-other-accused-160984](https://thenewsminute.com/article/elgar-parishad-case-nia-court-rejects-bail-pleas-prof-hany-babu-3-other-accused-160984); "Elgar Parishad: Bombay HC Grants NIA, Maha Govt 2 Weeks to Respond to Activists' Bail Review Plea," *The Wire*, February 10, 2022, [thewire.in/law/elgar-parishad-bombay-hc-grants-nia-maha-govt-2-weeks-to-respond-to-activists-bail-review-plea](https://thewire.in/law/elgar-parishad-bombay-hc-grants-nia-maha-govt-2-weeks-to-respond-to-activists-bail-review-plea); Sonam Saigal, "NIA court reject medical bail pleas of four Bhima-Koregaon case accused," *The Hindu*, September 21, 2021, [thehindu.com/news/national/nia-court-rejects-medical-bail-of-shoma-sen-anand-teltumbde-gautam-navlakha-and-vernon-gonsalves/article36598726.ece](https://thehindu.com/news/national/nia-court-rejects-medical-bail-of-shoma-sen-anand-teltumbde-gautam-navlakha-and-vernon-gonsalves/article36598726.ece)



**Status: Conditional Release**

Writer, activist, and lawyer Sudha Bharadwaj was released on bail in December 2021 after more than three years in prison. *Photo by Friends of Sudha*

During the course of the year, courts rejected repeated bail requests for Gonsalves and Teltumbde—including one request made by Teltumbde for a 15-day reprieve following the death of his brother—although Babu was released once very briefly on the grounds of poor health before being pulled back into jail.<sup>227</sup>

A letter written by Teltumbde, Ferreria, and other activists was confiscated by prison authorities in

August 2021, and authorities mounted a concerted effort to restrict Teltumbde and Gonsalves from sending and receiving certain communications, including with their lawyers, throughout 2021.<sup>228</sup>

Poet **P. Varavara Rao**, elderly and in very fragile health after testing positive for COVID-19 in 2020, in addition to incurring a head injury while in state custody, won a six-month release on bail in February 2021.<sup>229</sup> Rao's temporary release has since been

227 "Anand Teltumbde denied bail," *The Hindu*, December 1, 2021, [thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/anand-teltumbde-denied-bail/article37796340.ece](https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/anand-teltumbde-denied-bail/article37796340.ece); "Elgar Parishad: Bombay HC Grants NIA, Maha Govt 2 Weeks to Respond to Activists' Bail Review Plea," *The Wire*, February 10, 2022, [thewire.in/law/elgar-parishad-bombay-hc-grants-nia-maha-govt-2-weeks-to-respond-to-activists-bail-review-plea/](https://www.thewire.in/law/elgar-parishad-bombay-hc-grants-nia-maha-govt-2-weeks-to-respond-to-activists-bail-review-plea/); "Elgar Parishad case: Hany Babu to be shifted back to Navi Mumbai jail, says HC," *Hindustan Times*, August 18, 2021, [hindustantimes.com/cities/mumbai-news/elgar-parishad-case-hany-babu-to-be-shifted-back-to-navi-mumbai-jail-says-hc-101629228339713.html](https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/mumbai-news/elgar-parishad-case-hany-babu-to-be-shifted-back-to-navi-mumbai-jail-says-hc-101629228339713.html)

228 "Bhima Koregaon: Letters to families, lawyers scanned by jail official, allege 10 arrested activists," *Scroll*, August 27, 2021, [scroll.in/latest/1003876/bhima-koregaon-letters-to-families-lawyers-scanned-by-jail-official-allege-10-arrested-activists](https://scroll.in/latest/1003876/bhima-koregaon-letters-to-families-lawyers-scanned-by-jail-official-allege-10-arrested-activists); "Dr Anand Teltumbde writing suspicious content in letters: NIA affidavit in HC," *Hindustan Times*, August 17, 2021, [hindustantimes.com/cities/mumbai-news/dr-anand-teltumbde-writing-suspicious-content-in-letters-nia-affidavit-in-hc-101634916102045.html](https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/mumbai-news/dr-anand-teltumbde-writing-suspicious-content-in-letters-nia-affidavit-in-hc-101634916102045.html)

229 Srinivasa Rao Apparasu, "Can't afford Mumbai rent, says Varavara Rao's family on court's bail condition," *Hindustan Times*, February 22, 2021, [hindustantimes.com/india-news/where-in-mumbai-varavara-rao-s-family-as-court-declines-hyderabad-return-101613996269475.html](https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/where-in-mumbai-varavara-rao-s-family-as-court-declines-hyderabad-return-101613996269475.html)

extended in repeated small increments, but he had to remain in Mumbai, hundreds of miles away from his family in Hyderabad, and was not allowed to have contact with the others accused in the case.<sup>230</sup> After numerous attempts, **Sudha Bharadwaj** managed to win a conditional release in December 2021; she was released from pretrial detention, but the terms of her bail include no travel outside the jurisdiction of the Mumbai court without permission, no statements online or in print about the case, and no communication with her co-accused.<sup>231</sup>

In a new case that is illustrative of the heightened threats against religious minorities, and particularly Muslims, under the Modi government, **Munawar Faruqui**, a comedian, was arrested after a police report was filed alleging that he had “insulted Hindu deities.”<sup>232</sup> Despite a lack of evidence, he was held in jail for just over a month before being released on bail by India’s Supreme Court after earlier appeals failed.<sup>233</sup> **Rana Ayyub**, an outspoken and critical columnist and opinion writer, has faced a range of threats during 2021, including the filing of legal charges as well as a sustained campaign of online

harassment and trolling. Complaints have been filed against her in an attempt to discredit her fundraising for COVID and disaster relief, which UN experts have called “baseless.”<sup>234</sup> Police also opened a criminal investigation into Ayyub and other journalists for a video they shared on social media.<sup>235</sup> Meanwhile, Ayyub struggled with misinformation attacks by right-wing groups and publications, allegedly to discredit her journalism work.<sup>236</sup> The fundraising debacle escalated through 2021: in September 2021, Ayyub was slapped with spurious charges of money laundering.<sup>237</sup> She reflected on the harassment in an opinion piece later that month for *The Washington Post*, lamenting that, “I’ve barely written or reported, because all my energy has gone to battling the latest accusations and clearing my name.”<sup>238</sup> Her case is indicative of many others: in recent years, dozens of Indian writers and public intellectuals have faced spurious legal charges, other punitive administrative actions, and threats both on and offline in response to their expression of dissenting viewpoints. Those particularly at risk include those with a history of advocating on behalf of India’s marginalized and minority groups, challenging the caste system and

---

230 K A Y Dodhiya, “Varavara Rao fell from bed, unable to do anything on his own; allow us to help: Family to state,” *Hindustan Times*, July 21, 2020, [hindustantimes.com/mumbai-news/give-us-updates-on-health-allow-kin-to-help-him-varavara-rao-s-family-to-state/story-a2Mv5dYQTma8tokaPVQVeK.html](https://www.hindustantimes.com/mumbai-news/give-us-updates-on-health-allow-kin-to-help-him-varavara-rao-s-family-to-state/story-a2Mv5dYQTma8tokaPVQVeK.html)

231 “Elgaar Parishad case: 3 years after arrest, Sudha Bharadwaj out on bail,” *Indian Express*, December 10, 2021, [indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/elgaar-parishad-case-3-years-after-arrest-sudha-bharadwaj-out-on-bail-7664911](https://www.indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/elgaar-parishad-case-3-years-after-arrest-sudha-bharadwaj-out-on-bail-7664911)

232 Prachi Sibal, “We Spoke with the Indian Comedian Who Was Arrested for Jokes He Didn’t Crack,” *Vice News*, March 19, 2021, [vice.com/en/article/g5baa3/interview-with-munawar-faruqui-indian-comedian-arrested](https://www.vice.com/en/article/g5baa3/interview-with-munawar-faruqui-indian-comedian-arrested)

233 “Supreme Court Grants Interim Bail to Comedian Munawar Faruqui,” *The Wire*, February 5, 2021, [thewire.in/rights/supreme-court-grants-interim-bail-to-comedian-munawar-faruqui](https://www.thewire.in/rights/supreme-court-grants-interim-bail-to-comedian-munawar-faruqui)

234 “UN experts say journalist Rana Ayyub facing legal harassment from the Indian government,” *Scroll.in*, February 21, 2022, [scroll.in/latest/1017914/un-experts-say-journalist-rana-ayyub-facing-judicial-harassment](https://scroll.in/latest/1017914/un-experts-say-journalist-rana-ayyub-facing-judicial-harassment)

235 “Indian police open criminal investigation into The Wire and 3 journalists,” Committee to Protect Journalists, June 16, 2021, [cpj.org/2021/06/indian-police-open-criminal-investigation-into-the-wire-and-3-journalists](https://www.cpj.org/2021/06/indian-police-open-criminal-investigation-into-the-wire-and-3-journalists)

236 Rana Ayyub, “Opinion: The Indian government continues to harass journalists. I’m facing prison over a tweet,” *The Washington Post*, June 29, 2021, [washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/06/29/rana-ayyub-india-journalism-modi-harassment](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/06/29/rana-ayyub-india-journalism-modi-harassment)

237 “ED attaches Rs 1.77 cr of Rana Ayyub in money laundering case,” *Deccan Herald*, February 10, 2022, [deccanherald.com/national/ed-attaches-rs-177-cr-of-rana-ayyub-in-money-laundering-case-1080225.html](https://www.deccanherald.com/national/ed-attaches-rs-177-cr-of-rana-ayyub-in-money-laundering-case-1080225.html)

238 Rana Ayyub, “Opinion: The Indian government continues to harass journalists. I’m facing prison over a tweet,” *The Washington Post*, June 29, 2021, [washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/06/29/rana-ayyub-india-journalism-modi-harassment](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/06/29/rana-ayyub-india-journalism-modi-harassment)





Women protesters read a magazine during farmers' protests in Mumbai, India, January 2021. Photo by ShamsherSinghi

promoting the rights of economically disadvantaged populations, and those who have spoken out against Prime Minister Narendra Modi's increasingly virulent brand of Hindu nationalism.

More broadly, the environment for free expression in India continued to decline in 2021. Freedom House, which had downgraded India from "Free" to "Partly Free" in their annual *Freedom in the World* report

for 2020, noted further worrying trends in 2021, including a February 2021 law restricting anonymity and encryption on social media applications, and the official use of Pegasus spyware against journalists and human rights activists.<sup>239</sup> Modi's government shut down the internet for 48 days over the course of the year.<sup>240</sup> The government restricted the internet to stifle news and communications about the farmer protests in the capital of New Delhi, which opposed

239 "Draft rules: Social media firms to reveal first originator of message, OTT to self-regulate, digital media to have grievance officer," *The Indian Express*, February 25, 2021, [indianexpress.com/article/technology/tech-news-technology/new-social-media-rules-whatsapp-twitter-facebook-ott-7204309/](https://indianexpress.com/article/technology/tech-news-technology/new-social-media-rules-whatsapp-twitter-facebook-ott-7204309/); "Anatomy of the Pegasus spyware in India," IFEX, July 23, 2021, [ifex.org/anatomy-of-the-pegasus-spyware-in-india/](https://ifex.org/anatomy-of-the-pegasus-spyware-in-india/); "India: Freedom in the World 2020," Freedom House, accessed March 22, 2022, [freedomhouse.org/country/india/freedom-world/2020/](https://freedomhouse.org/country/india/freedom-world/2020/); "India: Freedom in the World 2021," Freedom House, accessed March 22, 2022, [freedomhouse.org/country/india/freedom-world/2021/](https://freedomhouse.org/country/india/freedom-world/2021/)

240 "India's war on the internet," *The Economic Times*, February 18, 2022, [economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/newsletters/ettech-unwrapped/indias-war-on-the-internet/articleshow/89671072.cms](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/newsletters/ettech-unwrapped/indias-war-on-the-internet/articleshow/89671072.cms)

laws intended to deregulate their industry. In Kashmir, the fiercely contested region in between Pakistan and India, where militant groups and security forces engage in regular skirmishes and dozens of civilians were killed during 2021, the government also continued to regulate internet speeds; Kashmir was previously under a dramatic, six-months-long blanket internet shutdown, the end of which was marked with continued restrictions on accessing social media.<sup>241</sup> Dissident voices from the region continued to experience various types of pressure, with journalists and others subject to brief detentions, travel bans, and threats from Indian security forces to curb their criticism.<sup>242</sup> The government also engaged in censorship of online criticism—including from opposition politicians—concerning the government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>243</sup>

Political pressure is also mounting on Indian academics and scholars, both within the country and overseas. In March 2021, two professors resigned from a Delhi university following their vocal critiques of the country’s political leadership,<sup>244</sup> and in

September 2021, scholars and universities inside and outside India faced severe online harassment for their participation in Syracuse University’s “Dismantling Global Hindutva” conference.<sup>245</sup> Hindutva is a political ideology supported by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) seeking hegemony of Hinduism in India, and Indian right-wing groups led an intimidation campaign against scholars and universities participating in the event. The 2021 *Free To Think* report by Scholars at Risk describes the shrinking space for academic freedom in the country, citing physical injuries to protesting students in February 2021, professors forced to resign for class or social media content, and an official inquiry launched over a master’s student’s thesis referring to “India Occupied Kashmir.”<sup>246</sup> India remains the only relatively free and democratic country in the Index’s top ten, an outlier, but also a warning sign that the jailing of writers and broader curbs on free expression represent but one element of the ruling party’s attempts to quash dissent and entrench political control..

---

241 Safwat Zargar, “Kashmir 2021: How the Valley changed after the killings of religious and ethnic minorities,” *Scroll.in*, December 30, 2021, [scroll.in/article/1013919/kashmir-2021-how-the-valley-changed-after-the-killings-of-religious-and-ethnic-minorities](https://scroll.in/article/1013919/kashmir-2021-how-the-valley-changed-after-the-killings-of-religious-and-ethnic-minorities); Anjana Pasricha, “India Restores Some Internet in Kashmir After Nearly Six Months,” *Voice of America*, January 25, 2020, [voanews.com/a/south-central-asia\\_india-restores-some-internet-kashmir-after-nearly-six-months/6183159.html](https://voanews.com/a/south-central-asia_india-restores-some-internet-kashmir-after-nearly-six-months/6183159.html)

242 Junaid Kathju, “Summoned, Raided, Censored: Crackdown on Journalists Is the New Normal in Kashmir,” *The Wire*, September 22, 2021, [thewire.in/media/summoned-raided-censored-crackdown-on-journalists-is-the-new-normal-in-kashmir](https://thewire.in/media/summoned-raided-censored-crackdown-on-journalists-is-the-new-normal-in-kashmir); “Jammu and Kashmir authorities detain, question 5 journalists; hold Salman Shah, Suhail Dar,” *Committee to Protect Journalists*, October 15, 2021, [cpj.org/2021/10/jammu-and-kashmir-authorities-detain-question-5-journalists-hold-salman-shah-suhail-dar/](https://cpj.org/2021/10/jammu-and-kashmir-authorities-detain-question-5-journalists-hold-salman-shah-suhail-dar/); “Indian police open criminal investigation into *The Wire* and 3 journalists,” *Committee to Protect Journalists*, June 16, 2021, [cpj.org/2021/06/indian-police-open-criminal-investigation-into-the-wire-and-3-journalists/](https://cpj.org/2021/06/indian-police-open-criminal-investigation-into-the-wire-and-3-journalists/)

243 “PEN America Condemns Indian Government Attempts to Block COVID Criticism,” *PEN America*, April 28, 2021, [pen.org/press-release/pen-america-condemns-indian-government-attempts-to-block-covid-criticism/](https://pen.org/press-release/pen-america-condemns-indian-government-attempts-to-block-covid-criticism/)

244 “Resignation of Two Professors Highlights Growing Academic Freedom Crisis in India,” *PEN America*, March 24, 2021, [pen.org/press-release/resignation-of-two-professors-highlights-growing-academic-freedom-crisis-in-india/](https://pen.org/press-release/resignation-of-two-professors-highlights-growing-academic-freedom-crisis-in-india/)

245 “Threats to Participants in Hindu Nationalism Conference Risk Silencing Academic Freedom,” *PEN America*, September 10, 2021, [pen.org/press-release/threats-to-participants-in-hindu-nationalism-conference-risk-silencing-academic-freedom/](https://pen.org/press-release/threats-to-participants-in-hindu-nationalism-conference-risk-silencing-academic-freedom/); Raqib Hameed Naik, “US academic conference on ‘Hindutva’ targeted by Hindu groups,” *Al Jazeera*, September 7, 2021, [aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/7/us-academic-conference-dismantling-global-hindutva-hindu-right-wing-groups](https://aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/7/us-academic-conference-dismantling-global-hindutva-hindu-right-wing-groups)

246 “Free to Think 2021: India,” *Scholars at Risk*, accessed March 14, 2022, [scholarsatrisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Free-to-Think-2021-India.pdf](https://scholarsatrisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Free-to-Think-2021-India.pdf)



In 2015, demonstrations calling for the release of Dawit Isaak, who had been detained for 5000 days, were organized across the globe. In 2021, seven years later, Isaak is still in prison. *Photo by Frankie Fouganthin*

## ERITREA

Freedom of expression in **Eritrea** has remained completely closed in the 20 years since the government imposed its sweeping and opportunistic crackdown on journalists and writers in the wake of the September 11 attacks in 2001. Entering a third decade after the shuttering of all independent press and media, Eritrea detained a total of eight writers in 2021—the same eight included in the 2020 Freedom to Write Index, the majority of whom have been imprisoned without trial for over 20 years.<sup>247</sup>

This past year, writers **Dawit Isaak**, **Amanuel Asrat**, **Fessehaye Yohannes**, **Medhanie Haile**, and **Temesgen Ghebreyesus** each marked the 20th anniversary of their arbitrary detention.<sup>248</sup> In the case of Amanuel Asrat—an Eritrean poet, songwriter, and critic—very little information has been made public about his condition ever since his arrest on September 23, 2001. In October 2020, Asrat received the PEN International Writer of Courage Prize, even as his whereabouts remain unknown.<sup>249</sup> Dawit Isaak, a playwright who holds dual Eritrean and Swedish citizenship, was recognized in May 2021 as one of

247 “Freedom to Write Index 2019,” PEN America, accessed March 10, 2022, [pen.org/report/freedom-to-write-index-2019/](https://pen.org/report/freedom-to-write-index-2019/); “Freedom to Write Index 2020,” PEN America, accessed March 10, 2022, [pen.org/report/freedom-to-write-index-2020/](https://pen.org/report/freedom-to-write-index-2020/)

248 “Eritrea: Release journalists and politicians arrested 20 years ago,” Amnesty International, September 17, 2021, [amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/09/eritrea-release-journalists-and-politicians-arrested-20-years-ago/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/09/eritrea-release-journalists-and-politicians-arrested-20-years-ago/)

249 Alison Flood, “Eritrean poet Amanuel Asrat named International Writer of Courage,” *The Guardian*, October 13, 2020, [theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/13/eritrean-poet-amanuel-asrat-named-international-writer-of-courage](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/13/eritrean-poet-amanuel-asrat-named-international-writer-of-courage)

the longest-detained journalists in the world.<sup>250</sup> The UN Office of the High Commission for Human Rights issued a statement in August 2021 renewing its demands for his release from the infamous Eiraeiro Prison, citing the continued uncertainty over his condition.<sup>251</sup> Of the 10 other journalists arrested alongside Isaak in 2001, seven are believed to have died in detention.<sup>252</sup> Other high-profile detainees include **Berhane Abrehe**, a former top government official and a critic of the president, who was arrested in September 2018, barely a week after publishing *Eritrea My Country*, a book criticizing the government's autocracy.<sup>253</sup> Like many others, Abrehe is being held without trial, and his conditions and whereabouts are unknown.<sup>254</sup>

After the Eritrean government banned all non-state press and media outlets in 2001, the country saw an unprecedented wave of arrests, as journalists, writers, and media representatives were rounded up and

detained without trial.<sup>255</sup> Since then, authorities have demonstrated a relentless commitment to upholding open-ended politically motivated detentions for writers, presumably arrested in retaliation for their criticism of the government, with no official charges being filed to justify their lengthy jailing, and no sign of any other resolution to their cases. All eight writers on PEN America's list remain in incommunicado detention, and the government has ignored repeated calls to confirm the details and whereabouts of those in jail. Amidst other egregious human rights abuses exercised by Eritrean authorities and documented by the UN Commission of Inquiry on human rights in Eritrea—including enslavement, forced disappearances, and torture—Eritreans risk arbitrary arrest for any form of dissent, and many have chosen to flee the country in recent years.<sup>256</sup>

---

250 Irwin Cotler, Shirin Ebadi, Christophe Deloire, "Opinion: The world's longest-imprisoned journalist deserves justice," Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, May 3, 2021, [raoulwallenbergcentre.org/en/news/opinion-the-world-s-longest-imprisoned-journalist-deserves-justice](https://raoulwallenbergcentre.org/en/news/opinion-the-world-s-longest-imprisoned-journalist-deserves-justice)

251 "Eritrea: UN experts demand release of human rights defender held 20 years without charge," United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, August 18, 2021, [ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27392](https://ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27392)

252 "Eritrea ended media freedom 15 years ago this month," Reporters Without Borders, September 21, 2016, [rsf.org/en/news/eritrea-ended-media-freedom-15-years-ago-month](https://rsf.org/en/news/eritrea-ended-media-freedom-15-years-ago-month)

253 "Eritrea: Release former finance minister immediately and unconditionally," Amnesty International, September 19, 2018, [amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/09/eritrea-release-former-finance-minister-immediately-and-unconditionally/](https://amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/09/eritrea-release-former-finance-minister-immediately-and-unconditionally/)

254 Jaclynn Ashly, "Call to release Eritrean political prisoners," *New Frame*, June 8, 2020, [newframe.com/call-to-release-eritrean-political-prisoners/](https://newframe.com/call-to-release-eritrean-political-prisoners/)

255 "Eritrea Archives: 2001," Committee to Protect Journalists, accessed March 10, 2022, [cpj.org/africa/eritrea/2001/](https://cpj.org/africa/eritrea/2001/)

256 Audrey Kawire Wabwire, "Interview: The Mass Exodus from Eritrea," Human Rights Watch, July 17, 2019, [hrw.org/news/2019/08/09/interview-mass-exodus-eritrea](https://hrw.org/news/2019/08/09/interview-mass-exodus-eritrea); "Detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in Eritrea," United Nations Human Rights Council, June 8, 2016, [ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoIEritrea/A\\_HRC\\_32\\_CRP.1\\_read-only.pdf](https://ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoIEritrea/A_HRC_32_CRP.1_read-only.pdf)



Spyware and digital surveillance technologies have been used against dissident writers and intellectuals by a range of governments, threatening their freedom to write without fear of repercussions.

## The Threat of Digital Surveillance

Spyware and digital surveillance technologies are being deployed in increasingly sophisticated ways in order to monitor, record, and arrest political opponents, journalists, and human rights activists. They have also been used against dissident writers and intellectuals by a range of governments, threatening their freedom to write without fear of repercussions. The surveillance industry is known for facilitating human rights violations and puts writers and activists at a greater risk of arbitrary detention, enhancing the abilities of state authorities to carry out unlawful investigations, arrests, and murders. Tactics such as phishing attacks enabled government agencies to track the activities and locations of their targets, as in the case of **Malcolm Bidali**, a Kenyan blogger and labor rights activist who was arrested by Qatari authorities in May 2021. Even more troubling is the wide-scale use of Pegasus hacking software, licensed to governments around the world by the Israeli company NSO Group. Pegasus made headlines in 2021 for its stealthy zero-click attack—which allows a hacker to break into a phone or computer even if the target does not click on any malicious links or attachments—and for its use by state actors against journalists, scholars, and human rights defenders, raising international human rights law concerns. The breadth of Pegasus' use and the enormity of its threat was revealed through investigations by the international media consortium the Pegasus Project.

It first emerged that NSO spyware had been used in 2016 in an unsuccessful attempt to hack the mobile phone of United Arab Emirates writer and human rights defender **Ahmed Mansoor**. Mansoor, who has been detained since 2017 on cybercrime charges related to his social media activism, had received text messages on his iPhone that promised “new secrets” about prisoners in UAE jails. Investigations by the Canadian cyber-

security company Citizen Lab determined that the failed hack would have installed sophisticated spyware on Mansoor's phone, capable of employing his camera and microphone, recording his calls and messages, and tracking his whereabouts and movements. Currently serving a sentence of 10 years in prison, Mansoor recently spoke out about his horrific treatment in detention in a letter published in July 2021. Since then, prison officials have responded with harsher retaliation, moving him to a smaller and more isolated cell, denying him access to medical care, and confiscating his reading glasses.

The Pegasus Project has confirmed the NSO Group's Pegasus software as the culprit behind dozens of other cyberattacks against writers, including **Maati Monjib**, **Khadija Ismayilova**, and **Loujain Al-Hathloul**. One of Saudi Arabia's most prominent women's rights activists and a recipient of the 2019 PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write Award, Al-Hathloul was released from jail in February 2021 after being held for over two years. Soon after her release, Pegasus malware was detected on her phone, and she was identified by Pegasus Project research as having been a target as early as 2018. Al-Hathloul has also been the victim of hacking by DarkMatter Group, another company known for targeting and spying on activists and political dissidents. In December 2021, Al-Hathloul filed a lawsuit against DarkMatter and three former members of U.S. intelligence agencies for their roles in hacking her phone on behalf of the UAE government.

Digital surveillance has been used to intensify sweeping crackdowns not only on writers and intellectuals, but also their families, friends, and colleagues. New analysis confirms that a UAE government agency installed the military-grade Pegasus spyware on a phone belonging to the wife of **Jamal Khashoggi** in the months before the Saudi journalist was murdered. Leaked data in July 2021 revealed that Pegasus had been used to surveil several writers and academics jailed in India's politically motivated Elgar Parishad case; lawyers representing many of the accused were identified as victims of Pegasus malware, as well as nearly a dozen more relatives, friends, lawyers, and colleagues, including the daughter of renowned poet **P. Varavara Rao**.

Linked to law enforcement and intelligence agencies in Saudi Arabia, India, Qatar, and more, NSO Group is one of many private cyber espionage companies contributing to growing concern over the regulation and sale of digital spyware as a tool that facilitates human rights violations. In July 2021, civil society organizations and independent experts signed onto a joint letter calling for a moratorium on the sale, transfer, and use of surveillance technology, citing dangerous implications for the deterioration of free expression and privacy. In February 2022, it was revealed that the U.S. government bought a version of Pegasus, before ultimately deciding against its use and adding NSO Group to its "entity list," cutting the firm off from U.S. suppliers. The unregulated marketing and distribution of digital surveillance technology continues to raise alarm, as the absence of an adequate legal framework to respond to these concerns means that governments operate with impunity, having no legal obligation to transparency or oversight when it comes to waging cyberattacks on journalists, writers, and activists.

# NEW THREATS AGAINST WRITERS

In 2021, at least 60 writers and public intellectuals were newly detained. These detentions of first instance represent roughly one-fifth of the 2021 Index count. This represents a moderate decline from last year's 79, when the COVID-19 pandemic intensified existing challenges for free expression in authoritarian states; new cases in 2020 were documented in China (12), Egypt (6), Iran (5), and Vietnam (5), and most notably, Belarus (5), where, as part of a broader crackdown, Alexander Lukashenka arrested writers, public intellectuals, and artists who used their writing and creative free expression to protest Belarus's stolen 2020 presidential election.

This year, new detentions primarily took place in Myanmar (20), where the military detained a number of influential writers starting as soon as they launched their coup on February 1, and continued to crack down on those using creative expression to protest and speak out against their takeover and in support of human rights; this came against the backdrop of arrests of thousands of protesters and the killing of hundreds of civilians. At least six Myanmar poets who gathered in downtown Yangon were arrested and detained for taking part in a poets' protest involving readings and art sales in support of civil resistance

on Pansodan Road.<sup>257</sup> The second-highest source of new cases was Iran, where at least eight writers were newly detained for their free expression work and writing, ranging from poetry to philosophical and historical research. At least half of these eight were detained for writing considered "propaganda against the regime," including author **Yasin Qasemi Bajd**, who writes about religion and society; rapper **Toomaj Salehi**, whose lyrics have criticized the government; religious historian **Touraj Amini**; and philosophy researcher **Nima Ghasemi**.

At least 32 other writers were also newly detained in Cuba, Nicaragua, Tunisia, Algeria, Sudan, Kuwait, Palestinian Territories, Qatar, Spain, United Kingdom, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan; in addition to in China, India, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, the more egregious jailers. In Algeria, **Abdenour Abdesselam**, a prominent cultural advocate of the Kabyle people—a Berber ethnic group indigenous to Kabylia in northern Algeria—as well as an author and linguist, was detained on September 13, 2021, in a government crackdown on dissent in the Kabliya region.<sup>258</sup> In Tunisia, where the democratic progress seen since the 2011 Arab Spring revolution suffered a devastating reversal this year after President Kais Saied suspended Parliament

257 Thin Lei Win, "Young, creative and angry: Myanmar's youth pushes back," *Nikkei Asia*, February 19, 2021, [asia.nikkei.com/Life-Arts/Young-creative-and-angry-Myanmar-s-youth-pushes-back](https://asia.nikkei.com/Life-Arts/Young-creative-and-angry-Myanmar-s-youth-pushes-back); Mon Mon Myat, "Is Civil Disobedience Myanmar's New Normal?," *The Irrawaddy*, February 15, 2021 [irrawaddy.com/opinion/civil-disobedience-myanmars-new-normal.html](https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/civil-disobedience-myanmars-new-normal.html)

258 "Algerian journalist, others detained in growing crackdown," *Associated Press*, September 15, 2021 [apnews.com/article/africa-arrests-journalists-language-algiers-0288bed39fa8e0320874ac94a2ea05](https://www.apnews.com/article/africa-arrests-journalists-language-algiers-0288bed39fa8e0320874ac94a2ea05)

and dismissed the government, popular online satirist and blogger **Salim Al-Jabali** was detained, tried in front of a military court, and sentenced to six months in prison for Facebook posts in which he criticized President Saied.<sup>259</sup> The name of Al-Jabali's satirical Facebook page, "The Minister of Hypertension and Diabetes," references the physical effects of stress.<sup>260</sup> Nicaraguan sports reporter turned critical blogger **Miguel Mendoza Urbina** was detained in June 2021 and later sentenced to nine years in prison for "conspiracy to undermine national integrity" and supposedly spreading false news for his online posts about President Daniel Ortega.<sup>261</sup> In late October 2021, the Hamas Internal Security Forces arrested Palestinian opinion writer and journalist **Alaa Al-Mashrawi** for unknown reasons and released him after 78 days in detention.<sup>262</sup>

Like the poets in Myanmar, poets and songwriters around the world used their lyricism and incisive words to perform and share commentary and criticism with the

public. Kuwaiti poet **Jamal Al-Sayer** was detained for his poem about corruption under the charge of "insulting the Emir," spreading false news that could harm Kuwait's image, and "misusing his mobile phone."<sup>263</sup> Sudanese poet **Yousef El Dosh** was interrogated and detained for five days in March 2021 on a complaint by the military-led Transitional Sovereignty Council for his recitation of his poem on television. The subject of El Dosh's poem was a violent military shooting of protesters holding a sit-in in Khartoum in 2019, known as the June 3 Massacre.<sup>264</sup> In Spain, **Pablo Rivadulla** began his nine-month imprisonment in February 2021 for his tweets and song lyrics that ostensibly "praised terrorism."<sup>265</sup> Two Cuban songwriters and rappers **Ramón Eusebio López Díaz** and **Richard Zamora**—known as El Invasor and El Radikal respectively—were newly detained during the summer of 2021. Both rappers are known for their hip-hop songs that are often critical of the Cuban government's repression and in support of free expression.<sup>266</sup> El Invasor, for example, has written songs about repression of free expression such as "Voy a hablar por mí" (*I Will*

259 "Tunisia arrests popular blogger for insulting president," *Middle East Eye*, June 2, 2021, [middleeasteye.net/fr/actu-et-enquetes/tunisie-blogueur-arrestation-liberte-expression-kais-saied-ben-ali](https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/actu-et-enquetes/tunisie-blogueur-arrestation-liberte-expression-kais-saied-ben-ali); Mayara, "Le blogueur Slim Jebali condamné à 6 mois de prison," *Tunisie Numerique*, November 13, 2021, [tunisienumerique.com/le-blogueur-slim-jebali-condamne-a-6-mois-de-prison](https://tunisienumerique.com/le-blogueur-slim-jebali-condamne-a-6-mois-de-prison)

260 "Tunisia condemned for trying an activist in military courts," *Monitor de Oriente*, June 5, 2021, [monitordeoriente.com/20210605-tunex-es-condenado-por-juzgar-a-un-activista-en-tribunales-militares/](https://www.monitordeoriente.com/20210605-tunex-es-condenado-por-juzgar-a-un-activista-en-tribunales-militares/); "Tunisia arrests popular blogger over insulting President Kais Saied," *Middle East Eye*, June 1, 2021, [middleeasteye.net/news/tunisia-arrests-blogger-over-insulting-president-kais-saied](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/tunisia-arrests-blogger-over-insulting-president-kais-saied)

261 "Prosecutor's Office used Twitter and Facebook posts to convict journalist Miguel Mendoza," *Artículo 66*, February 8, 2022, [articulo66.com/2022/02/08/fiscalia-utilizo-publicaciones-de-twitter-y-facebook-para-condenar-al-periodista-miguel-mendoza/](https://articulo66.com/2022/02/08/fiscalia-utilizo-publicaciones-de-twitter-y-facebook-para-condenar-al-periodista-miguel-mendoza/)

262 "Hamas security arrests journalist Alaa al-Mashrawi and confiscates 2 computers and 4 phones from his home," *Skeyes Media*, October 31, 2021, [skeyesmedia.org/ar/News/News/31-10-2021/9644](https://skeyesmedia.org/ar/News/News/31-10-2021/9644); Alaa Al-Mashrawi, "Touching moments for the moment journalist Alaa Al-Mashrawi met his family," Facebook, January 16, 2022, [facebook.com/alamashharawi/posts/2191296781024138](https://www.facebook.com/alamashharawi/posts/2191296781024138)

263 "Kuwait arrests poet activist for 'insulting' emir, family says," *Reuters*, July 7, 2021, [reuters.com/world/middle-east/kuwait-arrests-poet-activist-insulting-emir-family-says-2021-07-07/](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/kuwait-arrests-poet-activist-insulting-emir-family-says-2021-07-07/)

264 "Khartoum poet released from prison," *Dabanga*, March 11, 2021, [dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/khartoum-poet-released-from-prison](https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/khartoum-poet-released-from-prison); "Sudanese poets: With Yousef El-Dosh against the 'Transitional'," *Almayadeen*, March 8, 2021, [almayadeen.net/news/culture/1463274/%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%B4-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1](https://www.almayadeen.net/news/culture/1463274/%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%B4-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1); Zeinab Mohammed Salih, "Sudanese authorities raid offices of 2019 massacre tribunal," *Al Jazeera*, March 9, 2022, [aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/9/sudanese-authorities-raid-offices-of-2019-massacre-tribunal](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/9/sudanese-authorities-raid-offices-of-2019-massacre-tribunal)

265 Alfonso L. Congostrina, "Spanish rapper convicted over tweets arrested after ignoring prison deadline," *El País*, February 16, 2021, [english.elpais.com/society/2021-02-16/spanish-rapper-convicted-over-tweets-arrested-after-ignoring-prison-deadline.html](https://english.elpais.com/society/2021-02-16/spanish-rapper-convicted-over-tweets-arrested-after-ignoring-prison-deadline.html)

266 Santiago Pérez, "Cuba to Prosecute People Detained During Recent Protests," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 20, 2021, [wsj.com/articles/cuba-to-prosecute-people-detained-during-recent-protests-11626786827](https://www.wsj.com/articles/cuba-to-prosecute-people-detained-during-recent-protests-11626786827); "The regime frees rapper El Invasor, detained after forcibly removing him from his home," *Diario de Cuba*, June 22, 2022, [diariodecuba.com/derechos-humanos/1624313508\\_32078.html](https://www.diariodecuba.com/derechos-humanos/1624313508_32078.html)





**Status (right): Detained**

Benny Tai Yiu-ting (right) walks to Ma On Shan police station in February 2021, where he was charged with subversion and is now facing life imprisonment. Photo by Studio Incendo

*Speak for Myself*) and “Suéltelos” (*Let Them Go*). Both rappers were arrested the day after they joined major protests in Cuba on July 11.

Based on an examination of case data since the inaugural Freedom to Write Index 2019, nearly a dozen writers and public intellectuals have been subject to at least one further repeated arrest, detention, or reimprisonment following a prior release from prison. These situations of repeated jailings demonstrate the persistent intimidation and threats writers often face, especially if they continue to speak and write freely. Writer and academic **Benny Tai Yiu-ting** from Hong Kong had his bail revoked after

authorities slapped him with another spurious case, charging him among a swath of pro-democracy figures under the National Security Law. While some in the case were granted bail, the court revoked Tai’s existing release conditions and kept him in custody.<sup>267</sup> In most cases, these situations also underscore the precarious nature of being conditionally released from jail or prison, a status that dangles a sword of Damocles over those subject to it. Blogger **Huynh Thuc Vy** from Vietnam was abruptly rearrested in 2021 after the government sent a letter annulling the conditions of her bail, claiming that she negatively influenced security, order, and social safety during the postponement of her sentence.<sup>268</sup>

267 Jasmine Siu, “Benny Tai sent back to jail to await Hong Kong court’s ruling in Occupy Central appeal,” *South China Morning Post*, March 4, 2021, [scmp.com/news/hong-kong/law-and-crime/article/3124100/benny-tai-sent-back-jail-await-hong-kong-courts-ruling](https://scmp.com/news/hong-kong/law-and-crime/article/3124100/benny-tai-sent-back-jail-await-hong-kong-courts-ruling)

268 My Hang, “Huynh Thuc Vy ‘peacefully received’ news of execution of prison sentence for ‘insulting the National Flag,’” *BBC News*, December 1, 2021, [bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam-59486915](https://bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam-59486915)

Judicial controls imposed on writers who have been released from prison after serving their sentences, such as travel bans and formal state surveillance, have led to further detentions of **Guo Quan**, **Yang Maodong**, and **Sophia Huang Xueqin** in China since 2019. While the release of an individual from jail or prison is always welcome news and an essential first step towards fully restoring their freedom, conditions that limit writers' speech or work amount to arbitrary, unwarranted punishments that place continued constraints on their freedom to write.

In a handful of these cases, repeated arrests appear intended to essentially tire out their target and force submission, especially when the individual persists in writing and speaking out. Cuban lyricist and rapper **Maykel Castillo Pérez** was released after serving a year in prison in 2019, but was then arbitrarily arrested at least four separate times in 2020 and at least three separate times in 2021. He was most recently detained on May 18, 2021 and has remained in jail since.<sup>269</sup> Ugandan satirical novelist and fiction writer **Kakwenza Rukirabashaija** was arrested in 2021, after already enduring two separate detentions in 2020 for his fiction novel *The Greedy Barbarians*. Before his third arrest, he had published

**In a handful of these cases, repeated arrests appear intended to essentially tire out their target and force submission, especially when the individual persists in writing and speaking out.**

another book—*Banana Republic*—and received the PEN Pinter International Writer of Courage Award conferred by English PEN. In December 2021, he was abruptly arrested and charged with “offensive communication” for tweeting. In January 2022, after Rukirabashaija was finally released—and after he was tortured in custody and his lawfully ordered release was delayed—plainclothes state agents seized him mere hours after his release on bail and detained him in an unknown location.<sup>270</sup>

**Mohamed Tajadit**, an Algerian poet and activist, was detained in April 2021, one week after he was released from a four-month sentence for participating in the HIRAK (HIRAK meaning “movement” in Arabic) protests and speaking out against the president. This was the third time in three years Tajadit, who is affectionately known as the “poet of the HIRAK”<sup>271</sup> for reciting his verses during demonstrations, has been detained.<sup>272</sup>

---

269 “Régimen cubano libera al rapero Maykel Osorbo,” *ADN Cuba*, April 18, 2020, [adncuba.com/noticias-de-cuba/derechos-humanos/regimen-cubano-libera-al-rapero-maykel-osorbo/](https://adncuba.com/noticias-de-cuba/derechos-humanos/regimen-cubano-libera-al-rapero-maykel-osorbo/); Lázaro Javier Chirino, “Policía cubana detiene al rapero Maykel Osorbo: No sabemos dónde lo tienen, aseguran sus amigos,” *Ciber Cuba*, April 8, 2020, [cibercuba.com/noticias/2020-08-04-u199482-e199482-s27061-policia-cubana-detiene-al-rapero-maykel-osorbo-no-sabemos/](https://cibercuba.com/noticias/2020-08-04-u199482-e199482-s27061-policia-cubana-detiene-al-rapero-maykel-osorbo-no-sabemos/); “Rapero cubano Maykel Osorbo es detenido a golpes por 7 policías,” *Periódico Cubano*, September 28, 2020, [periodicocubano.com/el-rapero-cubano-maykel-osorbo-detenido-a-golpes-por-7-agentes-de-la-policia/](https://periodicocubano.com/el-rapero-cubano-maykel-osorbo-detenido-a-golpes-por-7-agentes-de-la-policia/); “Directorio Democrático Cubano denuncia incremento de la represión en Cuba,” *Martí*, November 16, 2020, [radiotelevisionmarti.com/a/directorio-democr%C3%A1tico-cubano-denuncia-incremento-de-la-represi%C3%B3n-en-cuba/279018.html](https://radiotelevisionmarti.com/a/directorio-democr%C3%A1tico-cubano-denuncia-incremento-de-la-represi%C3%B3n-en-cuba/279018.html); “Arrestan en Cuba a Maykel Osorbo, cantante de ‘Patria y vida,’” *El Pitazo*, March 9, 2021, [elpitazo.net/internacional/arrestan-en-cuba-a-maykel-osorbo-cantante-de-patria-y-vida/](https://elpitazo.net/internacional/arrestan-en-cuba-a-maykel-osorbo-cantante-de-patria-y-vida/); Karla Pérez, “ONU exige al régimen cubano dar a conocer paradero de Maykel Osorbo,” *ADN Cuba*, May 28, 2021, [adncuba.com/noticias-de-cuba/derechos-humanos/onu-exige-conocer-paradero-de-osorbo](https://adncuba.com/noticias-de-cuba/derechos-humanos/onu-exige-conocer-paradero-de-osorbo)

270 “Ugandan novelist detained again despite release order: Lawyer,” *Al Jazeera*, January 25, 2022, [aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/25/ugandan-novelist-detained-again-despite-release-order-lawyer](https://aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/25/ugandan-novelist-detained-again-despite-release-order-lawyer); “Ugandan author Kakwenza Rukirabashaija flees the country: Lawyer,” *Al Jazeera*, February 9, 2022, [aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/9/ugandan-author-flees-after-alleged-torture-says-lawyer](https://aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/9/ugandan-author-flees-after-alleged-torture-says-lawyer)

271 “Three Algerian activists on hunger strike hospitalized in prison protest,” *Al Arabiya News*, January 6, 2021, [english.alarabiya.net/News/north-africa/2021/01/06/Three-Algerian-activists-on-hunger-strike-hospitalized-in-prison-protest](https://english.alarabiya.net/News/north-africa/2021/01/06/Three-Algerian-activists-on-hunger-strike-hospitalized-in-prison-protest)

272 Jasper Hamann, “Algeria: HIRAK Protesters Call For Ramadan Amnesty For Activists,” *Morocco World News*, April 10, 2021, [moroccoworldnews.com/2021/04/339426/algeria-hirak-protesters-call-for-ramadan-amnesty-for-activists](https://moroccoworldnews.com/2021/04/339426/algeria-hirak-protesters-call-for-ramadan-amnesty-for-activists)



**Status: Detained**

Rapper Maykel Castillo Pérez, known as Maykel Osorbo, was detained on May 18, 2021 for ‘resistance’ for co-writing the Grammy-winning song “Patria y Vida.” *Photo by Anyelo Troya*

## MAYKEL CASTILLO PÉREZ (MAYKEL OSORBO)

**Creative Artist, Singer/Songwriter**

### 📍 Cuba

Maykel Castillo Pérez, known by his stage name Maykel Osorbo, is a Latin-Grammy nominated Cuban artist who has been vocal in his support of fellow censored members of the San Isidro Movement (MSI), a collective of artists, journalists, and academics, who use free expression to call attention to human rights issues in Cuba. Through this work, Pérez has been an active and notable voice in Cuba for years, which has also made him a moving target for Cuban authorities. Though he and his family have experienced continuous harassment by authorities since 2018, he was most recently detained on May 18, 2021, for writing the lyrics to and performing his song, “Patria y Vida,” (Homeland and Life).

Pérez’s song won two Grammy awards in the categories of “Best Urban Song” and “Song of the Year,” in November 2021, though he was not able to personally accept the awards due to his incarceration. Cuban authorities have unjustly accused Pérez, along with his co-lyricists, of resistance, contempt, and disobedience for the song’s lyrics, which play on language of the Cuban Revolution. “Patria y Vida,” the title of the song, is itself a reference to a speech Fidel Castro made on March 5, 1960, in which he proclaimed for Cuba, “Patria o muerte!” (Homeland or Death!), stating the commitment and intentions of the Cuban Revolution. In the lyrics of the song, Pérez and co-lyricists Yotuel, Descemer Bueno, Gente de Zona, and El Funky, describe the

poverty that people living in Cuba have suffered in the past and continue to experience in the present. The song denounces a life governed by ideological doctrines and expresses a wish to cease bloodshed between the state and citizens who think differently, stating “Se acabo!” (It’s over!).

---

*“Mi pueblo pide libertad, no más doctrinas  
My people ask for freedom, no more doctrines*

*Ya no gritemos patria o muerte sino patria y vida  
Let's not shout homeland or death but homeland and life*

*Y empezar a construir lo que soñamos  
And start building what we dream”  
- “Paria y Vida” featuring Maykel Osorbo*

---

Pérez has said that entering the music scene saved him in his youth, and his passion for music is evident in his championship of artistic expression. Pérez was first detained as a political prisoner in 2018, for organizing a concert in opposition to Decree 349, which allows the state to regulate artistic expression. He was detained for one and a half years, and from this time on, he became connected to human rights efforts and the goals of the MSI. Pérez then began to participate in public protests, including a demonstration in February 2020 in which people wore yellow hard hats to denounce the dangerous and crumbling housing infrastructure in Havana. He also posted on Facebook, calling the president to action. During previous unjust detentions, Pérez has undergone hunger strikes to demonstrate his opposition to the repression of artists, writers, and civil society in Cuba.

Pérez has currently been detained since May 18, 2021, in which time he has been subjected to extended periods of solitary confinement, as well as limited access to outside communication. Even further, nearly six months ago, Pérez was afflicted with a serious ailment: his lymphatic system is failing, producing swollen nodes throughout his body. His physical health has thus suffered as a result of his arbitrary detention, and he has yet to receive an accurate or reliable diagnosis while detained. Friends and family continue to urgently demand Pérez’s release so that his dire health condition may be properly treated. On February 1, 2022, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ruled that his detention has been arbitrary and called for his immediate release. Despite this, the prosecutor plans to request a 10-year prison sentence for Pérez.



**Status: In Exile**

Satirical novelist Kakwenza Rukirabashaija was arrested in December 2021 and tortured for criticizing President Museveni.

## KAKWENZA RUKIRABASHAIJA

**Literary Writer**

### 📍 Uganda

Kakwenza Rukirabashaija is an award-winning author whose satirical novels and online writings on human rights and free expression in Uganda have made him both an essential literary voice and the target of repeated attempts to stifle free speech. He was first arrested in April 2020 for his novel *The Greedy Barbarian*, which explores themes of high-level corruption in a fictional country, and again in September 2020 for *Banana Republic: Where Writing is Treasonous*, an account of the torture he was subjected to while in detention. Less than two months after receiving the PEN Pinter Prize International Writer of Courage Award from English PEN in October 2021, he was detained for a third time in retaliation for his writing.

On December 28, 2021, Rukirabashaija was arrested by Uganda's Special Forces Command (SFC) and held incommunicado for nearly two weeks, due to a series of tweets in which he criticized President Yoweri Museveni and his son Lieutenant General Muhoozi Kainerugaba. Reports of Rukirabashaija's torture in detention soon surfaced online—confirmed by photographs and videos of his injuries in addition to official court medical reports. Despite public outcry and a January 4, 2022, court ruling ordering his unconditional release, he remained in detention without charges. Facing mounting international pressure, including PEN America advocacy, on January 10 the High Court of Uganda in Kampala ordered authorities to produce Rukirabashaija before the court. Finally, in a secret hearing on January 11 he was charged with two counts of "offensive

communication" under Section 25 of the Computer Misuse Act for his tweets about President Museveni.

Rukirabashaija was granted bail and set to be conditionally released on January 25, 2022. However, before exiting Kitalya Prison, he was abducted by five military authorities and illegally detained, his wife and lawyers watching as an unmarked car sped through the prison gates carrying him to an unknown location. After being held overnight at SFC military barracks, he was dumped at his home in Iganga the next morning, weak and in urgent need of medical attention. Rukirabashaija managed to flee Uganda on February 9 and is now seeking medical treatment abroad for injuries he sustained while tortured in detention. Since his release, he has vowed to continue his writing, and is reportedly at work on a third book.

---

“When you torture a writer, he bleeds ink. You cannot just torture me and I keep quiet. No. . . I have to write about it. . . It is our responsibility as writers to reflect the times we are living in. . . We have to use our talents as writers, our gifts, and write about the injustices, the impunities that we are being subjected to. I call upon all writers, wherever you are, know that you can use your pen to do something.”

– **Kakwenza Rukirabashaija**

---

Rukirabashaija’s forced disappearance, arbitrary detention, and torture are emblematic of Ugandan authorities’ routine attempts to silence government criticism. In May 2021, following a wave of arbitrary arrests similar to Rukirabashaija’s, Lieutenant General Muhoozi was named in an International Criminal Court complaint over allegations of abductions and torture by the SFC. The repeated abuse of writers and activists for their peaceful expression demonstrates the declining rule of law in Uganda and its shrinking space for free speech. Politically motivated abductions have become a trademark of President Museveni’s regime.

# LANGUISHING BEHIND BARS: LONG-TERM IMPRISONMENTS AND LIFE SENTENCES

At least 62 of the writers included in the 2021 Freedom to Write Index are serving long-term sentences, ranging from 10 years to life in prison. Of these, at least 11 writers are serving sentences of life imprisonment—including the 7 Eritrean writers who have been detained incommunicado and without charge since the early 2000s after a crackdown on independent media and who are effectively condemned to de facto life sentences—and at least 34 writers had been serving sentences of more than 15 years. These 62 writers represent just over a fifth of the total number of writers behind bars, illustrating the extreme costs associated with free expression in many of the world's most closed and repressive countries, where the legal system has been completely subverted to political prerogatives and delivers harsh penalties rather than upholding the rule of law.

Because these cases can go years without a significant development, they often get little international media or foreign government attention, which can inadvertently further the interests of the governments behind these detentions; they wish to make these “problematic” individuals go away, and long sentences, often combined with significant restrictions on access or communications with the

detained individual, can effectively achieve that goal. It can also be understandably difficult for family and other advocates to sustain energy over such long periods, and governments enacting these long punishments rely on the likelihood of that fatigue. The Freedom to Write Index often focuses on new detentions and those individuals caught up in recent turmoil in places like Myanmar or Belarus. But it is also essential to shine a light on the writers and intellectuals whom governments are working hard to keep in the shadows.

The majority of these cases are in China, although Vietnam and Eritrea also stand out for their high concentrations of lengthy sentences and long-term imprisonments. In Vietnam, 70 percent of jailed writers are serving sentences of 10 or more years in prison, while six of the eight imprisoned writers in Eritrea have been arbitrarily detained for over 20 years; and one Eritrean writer for over 15 years. While few imprisoned writers around the world currently face an official death penalty, the handing down of long sentences and open-ended detentions is often itself a “life sentence,” particularly in the cases of writers who are elderly or in poor health at the start of their sentence, and are frequently subjected to

poor prison conditions, torture, and a lack of access to medical care. For example, the celebrated writer and publisher **Haji Mirzahid Kerimi** was said to have suffered from a serious health condition before passing away in Chinese custody at the age of 82.<sup>273</sup> Known for his books and poems about Uyghur literature and history, Kerimi died in January 2021 while serving an 11-year prison sentence for his writing. Kazakh poet and author **Aron Atabek** was released on medical parole in October 2021 after serving most of his 18-year prison sentence in Kazakhstan.<sup>274</sup> While incarcerated, he endured periods of solitary confinement, torture, and beatings, on top of already suffering from heart disease, diabetes, and arthritis. In November 2021, Atabek died while being treated in a Kazakh hospital for COVID-19, just one month after being released.<sup>275</sup>

**Abduljalil Al-Singace** represents another case in which long-term detentions pose severe and life-threatening health risks. A Bahraini blogger, human rights activist, and engineer, Al-Singace is a decade into a lifetime prison sentence. Best known for his blog *Al-Faseelah*, where he published articles critical of Bahrain's authoritarian governance, Al-Singace was first arrested in January 2009 for "inciting hatred

against the regime," and was later sentenced to life imprisonment for his peaceful role in Bahrain's 2011 uprising.<sup>276</sup> Since then, Al-Singace has been subjected to torture, denial of medical care, and long periods of incommunicado detention. In June 2021, United Nations experts called on Bahrain to immediately release Al-Singace, reporting that he had been forced to make confessions and that his religious books had been confiscated. Soon after, on July 8, 2021, he began a hunger strike to protest the conditions of his imprisonment, demanding the return of a book he had been writing about Bahraini language dialects that was confiscated by prison officials.<sup>277</sup> After more than 240 days of his hunger strike, his severely deteriorating health and lack of adequate medical treatment raise serious concerns that his life is at risk.<sup>278</sup>

In the case of Russian historian **Yury Dmitriev**, an initial conviction and sentence of 3 and a half years opened the door for the court to increase his sentence twice, ultimately handing him 15 years in prison. Dmitriev is best known for his research and writing that has uncovered the burial places and mass graves of thousands of victims of Stalin-era mass executions. His work to uncover the truth behind these horrific atrocities have made him a target of the Putin regime,

---

273 "Prominent Uyghur Poet and Author Confirmed to Have Died While Imprisoned," *Radio Free Asia*, January 25, 2021, [rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/poet-01252021133515.html](https://rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/poet-01252021133515.html)

274 "Kazakh Court Orders Release Of Jailed Dissident Poet, Reportedly In Poor Health," *Radio Free Europe*, October 1, 2021, [rferl.org/a/aron-atabek-release-prison-kazakhstan/31487474.html](https://rferl.org/a/aron-atabek-release-prison-kazakhstan/31487474.html)

275 "Released After 18 Years In Prison, Dissident Kazakh Poet Dies After COVID-19 Hospitalization," *Radio Free Europe*, November 24, 2021, [rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-atabek-dissident-poet-dead/31577362.html](https://rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-atabek-dissident-poet-dead/31577362.html)

276 "Abduljalil Al-Singace," Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy, accessed March 10, 2022, [birdbh.org/abduljalil-al-singace/](https://birdbh.org/abduljalil-al-singace/); "Sick Human Rights Defender Must be Release," Amnesty International, February 14, 2022, [amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/MDE1152322022ENGLISH.pdf](https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/MDE1152322022ENGLISH.pdf)

277 "Timeline: Dr Abduljalil Al-Singace's Hunger Strike," Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy, accessed March 10, 2022, [birdbh.org/2021/01/timeline-dr-abduljalil-alsingaces-hunger-strike/](https://birdbh.org/2021/01/timeline-dr-abduljalil-alsingaces-hunger-strike/); "Bahrain: UN expert alarmed by prolonged detention of human rights defenders," UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, June 22, 2021, [srdefenders.org/bahrain-un-expert-alarmed-by-prolonged-detention-of-human-rights-defenders](https://srdefenders.org/bahrain-un-expert-alarmed-by-prolonged-detention-of-human-rights-defenders); "Bahrain: Request for support to free imprisoned human rights defender Dr Abduljalil Al-Singace, on hunger strike since July 2021," PEN International, January 17, 2022, [pen-international.org/news/bahrain-request-for-support-to-free-imprisoned-human-rights-defender-dr-abduljalil-alsingace-on-hunger-strike-since-july-2021/](https://pen-international.org/news/bahrain-request-for-support-to-free-imprisoned-human-rights-defender-dr-abduljalil-alsingace-on-hunger-strike-since-july-2021/)

278 "Timeline: Dr Abduljalil Al-Singace's Hunger Strike," Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy, accessed March 10, 2022, [birdbh.org/2021/01/timeline-dr-abduljalil-alsingaces-hunger-strike/](https://birdbh.org/2021/01/timeline-dr-abduljalil-alsingaces-hunger-strike/)



**Writers and public intellectuals serving long-term sentences, ranging from 10 years to life in prison, comprise just over one-fifth of the 2021 Index.**

which has worked to rehabilitate the Soviet era and whitewash Stalin-era atrocities.<sup>279</sup> In September 2020, 2 months after his initial sentencing of 3 and a half years—and in a closed-door hearing without his lawyer—two acquittals in Dmitriev’s case were overturned and his prison sentence was extended to 13 years. With time served, he was set to be released the next month; but in this extrajudicial move, his imprisonment was extended. In a cruel move, a court added two more years to Dmitriev’s sentence on December 27, 2021.<sup>280</sup> Dmitriev is also the head of the Karelian branch of Russia’s oldest and most prominent human rights organization, Memorial. On December 28, 2021, as part of the regime’s apparent campaign to obscure history, the Russian Supreme Court ordered Memorial to liquidate itself and close down.<sup>281</sup>

Scholars, authors, and activists who are members of ethnic or religious minority groups are often at an increased risk of forced disappearances, open-ended detentions, and long-term prison sentences. In

Xinjiang, China, for example, Uyghur Muslim writers are commonly arrested and held incommunicado, only to resurface years later in Chinese-run detention centers, often hit with heavy sentences of more than 15 years in prison. Such is the case of poet **Gulnisa Imin**, a prolific writer and teacher of Uyghur literature. On December 4, 2015, Gulnisa Imin began her “One Thousand and One Nights” poetry project, writing and releasing one poem per night, often expressing anguish over China’s crackdown on Uyghur society.<sup>282</sup> In March 2018, on the 345th night of her poetry series, she was suddenly cut off from the internet and disappeared.<sup>283</sup> Apparently arrested on the grounds that her poetry “spread thoughts of separatism,” it was not until December 2021 that her detention was confirmed, along with her sentence of 17 years and 6 months in prison.<sup>284</sup> **Ablikim Kalkun**, a Uyghur comedian and creative artist, was also handed an 18-year sentence in late 2019 on similar charges, though once again, reports confirming his detention didn’t surface until fall 2020.<sup>285</sup>

Two Uyghur writers on PEN America’s case list, **Ilham Tohti** and **Nagy Muhammed**, are currently serving sentences of life imprisonment. Nagy Muhammed is a poet who worked to preserve Uyghur culture and heritage before his arrest in 2018, during a period

279 Alec Luhn, “Gulag grave hunter unearths uncomfortable truths in Russia,” *The Guardian*, August 3, 2017, [theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/03/gulag-grave-hunter-yury-dmitriyev-unearths-uncomfortable-truths-russia](https://theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/03/gulag-grave-hunter-yury-dmitriyev-unearths-uncomfortable-truths-russia)

280 Kristina Safonova, “Unusual, even for Russia,” *Meduza*, September 30, 2020, [meduza.io/en/feature/2020/09/30/unusual-even-for-russia](https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/09/30/unusual-even-for-russia); “Russian court extends jail term for Gulag historian to 15 years,” *Reuters*, December 27, 2021, [reuters.com/world/europe/russian-court-extends-jail-term-gulag-historian-15-years-2021-12-27/](https://reuters.com/world/europe/russian-court-extends-jail-term-gulag-historian-15-years-2021-12-27/)

281 Andrew E. Kramer and Ivan Nechepurenko, “Russian Court Orders Prominent Human Rights Group to Shut,” *The New York Times*, December 28, 2021, [nytimes.com/2021/12/28/world/europe/russia-memorial-human-rights.html](https://nytimes.com/2021/12/28/world/europe/russia-memorial-human-rights.html)

282 Abdullah Qazanchi and Abduweli Ayup, “The Disappearance of Uyghur Intellectual and Cultural Elites: A New Form of Eliticide,” Uyghur Human Rights Project, December 7, 2021, [uhrp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/The-Disappearance-of-Uyghur-Intellectual-and-Cultural-Elites\\_2021-12-07-1.pdf](https://uhrp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/The-Disappearance-of-Uyghur-Intellectual-and-Cultural-Elites_2021-12-07-1.pdf); Shohret Hoshur, “Uyghur poet imprisoned on separatism charges in China’s Xinjiang,” *Radio Free Asia*, December 15, 2021, [rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/gulnisa-emin-12152021171144.html](https://rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/gulnisa-emin-12152021171144.html)

283 Shohret Hoshur, “Uyghur poet imprisoned on separatism charges in China’s Xinjiang,” *Radio Free Asia*, December 15, 2021, [rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/gulnisa-emin-12152021171144.html](https://rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/gulnisa-emin-12152021171144.html)

284 “Gulnisa Emin, the author of ‘One Thousand and One Nights,’ was sentenced to 17 years and 6 months in prison,” *Radio Free Asia*, December 6, 2021, [rfa.org/uyghur/xewerler/ming-bir-keche-12062021140942.html](https://rfa.org/uyghur/xewerler/ming-bir-keche-12062021140942.html)

285 “Xinjiang Authorities Jail Prominent Uyghur Comedian Over ‘Extremist and Separatist’ Songs,” *Radio Free Asia*, October 6, 2020, [rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/comedian-10062020124834.html](https://rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/comedian-10062020124834.html)



Protestors hold a demonstration in November 2021 called “We will not let the Memorial be extinguished.” One month later, the Russian government ordered the liquidation of the organization. *Photo by Tomaz Molina*

that saw a heightened wave of arbitrary arrests and disappearances of Uyghur activists and scholars.<sup>286</sup> Muhammed was handed a lifetime prison sentence in September 2020.<sup>287</sup> Likewise, Ilham Tohti, a world-renowned writer, economist, and professor, is serving a sentence of life in prison on charges of separatism.<sup>288</sup>

Detained by Chinese authorities in January 2014, Tohti has been called a “Uyghur Mandela” for his decades spent working to promote peace and understanding between Uyghurs and Han Chinese.<sup>289</sup> Since his arrest, he has been held incommunicado, with no access to family or lawyers since 2017, while allegations of his torture in custody continue to cause

286 Chris Buckley, “China’s Prisons Swell After Deluge of Arrests Engulfs Muslims,” *The New York Times*, August 31, 2019, [nytimes.com/2019/08/31/world/asia/xinjiang-china-uyghurs-prisons.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/31/world/asia/xinjiang-china-uyghurs-prisons.html)

287 “China: Further information: Life imprisonment for missing Kazakh writer: Nagyz Muhammed,” Amnesty International, October 29, 2020, [amnesty.org/en/documents/asa17/3279/2020/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa17/3279/2020/en/)

288 Edward Wong, “China Sentences Uighur Scholar to Life,” *The New York Times*, September 23, 2014, [nytimes.com/2014/09/24/world/asia/china-court-sentences-uyghur-scholar-to-life-in-separatism-case.html?smid=share](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/24/world/asia/china-court-sentences-uyghur-scholar-to-life-in-separatism-case.html?smid=share)

289 Helena Kennedy, “We Uyghurs Have No Say by Ilham Tohti review – a people ignored,” *The Guardian*, March 9, 2022, [theguardian.com/books/2022/mar/09/we-uyghurs-have-no-say-ilham-tohti-review-background-genocide-china](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/mar/09/we-uyghurs-have-no-say-ilham-tohti-review-background-genocide-china)

concern for his health and well-being.<sup>290</sup> In 2014, he was the recipient of PEN America's Freedom to Write Award, and in December 2019, Tohti's daughter accepted the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought on his behalf.<sup>291</sup>

In extreme cases, long-term imprisonments are compounded by capital punishment. In Iran, the writer and activist **Arzhang Davoodi**, detained since 2003, faces the death penalty for his peaceful political advocacy and writing. Since his initial arrest, Davoodi has suffered prolonged periods of solitary confinement, torture, and repeated transfers, while being denied access to his family and lawyers.<sup>292</sup> In 2014, he was sentenced to death after already enduring 11 years of detention.<sup>293</sup> **Junaid Hafeez**,

a writer and academic who lectured at Bahauddin Zakariya University in Pakistan, was arrested in March 2013 for allegedly insulting the Prophet Muhammad on social media.<sup>294</sup> He has been held in solitary confinement, since 2014, after his lawyer, Rashid Rehman, was murdered in retaliation for agreeing to defend his case.<sup>295</sup> In 2019 Hafeez was found guilty of blasphemy and sentenced to death.<sup>296</sup>

Many of these cases fall off the public radar as the years accumulate and the initial sense of outrage has waned. Such cases require sustained attention in order to draw media attention and to support lobbying efforts before governments and international organizations to work to secure their release.

---

290 "PEN Condemns the Denial of Family Visits or Support in Prison for Ilham Tohti," PEN America, May 15, 2015, [pen.org/pen-condemns-the-denial-of-family-visits-or-support-in-prison-for-ilham-tohti/](https://pen.org/pen-condemns-the-denial-of-family-visits-or-support-in-prison-for-ilham-tohti/); "China: Human rights defenders given long jail terms, tortured - UN expert," United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, June 28, 2021, [ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27221&LangID=E](https://ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27221&LangID=E); "Ilham Tohti," United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, accessed March 17, 2022, [uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/ilham-tohti](https://uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/ilham-tohti)

291 "PEN Honors Ilham Tohti with PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award," PEN America, March 31, 2014, [pen.org/press-release/pen-honors-ilham-tohti-with-penbarbara-goldsmith-freedom-to-write-award/](https://pen.org/press-release/pen-honors-ilham-tohti-with-penbarbara-goldsmith-freedom-to-write-award/); Jonas Ekblom, "Daughter accepts EU Parliament prize on behalf of Uighur activist," *Reuters*, December 18, 2019, [reuters.com/article/us-eu-sakharov-prize/daughter-accepts-eu-parliament-prize-on-behalf-of-uighur-activist-idUSKBN1YM1GQ](https://reuters.com/article/us-eu-sakharov-prize/daughter-accepts-eu-parliament-prize-on-behalf-of-uighur-activist-idUSKBN1YM1GQ)

292 "Iran: A Renewed Call For Information About Political Prisoner Arzhang Davoodi And To Save His Life," National Council of Resistance of Iran, June 2, 2021, [ncr-iran.org/en/ncri-statements/iran-a-renewed-call-for-information-about-political-prisoner-arzhang-davoodi-and-to-save-his-life/](https://ncr-iran.org/en/ncri-statements/iran-a-renewed-call-for-information-about-political-prisoner-arzhang-davoodi-and-to-save-his-life/)

293 "Iranian writer sentenced to death: Arzhang Davoodi," Amnesty International, July 24, 2014, [amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/042/2014/en/](https://amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/042/2014/en/)

294 "Junaid Hafeez: Academic sentenced to death for blasphemy in Pakistan," *BBC News*, December 21, 2019, [bbc.com/news/world-asia-50878432](https://bbc.com/news/world-asia-50878432)

295 "Pakistan 'blasphemy lawyer' shot dead in Multan office," *BBC News*, May 7, 2014, [bbc.com/news/world-asia-27319433](https://bbc.com/news/world-asia-27319433)

296 Asad Hashim, "Pakistani academic Junaid Hafeez sentenced to death for blasphemy," *Al Jazeera*, December 21, 2019, [aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/21/pakistani-academic-junaid-hafeez-sentenced-to-death-for-blasphemy](https://aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/21/pakistani-academic-junaid-hafeez-sentenced-to-death-for-blasphemy)

# CONCLUSION

On January 8, 2022, the Iranian poet, screenwriter, and filmmaker **Baktash Abtin** died of COVID-19 in a Tehran hospital, while still in state custody serving a six-year sentence in retaliation for his writing and his advocacy for free expression in Iran. Abtin, alongside his fellow members of the Iranian Writers' Association, **Reza Khandan Mahabadi** and **Keyvan Bajan**, had received the PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write Award in October 2021.

Abtin's devastating and preventable death highlights the severity of the conditions for prisoners in Iran, and the government's callous disregard for those unjustly detained in its prisons. And it makes plain the heightened dangers facing those in prison around the world in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; even as some of the world begins to emerge from the constraints of the worst stages of the pandemic, the risks to those behind bars remain high. Abtin's death also illustrates the courage that writers exhibit when they speak up against repression, when they dare to dissent, and when they insist on continuing to create, no matter the potential cost.

Global solidarity for writers behind bars plays an essential role in sustaining them and their families, and in ensuring that government attempts to silence them do not succeed. Continuing to elevate their work and draw public and media attention to their plight can help to tip the scales for governments and make release more likely. This year's Index includes many writers who have since been freed, reflecting the fact that such efforts can work, but also the reality that many of the writers released in 2021 still face conditions on their freedom that limit their ability to travel and, in some cases, to speak or write freely.

In videotaped remarks he made to accept the Freedom to Write award while on a brief furlough from prison last fall, **Baktash Abtin** said, "I hope for a day when no one in the world is imprisoned for their thoughts and for having such a beautiful demand as freedom." His death must serve as a source of inspiration to continue to call for the freedom of all writers unjustly detained around the world.

# ABOUT THE FREEDOM TO WRITE INDEX

The 2021 Freedom to Write Index provides a count of the writers, academics, and public intellectuals who were held in prison or detention during 2021 in relation to their writing or for otherwise exercising their freedom of expression. For the past century, PEN America and the global PEN network have defended the rights of writers and intellectuals to express themselves freely, and advocated on behalf of those who have faced threats as a result of their writing or other forms of expression. The criteria for inclusion in the Freedom to Write Index thus adhere closely to PEN International's standards for selection for their annual Case List.

The Index is a count of individuals who primarily write literature, poetry, or other creative writing; essays or other nonfiction or academic writing; or online commentary. The Index includes journalists only in cases where they also fall into one of the former categories, or are opinion writers or columnists. To be included in the count, individuals must have spent at least 48 hours behind bars in a single instance of detention between January 1 and December 31, 2021.

For the purposes of the Index and the status designations used to classify cases, imprisonment is considered to be when an individual is serving a sentence following a conviction, while detention accounts for individuals held in custody pending charges, or those who have been charged and are being

held prior to conviction. Writers are, of course, also subject to other types of threats, including censorship, harassment, legal charges without detention, or physical attacks, and these are also analyzed to a lesser degree in this report.

PEN America works closely with the PEN International Secretariat and Writers in Prison Committee (WiPC), as well as other members of the global PEN network. The Index and this report draw significantly from PEN International's Case Lists, which in turn reflect input from PEN Centers around the world. The cases included in the Index are also based on PEN America's own internal case list, the Writers at Risk Database, and PEN America's Artists at Risk Connection (ARC) case list. Additionally, PEN America draws from press reports; reports from the families, lawyers, and colleagues of those in prison; and data from other international human rights, press freedom, academic freedom, and free expression organizations. The methodology behind the Index is explained in greater detail here.

The annual Freedom to Write Index has become an essential component of PEN America's long-standing Writers at Risk Program, which encompasses support for and advocacy on behalf of writers under threat around the world. Another flagship component of PEN America's year-round advocacy is the PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write Award, given annually to

an imprisoned writer targeted for exercising their freedom of expression. Of the 51 jailed writers who have received the Freedom to Write Award from 1987 to 2021, 45 have been released due in part to the global attention and pressure the award generates. PEN America also publishes the Writers at Risk Database, a searchable catalog of the writers, journalists, artists, academics, and public intellectuals under threat around the world, including those counted in the 2019 Index and 2020 Index. This database offers researchers, rights advocates, and the public a wealth of actionable evidence of ongoing global threats to free expression.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

PEN America is deeply grateful to the John Templeton Foundation for its generous support of the Freedom to Write Index and Writers at Risk Database. PEN America also extends its thanks to PEN International—both the Secretariat and the Writers in Prison Committee (WiPC)—for its collaboration on this project. The Freedom to Write Index report was written by PEN America Director of Free Expression at Risk Programs Dr. Karin Deutsch Karlekar and Free Expression Programs Coordinator Veronica Tien. Free Expression Programs interns Daria Locher and Rosy Fitzgerald provided essential support with research, data analysis, drafting, references, and fact-checking. Washington Director Nadine Farid Johnson provided support drafting and reviewing, and Legislative and Research Analyst Andy Gottlieb also provided essential review and support. Eurasia

Program Director Polina Sadovskaya, Artists at Risk Connection (ARC) Director Julie Trébault, and Artists at Risk Connection Program Assistant Juliette Verlaque provided assistance on case research.

The report was reviewed and edited by James Tager, PEN America’s director of research, and by Summer Lopez, senior director of Free Expression Programs, who also provided guidance and oversight for the project.

PEN America offers special thanks to interns, volunteers, and fellows Ashley Arancibia, Jake Neuberger, Chiara Caremoli, D. Zhang, Violet Barton, Elizabeth Huang, Juan Fueyo-Gomez, Tala Semaan, and Dounia Benslimane for their support with research and fact-checking throughout the year.