

NEWS

# Reporters Without Borders honors journalists who fear for their lives

Three female journalists from Malta, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam have received this year's press freedom prizes awarded by the NGO Reporters Without Borders. Two were not allowed to travel to collect their award.



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Sometimes the fight for press freedom is so desperate that journalists are forced to become activists. "I had an interview with the BBC recently, when they said: you're not a journalist, you're an activist," said Caroline Muscat, co-founder of Malta's investigative network [Shift News](#). "I'm sorry, we don't have a choice anymore. If we're not going to defend the freedom of the press, who is? If the journalists aren't going to do it, who is?"

Muscat was one of three journalists from very different countries, but all with reasons to fear for their lives, to win the prizes presented by the NGO [Reporters Without Borders](#) at an event in Berlin on Thursday evening.

Only Muscat was able to appear in person to collect her "Prize for Independence." Vietnamese blogger Pham Doan Trang, who won the "Prize for Impact," and [Saudi Arabian women's rights activist Eman al-Nafjan](#), winner of the "Prize for Courage," both remain barred from leaving their countries, their websites blocked, and under constant threat of detention and harassment.

Both women were represented by friends who have moved to freer countries, and who are also committed to the struggle for press freedom. Trang sent Huu Long Trinh, a Taipei-based journalist who co-founded the civil society organization Legal Initiatives for Vietnam





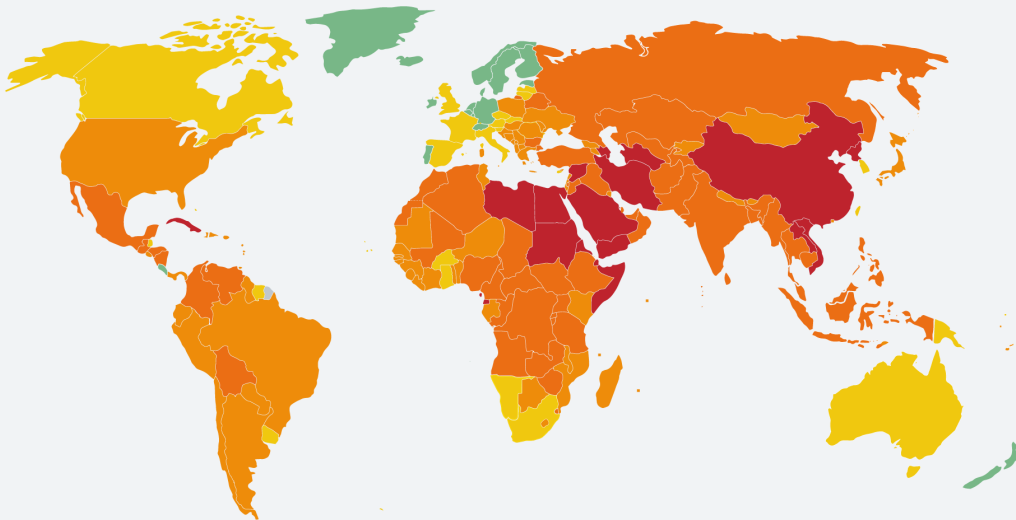
(LIV), while al-Nafjan was represer who, following her former teacher's [women's rights from her home in H](#)

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Maltese journalist Caroline Muscat on guaranteeing press freedom: 'If the journalists aren't going to do it, who is?'

## World Press Freedom Index 2019



- Good situation
- Satisfactory situation
- Noticeable problem
- Difficult situation
- Very serious situation

Source: Reporters without Borders | April 2019

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### Saudi Arabia and Vietnam: different regimes, same repression

Reporters Without Borders is open about the fact that its prizes are specifically meant to apply pressure on the governments in question: al-Nafjan's prize was, one spokeswoman said, a direct consequence of the killing last year of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey.

Al-Najjar has often pointed out how the Saudi Arabian government is especially keen to massage its image at moments when its brutality becomes blindingly apparent, for instance by [lifting the ban on women driving](#) as [its role in the atrocities in Yemen](#) became public.

"I believe the timing of the so-called reforms came in a period when Saudi Arabia was receiving a lot of backlash of the crimes they committed in Yemen," al-Najjar told DW. "After the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, they received a backlash from traditional media: Shortly after, they released some of the women activists, so the world would be happy and forget a

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Al-Najjar says there are still dozens of people in Saudi prisons for writing blogs about the regime, or even for expressing sympathy for people who have written such blogs. "The majority of them are facing charges related to terrorism," she said. "But after the backlash of the traditional media and international pressure, the government changed that into cybercrime."

Read more: [Murdered Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi's last words](#)

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Murdered Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi



Press freedom in Vietnam: According to the country's journalists, there is no such thing

The Vietnamese regime is not religious, but hardly less repressive. Vietnam is still a communist country dominated by a single political party that allows no private, independent media at all.

For that reason, LIV has set up two magazines: *Luat Khoa*, which focuses on political and legal issues, and the English-language [The Vietnamese](#), while also training and providing resources to journalists in Vietnam to produce their own work. "What we're trying to do is to make free press a reality in Vietnam," Huu Long Trinh told DW.

Trinh said Trang is helping to produce these magazines in the face of extreme government harassment: "She's been detained by police countless times, beaten up a few times," he said. "She's not even allowed to stay in one place for more than a week. She has to move to different places every one or two weeks. So what I'm trying to do now is have her be recognized internationally more, so that it could be safer for her at home."

Read more: [Daphne Caruana Galizia, the woman who 'broke the mold'](#)

### Malta: 'hub of corruption'

Of the three honorees, Muscat's story hits closest to the bone for the European Union, which has learned to tolerate Malta — which she calls a "hub of corruption" — as a member of the bloc for years. "Most of the investigative work that journalists are doing in Europe, at some point Malta comes into the picture," she said. "We're talking about corruption and money-laundering."

It was after [Daphne Caruana Galizia](#) was murdered in October 2017 after uncovering corruption in the Maltese government, that Muscat decided to quit her post as editor of *The Times of Malta*.

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Daphne Caruana Galizia's murder has still not been solved

The death of her friend changed everything. "I could no longer be the editor of a newspaper that is not understanding the significance of the assassination of a journalist," she said. "So we felt the need for change. So I brought people together to set up *The Shift News* to continue the work that we could do, that Daphne Caruana Galizia had started."

The government, she says, is doing what it can to bury Galizia's memory: The three men arrested for her murder in December 2017 have still not faced trial, and, according to Muscat, [flowers and candles that left at her memorial](#) are removed on almost a daily basis.

A glance at the Reporters Without Borders map that rates press freedom standards across the world suggests that the press is only really free in a small pocket of the world: mainly a handful of countries in northern Europe.

But the NGO has reasons to claim that its work, and its prizes, have an effect: The 2001 winner Reza Alijani was released from an Iranian prison a few days after winning.

Nevertheless, one of last year's winners, the Indian author Swati Chaturvedi, who exposed the troll army of India's governing party, said the award was a sad testament to the desperate situation the press is in. "I don't think you should get a prize for doing your job," she told DW on Wednesday. "But the way the press is being disempowered across the world... It's very sad that you're rewarded for doing your job."



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JOURNALISM: A DANGEROUS ACTIVITY

Viktoria Marinova, Bulgaria

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The 30-year-old TV presenter had recently hosted investigative journalists working on alleged involving European Union funds. She was brutally murdered in the northern Bulgarian town ( October 2018.

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## DW RECOMMENDS

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### Saudi women denounce male guardianship on Twitter

After the publication of a report condemning women's legal subjugation in Saudi Arabia, a Twitter campaign emerged demanding its end. The practice turns grown women into minors under male custody before the law. (20.09.2016)

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### Women's rights in Saudi Arabia: A timeline

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has lifted its driving ban on women and made other strides toward granting women equal rights. But progress is incredibly slow, and lags far behind the rest of the world. (07.01.2019)

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### Where freedom of the press doesn't exist

Many states routinely attack and intimidate journalists and bloggers to keep them in check. In its 2015 press freedom index, Reporters Without Borders ranks the performance of 180 countries. These states come in last. (30.04.2015)

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