

# The tools of freedom

## SANA'A, YEMEN

There comes a time in the life of every person and nation to decide, in the struggle between truth and lies, if they will choose to stand on the side of good or evil -- this was the case put by English writer James Russell Lowell 150 years ago. You'd think he was writing about contemporary Yemen.

Newspapers here include al-Ayyam, al-Gumhuryah and al-Thawra, known in English as The Days, The Republic and The Revolution. At least a dozen other newspapers are read in this capital city. None, however, carry the western banner The Free Press. That's because the words "free" and "press" are yet to be forged together in this part of the world.

Consider al-Shomu'a or The Candle, a daily paper known for exposing corruption and the inadequacies of some officials. It was recently shut down. Indeed, the latest report by Washington-based Human Rights Watch verifies what journalists here already know: they can be harassed, jailed or banned from their writing careers. That's because under Yemeni press law, it's easy to level a charge of so-called "defamation" against journalists.

Not long ago, things were brighter. It was the spring of 1991, when North and South Yemen unified, and this country undertook an exceptional experiment in the Arab world. It's called democracy.

While its theocratic neighbours watched in horror, Yemen birthed 40 political parties in anticipation of the first free elections ever held in the Arabian Peninsula. In 1993 they took place.

Yemen then introduced relative freedom of the press in its new constitution. The government could no longer close newspapers without court approval. Overnight, publications doubled to more than 100, half of them newspapers.

The wheels of Yemen's promising change, however, soon wobbled off. Yemen opposed America's Gulf War, because it considered the Iraq-Kuwait problem one to be solved by Arabs. For that stance, it was punished by neighbouring Saudi Arabia, which kicked out as many as two million Yemenis working there. Dependant families back in Yemen lost their income and the country had to absorb the newly-returned unemployed.

Then, in 1994 this fledgling democracy fell into civil war when the oil-producing South pushed to secede. The three-month war cost 7,000 lives and sucked an estimated \$5.5 billion US from an already impoverished economy. It effectively killed the political

opposition, along with many newspapers.

Laws protecting a free press remain intact, on paper. But the Ministry of Information can still control newspapers by issuing, and revoking, licences. One no-no, according to Yemen's penal code, is to publish things that "threaten public order or the public interest," or "false stories intended to damage Arab and friendly countries or their relations with Yemen."

Criticizing Islam, in particular, can result in jail or fines, or, if a mild case, just a beating. Two years ago, for example, journalists were beaten by police for reporting on the so-called "Sana'a Ripper," Mohammed Adam Omar, a Sudanese national convicted of brutally raping and killing female university students. Even female journalists were harassed for telling the story. Fundamentalists thought the reporting cast a black eye on Islam and that it was further proof that educating women can only lead to trouble.

With such uncertainties, journalists, including foreign journalists living here such as myself, are left to practise various degrees of self-censorship on a range of issues.

Enter The Yemen Times.

Launched just before unification by University of Sana'a professor Abdulazia al-Saqqaf, Yemen's first English paper garnered a reputation for hard-nosed attacks against the government. After he was arrested for certain coverage of the civil war, in 1995 al-Saqqaf became the first Arab to receive the International Freedom of the Press Award from the U.S. National Press Club.

His independent paper was charged again in 1998 after it accused some officials of siphoning international development funds into their bank accounts. Prosecution was dropped the next year after al-Saqqaf was killed in a traffic accident. He has since been heralded as a martyr for freedom.

"We need help," acknowledges his 29-year-old son, Walid, who now publishes the paper.

Indeed, more than half of Yemen's 20 million people can't read Arabic, let alone English. And The Times has limited resources.

But there are an estimated 50,000 English readers among Sana'a's million souls. So, with photos of the late al-Saqqaf hanging in rooms throughout The Times' building, alongside appeals for God's strength, the paper now runs 15,000 copies a week to a significant readership base that includes many of Yemen's reputable decision-makers.

It's the type of thing one can't help but cheer, especially as one discovers more about this proverbial underdog country. Yemen is seen as the joke of this region, its people the low caste of the oil-rich Middle East. I see it more as the poor kid who studied hard to break free from a rotten neighbourhood to make a new life for himself, only to be

expelled for fighting the class bully.

Indeed, despite its slide this past decade, Yemen still clings to freedoms that are unique to this part of the world. Consider that media in neighbouring theocratic countries. are completely state-controlled.

Looking beyond this region, one is reminded of other dark territories. According to Reporters Without Borders, 489 journalists were arrested around the world in 2001. That's 50 per cent more than the year before. More than 100 are still in jail, largely in Iran, China and Nepal.

Last year 37 journalists were also killed, up 13 from the year before. We're familiar with the recent, highly publicized murder of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl in Pakistan. But China, Bangladesh, Thailand and the former Yugoslavia actually take the prize for killing the most reporters, usually after they brought to light illicit actions of authorities.

What I fear is that while the West is now pre-occupied with American politics and hunting al-Qaida, Yemen is seen as a one dimensional place harbouring everyone's worst terrorist fears. In truth, this country has pursued promising ideals against tough odds. And its press, the one element that can keep it from falling from the semblance of democracy it still has, quite frankly, could use some help.

Some broadcasters are helping Arab-Muslim culture understand the value of a free press. Al Jazeera, for example, the Qatar-based newscast known for first showing Osama bin Laden's videos, has helped some officials feel more comfortable with an independent media, while also making links to the West by sharing news with organizations such as CNN.

Large illiterate populations such as those in Yemen, however, remain ignorant of the larger world because they rely on state-controlled broadcasters. Internet use does not yet balance that out. The capital of Sana'a now has about 70 Internet cafes. But countrywide, just one-seventh of one per cent of the population of 20 million has Internet access, and just one quarter of that number have their own computer.

Because of poor wages, most print journalists here also carry other jobs, something that puts them odds with free reporting if that other job is, for example, in government. Without formal training, many lack skills. And virtually all of Yemen's newspapers lack resources. Only one, in fact, owns its own printing press.

Which is all to say that if James Russel Lowell is right -- and I believe he is -- that there comes a time in the life of every person and nation to choose between truth and lies, then the developed world needs to arrive in a bigger way in places such as Yemen. Native English speakers are valued like gold here. So why aren't there more? Why, up to now, has there been no internationally-sponsored media training?

"A good journalist will comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." I was encouraged to find that creed hung on a wall during my first visit to The Times. Without support, however, such an significant credo can't be put into real life. Further, when people's lives are governed by fear, notions of truth get rather muddy.

Maybe we should look at the West's own history and, in particular, the emergence in the 20th century of a stronger, socially responsible, press, especially in North America, where anyone was granted the right to speak in the public square.

That gives hope for this country, strange and uncertain as it is. Cultural change may be painfully slow, but we know from history it happens.

Societies have shown a great capacity to develop systems of control, so a free press is our prophetic conscience, our soul, our true north, breaking down systems that are, in the end, destructive for everyone. American poet Walt Whitman put it aptly when he said the newspaper is, in fact, our Bible of democracy.

But it's really up to the "haves" to help bring that spirit of liberty to those still on the journey. With new media in today's shrinking world, meeting that challenge has become realistic. Possibilities for a brighter millennium are waiting.

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