

PEN magazine

November 2024

PRESS

Fiji media
finally free

A Burmese
writer in exile

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accused of
silencing

Capital
punishment
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The absurd trials
of four Russian
journalists



pen
SYDNEY

FROM OUR WRITERS

PEN Sydney works to free writers who are at risk of being silenced. The words of these writers give us the motivation to continue.

JIMMY LAI is a **pro-democracy** campaigner, writer, and founder of the now-shuttered *Apple Daily* newspaper. He has been imprisoned in Hong Kong in **solitary confinement** since **December 2020**.

'The Chinese and Hong Kong SAR governments tried to silence my dad by throwing him in jail. **But that silence is deafening.** Today I want the whole world to hear his story.'

Sebastien Lai, Jimmy Lai's son, addressing the United Nations Human Rights Council, June 2023.

Cover photograph from funeral ceremony of Al-Quds TV journalist **Cebr Abu Hedrus**, killed in Israeli attacks on Nuseirat refugee camp on 30 December 2023.
Photography by Doaa Albaz, sourced from *Anadolu Agency*.

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Ma Thida: Prison and PEN

Ma Thida is a **surgeon** by training, a **writer** by calling, and a **dissident** by necessity

Born in 1966 in Yangon (then Rangoon in Burma) into a liberal Buddhist family, Thida describes her current status as ‘paper-less’, living in Berlin and travelling with a ‘German-issue alien passport’.

At the end of her nearly month-long tour of Australia, wowing audiences at the Writers’ Festivals in Sydney, Byron and Brisbane, she is taking some time out to see the West Australian countryside, driven around by an old friend ‘Khin’ and is speaking to the community in Perth, the city with the largest Myanmar migrant population in Australia.

Meeting Ma Suu

1988 was a complex and hopeful year in Myanmar's politics, though Thida does not agree that it was in any sense decisive or pivotal. Military dictator Ne Win stepped down, passing the baton to the younger generation of military rulers. The so-called *8888 Uprising* seemed to drive a momentum for democratic change.

At this time, **prominent politician, diplomat, and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi**, had returned to Myanmar after decades abroad to nurse her mother, and was addressing massive anti-military crowds in Yangon where she was welcomed everywhere as a **saviour** by the masses.

Ma Thida, by now a published author, and with a nearly completed medical degree, had the opportunity to work closely with Aung San Suu Kyi as her **media officer**. ‘I tried to keep my distance from her initially,’ Thida recalls, ‘fearing that her charm might cloud my judgement. But I soon realised her **genuine eagerness to learn about her people and her passionate commitment to change**. It was inspiring, although, I was really close to her for only a year or so.’

Ma Thida joined the National League for Democracy, the NLD. For a year she criss-crossed the country with Suu Kyi, becoming documentary maker and NLD party dog’s-body by day and doctor by night. ‘Everyone running around during the day in the **crowds invariably suffered bruises or at least exhaustion. So my mobile “clinic” was full** in the evenings wherever we stopped for the night. I will never forget this trip and seeing how the public welcomed Ma Suu and all of us so warmly, despite knowing there were Military Intelligence personnel following us,’ she recalls in her 2016 memoir: *[Prisoner of Conscience: My Steps through Insein](#)*.

Thida’s campaign role ended when **Suu Kyi was put under house arrest in 1989** and she returned to her medical internship and her writing. The complex politics of opposition to the military continued alongside, which she has described in her memoir.



Ma Thilda. Photograph by Cole Witt.

Prison Years

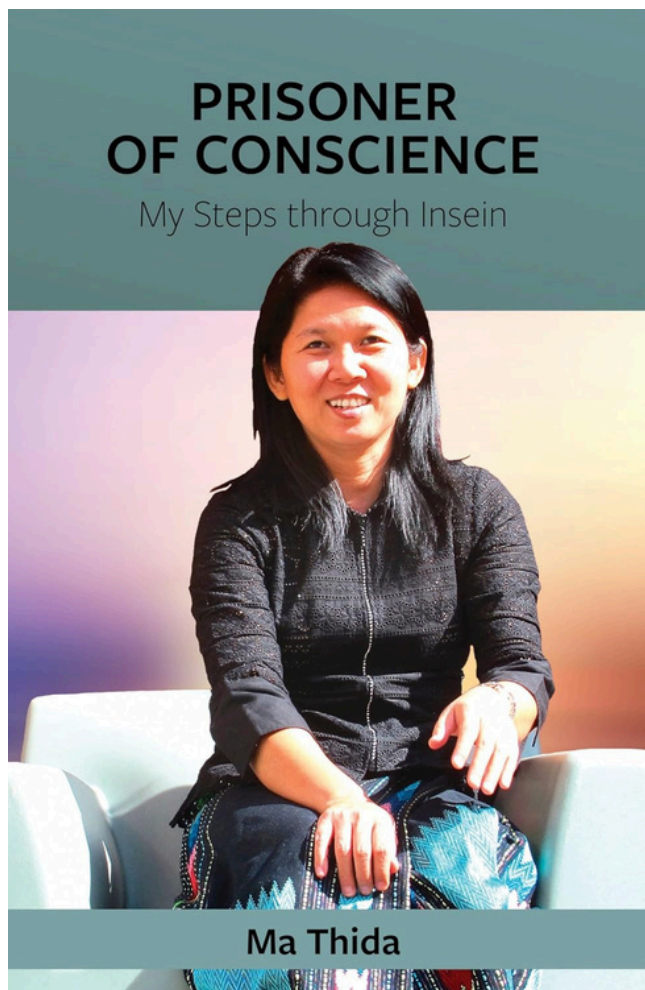
Khin, who now lives a quiet suburban life in Perth, met Thida in 1997, in the notorious **Insein Prison**. Thida was serving a **20-year sentence**, held alone in one of the small cells in a compound alongside other rooms filled with female political prisoners and a small number of petty criminals.

*When Thida was first introduced to **pro-democracy activism** inside the political ‘maze’ of Myanmar, at the start of her medical studies in the early 1980s, she had **always understood that prison might be the price to pay**.*

She had been questioned several times by the authorities and had learnt to be interrogated without losing her composure or giving away relevant information.

When in **August 1993**, she was finally **arrested, detained and sentenced to 20 years, for endangering public peace and distributing unlawful literature**, she said to herself, ‘Why not! This might be my chance to emulate the many seniors I admire, who have all written prison memoirs!’

‘So, then, the hardest part was that I was not allowed books or writing paper,’ Thida recounts. Undeterred, she joined the **network for smuggling in books**, which the inmates referred to as **vitamins**.



Amy Remeikis, Ma Thida and Sean Turnell at ANU in May 2024.



Ma Thida and Khin in Perth in 2023.

Thida recounts that when there were no books to read she **turned to reading herself through daily practice of Vipassana meditation and to memorising every detail of her prison life, for that eventual prison memoir she went on to publish first in Burmese in 2012**, and later in English translation.

Khin can still recall her first conversation with the, then new, inmate of Insein prison women’s compound. ‘I was upset that day. I was worried about my mother. Thida told me to meditate. Then she said, “If we could just have an English Dictionary! And we could memorise just ten words a day. We will be fluent in English by the time we come out!”’

Literary Pursuits

The first full moon day of the 9th Lunar month is ‘Literati Day’ in Burma, a day to pay homage to famous writers by listening to talks. The tradition goes back at least to the 1940s. By the time Ma Thida was growing up in the 1970s, the day had expanded to become the ‘Writer’s Season’. All through winter there were writers’ talks, free, often open air. With the media under state control, these were the fora to try out ideas.

Thida says: ‘In those days Burma had a big reading culture. There were not just public libraries. But almost every street had a little book-rental shop. Reading was the main entertainment. Even those who were illiterate would listen to people reading. Even the semi-literate knew the names of the great writers and came to listen to the winter-season writers’ talks.’

Upon her release in 1999, Thida resumed her literary and medical careers, releasing **four books** in quick



Ma Thida and Sean Turnell pose with their books at SWF May 2024.

succession. Talking to Thida, you might even think that a stint in prison could indeed be good for one! *'I became a better surgeon after I came out of prison. All the hours of meditation improved my concentration! Really,'* she says. She joined the **Muslim Free Hospital, which provided free service to the poor.**

From 2008 to 2010, Thida was able to put all her time into writing, with fellowships at Brown and Harvard Universities. Again, several publications came out in quick succession, including *The Roadmap*, her first English language book in 2010 and then in 2016, the English translation of her prison memoir, *Prisoner of Conscience*.

PEN Myanmar

Ma Thida co-founded PEN Myanmar, inspired by the recognition she and her fellow writers had received from PEN International. 'Just before I was arrested, one of my senior editors and mentor Myo Myint Nyein was arrested in 1990. He was recognised as an honorary member by some PEN Centres. After my arrest, I was similarly recognised and when I received the PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award, that felt like a miracle.'

After her release, Thida stayed in touch with PEN International. **In 2013 she collaborated with Myo Myint Nyein to establish PEN Myanmar.**

Starting with limited funding, PEN Myanmar quickly gained a reputation for its innovative approach to literary activities. The organisation transformed traditional literary talks into interactive forums, fostering a two-way exchange between writers and audiences, a significant departure from the one-way lectures that had previously dominated these events.

PEN Myanmar advocated vigorously for legislative reforms, for promoting and safeguarding freedom of speech and a free media. The organisation lobbied specifically for a Right to Information bill and conducted workshops for government officials and parliamentarians on UN principles of free speech

and association. They organised an annual 'poetry for peace' competition and ran workshops on federalism, contributing to the broader discourse on Myanmar's future. By the time of the 2020 coup, PEN Myanmar had grown significantly, with its own space and a dozen staff members. It received funding from various international sources, including PEN America, the Canadian Embassy, and PEN Norway.

*'Many **students** trained by PEN Myanmar have since become **leaders of the resistance against the military regime,**' Ma Thida says with some pride.*

The Military Coup and Exile

The **2021 military coup in Myanmar marked a devastating setback for the country's democratic progress.** Though as she explains in her most recent book *A-Maze*, she had never expected Myanmar's path to democracy was going to be a straight line of progression. She sees the current set-back as just that: a bad curve on the road, not the end of the line.

Personally, **for Thida, the coup meant exile.** She left Myanmar in April 2021, initially relocating to the Czech Republic and later moving to the United States as a fellow at Yale University. She subsequently received a scholarship in **Berlin, Germany, where she continues her advocacy work,** despite facing challenges such as the **refusal of the Myanmar Embassy to renew her passport.**

As the **chair of PEN International's Writers in Prison Committee,** Thida champions the rights of imprisoned writers worldwide, highlighting the broader struggle for freedom of expression in Myanmar and beyond.

*She remains a **steadfast voice for democracy and human rights,** and an **inspiring presence for anyone who shares her concerns for freedom and justice.***

Krishna Sen is an Emeritus Professor in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Western Australia, she is also the President of PEN Perth.



Ma Thilda at Kalbarri National Park.



Gabov, Favorskaya, Kriger and Karelin held behind glass at court, 2014 Moscow. Image sourced from Mediazona.



Anti-Putin rallies outside Russian Embassy in Berlin after alleged murder of Alexei Navalny in custody. Photographs by A. Savin, sourced from Wikipedia.



#FreeNavalny Campaign SHIZO installation of replica of solitary cell where Navalny was recurrently imprisoned. First opened in front of Berlin Russian Embassy building, 24 January 2023. Image sourced EP CC-BY-4.0.



Navalny's supporters gather to nominate him to run against Putin in 2018 presidential elections 24 December 2017 at Campus Martius St. Petersburg, Russia. Photograph by Alexei Kouprianov CC BY 2.0.



Memorial made in Amsterdam following demonstrations and protests day after murder of Alexei Navalny. Photograph by Guallendra CCO.

This darkness will not surround us forever:

Tom Morton on Russian journalists facing six years in prison

*'We have **hope** for ourselves. For the **justice system** there is no hope anymore.'*

Speaking from behind a glass barrier, **23-year-old Russian journalist Artem Kriger** uttered these defiant words to a small audience in a Moscow court in late September, before he and **three fellow journalists** were handcuffed and led away by police to face trial.

The exact nature of the **charges** against Kriger and his colleagues Konstantin Gabov, Sergei Karelin and Antonina Favorskaya is **unclear**, especially since the trial is being held in secret. But their arrest and prosecution is symptomatic of an increasingly **harsh crackdown** by the Russian security apparatus on **any surviving sources of independent reporting in Russia, and on civil society organisations** more broadly.

The four journalists were arrested in separate police actions over the last six months and have been in detention since.



Artem Kriger. Image sourced from SOTAvision June 27, 2024 article *Russia Adds Journalist Kriger to 'Terrorists and Extremists' List*.

Reporting on Navalny

According to **Mika Golubovsky**, a journalist with independent news website [Mediazona](#), the prosecution's case appears to involve videos published on the YouTube channel of the Anti-Corruption Foundation founded by **Alexei Navalny**, the **Russian opposition leader who died in a penal colony** in the Arctic Circle earlier this year. Prison authorities said Navalny had **suffered 'sudden death syndrome'**, but the [BBC](#) reported at the time that Navalny **'appeared to be in relatively good spirits and health'** in that same court video.

Before Navalny was transferred to the ['special regime' prison colony](#) in December 2023, one of the four journalists, **Antonina Favorskaya**, reported on court proceedings against



Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny in 2011. Photography by Mitya Aleshkovskiy CC BY-SA 4.0.

him in Moscow, where Navalny had been facing no fewer than **seven separate trials**.

Favorskaya, aged 34, a former actress, began working as a journalist after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. She **documented the last days of his life in the penal colony**, even managing to obtain and publish a court video of Navalny a day before his death.

A month after Navalny's death, Favorskaya herself was [arrested in a Moscow café after visiting Navalny's grave](#), and held in a cell for ten days. On the day she was due to be released she was charged again with working for the Navalny Anti-Corruption Foundation, and has been in **detention ever since**.



Antonina Favorskaya being escorted by a police officer to the courtroom of Basmanny District Court in Moscow, March 29, 2024. Image by Dmitry Serebryakov sourced from AP.

*The **Anti-Corruption Foundation** has been classified as an **'extremist organisation'** since 2021.*

Golubovsky says the **laws** surrounding such organisations are **vague**, so ‘nearly **any** interaction with such an organisation could theoretically become grounds for prosecution.’



Unofficial Alexei Navalny memorial next to the Russian embassy in Yerevan, Armenia. Photograph by Dor Shabashewitz CC BY 4.0.

Both Antonina Favorskaya and Artem Kriger, the youngest of the journalists on trial, had worked for *Sotavision*, another independent Russian media outlet. According to *Svoboda*, Kriger had **live-streamed reports** from **protests** and **rallies**, and also from **courts** where politicians and anti-war activists have been on trial. His uncle Mikhail Kriger, a human rights activist, and vocal critic of the war in Ukraine, was jailed for 7 years in 2023 for allegedly ‘justifying terrorism.’

The remaining two journalists on trial in Moscow had worked as **freelancers** for **foreign media**: **Konstantin Gabov**, 38 had reported for *Reuters*, *Deutsche Welle*, and *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, and **Sergei Karelin**, 41, had worked as a cameraman and reporter for the *Associated Press* and *Deutsche Welle*.

It is **unclear why these four** journalists have been targeted in particular, says Mika Golubovsky. It may simply be that they were **brave enough to work openly** as journalists and use their **own names**; many of the journalists who work for *Sotavision* and *Mediazona* inside Russia do so anonymously.



Anti-Putin rally of #FreeNavalny campaign supporters held in 2023 on Alexei Navalny's 47th birthday. Photograph by A. Savin, Wikipedia.



Pussy Riot by Igor Mukhin CC BY-SA 3.0.

The Pussy Riot connection

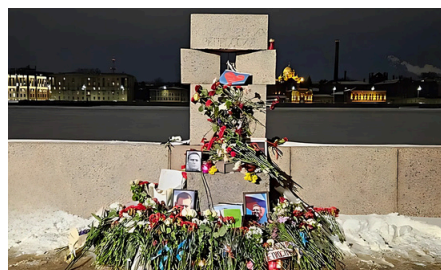
Mediazona itself was **founded** in 2014 by **Nadya Tolokonnikova** and **Maria Alekhina**, members of the punk rock performance art group **Pussy Riot**, after they **served 2 years in a Russian prison** for their performance in the Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Moscow.

Back then, says Golubovsky, there was still space for politics in the parliament and on the streets, but ‘**in the past decade, political life in Russia almost completely shifted to the courts.**’ That was one of the reasons *Mediazona* was founded, and the focus of their reporting has been largely on the courts; but now even this window on the operation of the Russian state is being closed, as more and **more trials are held in secret.**



Maria Alyokhina and Nadya Tolokonnikova speaking at the Capitol in Washington, D.C. on May 6, 2014. Photograph sourced from AP.

‘On the one hand’ says Golubovsky, ‘this allows the **prosecution not to embarrass itself** too much with the **absurdity of the charges** and the weakness of their position. On the other hand, it **prevents the accused** from **using the court** as a **political arena**. There’s been a fine and long tradition of doing so since the Soviet times and trials of dissidents in the 1960s-1980s.’



On the day of his death, 16 February 2024, a spontaneous memorial to Alexei Navalny was created at the Memorial to the Victims of Political Repression in St. Petersburg. Photograph by Gesanonstein CC0.

Court closing statements have become ‘essential for political life in Russia’ over the last 10 years, says Golubovsky. **Navalny** himself, activists such as Sasha **Skochilenko**, and Oleg **Orlov**, who was a member of the human rights organisation Memorial, which was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022, and many, many more, all ‘**delivered powerful political speeches during their absurd and shocking trials.**’

The current trial of the four journalists was **closed to the public** after the judge read out a letter from the ‘**Centre E**’ or *Ministry of Internal Affairs’ Centre for Extremism Prevention*, described by Golubovsky as an ‘infamous unit which **fights any real dissent and opposition** in Russian society.’ The letter **alleged** that supporters of Alexei Navalny were preparing ‘**threats of provocations**’ at the trial.

Lawyers who defend journalists also on trial

Now, not only are trials of journalists, activists and political dissidents increasingly held in secret, but the Russian state is targeting the lawyers who defend them. Three of the **lawyers** who acted for Navalny, **Vadim Kobzev**, **Alexey Liptser**, and **Igor Sergunin**, have been **put on trial** in the city of Kovrov for allegedly ‘participating in an **extremist organisation**’. According to Golubovsky, ‘they are basically being prosecuted for defending Navalny as lawyers.’

The maximum sentence for ‘participation in an extremist organisation’ is **six years in prison**. If Navalny’s lawyers, and the four journalists on trial in Moscow are found guilty, Golubovsky believes there’s ‘little doubt the sentence will be as close to the maximum penalty as you can get.’

But, **before** journalist **Antonina Favorskaya** was led away to **face prosecution** behind closed doors, she told her supporters in the court:



Alexei Navalny attacked with zelyonka, a triarylmethane antiseptic dye, in Moscow. Photograph by Evgeny Feldman 2017 CC BY-SA 4.0.

*‘This **darkness** will **not** surround us **forever**. There is no doubt that we will live to see this country in the state which **Alexei Navalny dreamed of** – a state in which there is **freedom of opinion** and **civil rights**, in which people are **not locked up** for their **opinions**, or because they **oppose this military action** [in Ukraine]. No-one will be locked up by the government. **That time will come**. I firmly believe that.’*

Tom Morton is a former ABC broadcaster and journalism academic, writing on the lands of the Gadigal of the Eora nation.



Mural in Kiryat HaMelacha that was painted after the death of Alexei Navalny in his memory and in solidarity with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Mural by KOTART CLCTV, photograph by Nizzan Cohen CC BY 4.0.

Silencing journalism in Gaza

Mark Isaacs on Israeli censorship and the defiance of Palestinian reporters

Over the past year, **Palestine** has become the **world's most dangerous country for journalists**, as media workers have increasingly been placed at risk of **death, violence, imprisonment and displacement**.

While **international** and local media's access to Gaza is **restricted**, **Palestinian journalists** are continuing to document and tell the story of the violence.

However, **Israel's refusal to protect** Palestinian media personnel and the **patterns of targeting** Palestinian journalists have made it increasingly dangerous to report on the conflict.

Consequently, a number of international organisations, including the United Nations, have alleged that **Israel is committing war crimes in order to silence reportage on Gaza**.

Zones of silence

Restrictions on media access, widespread **damage** and **destruction** of media infrastructure, and **threats** to journalists of **physical attack** and **detention** create what **UNESCO calls 'zones of silence'** which **obstructs** access to **accurate** information and allows **misinformation** and **propaganda** to flourish.

While international journalists and media outlets have access to the West Bank, which has enabled coverage of settler violence, what is happening in Gaza remains a difficult story to tell.

The **only permitted media** trips into Gaza have been via Israeli Defence Force (IDF)-**controlled embeds** where journalists selected by Israel travel with the military.

The Economist's Editor-in-chief **Zanny Minton Beddoes** is one of the few journalists who have been **allowed into Gaza**. She told the [Zam podcast](#) that she was accompanied by a **convoy of three Humvees**, an **armoured vehicle** and the **head spokesperson of the IDF**, Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari.

It's not uncommon in war zones for the military to restrict journalists from reporting on troop movements or weapons capabilities. However, the IDF-controlled embeds **require that journalists agree to hand over some measure of editorial control to the IDF** who [review all such coverage before publication](#). This results in a **tailored view of the conflict**.

Deadliest country in the world for journalists

Since October 7 2023, Palestinian journalists have played an essential role in reporting on the violence in Gaza; however, significant dangers are hindering their ability to continue their work.

Preliminary investigations by the New York-based **Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)** have found it to be the **deadliest conflict** in the world for journalists since the CPJ began gathering data in 1992. As of 1 November 2024:

134 journalists and media workers were confirmed killed: 126 Palestinian, two Israeli, and six Lebanese
41 journalists were reported injured
2 journalists were reported missing
71 journalists were reported arrested



A relative bids farewell during the funeral of Palestine TV journalist Mohamed Abu Hatab and 11 family members, the day after they were killed in an Israeli bombardment of Khan Yunis in November 2023., Photograph by Mahmud Hams/AFP via Getty Images.



Across May 4th-5th of 2024 on a wall on 105 Ave Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, a mural was created to commemorate the journalists killed while covering Gaza since October 7. The art was led by AJA Loudon, Tzadeka, and Ahmad. Community members took turns to write each of the names of journalists, at the time the mural was constructed, 97 journalists had been killed. Photograph sourced from r/Palestine.

Of these, **43 journalists remain under arrest** as of 1 November 2024. However, according to the CPJ's official assessment, the number of journalists behind bars may be higher than records show, as it has become increasingly difficult to verify information during the war.

At least **10** of the Palestinian journalists arrested by Israel are currently being held under administrative detention, a policy that allows individuals to be **detained without charge**. Detention typically lasts six months but can be **extended** an **unlimited** number of times.

The Paris-based group [*Reporters Without Borders \(RSF\)*](#) [reported](#) that detained journalists are being subjected to 'cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment' including psychological and physical torture. During his 33-day detention, veteran Palestinian journalist [*Diaa Al-Kahlout*](#) was blindfolded the entire time, was physically and verbally **assaulted**, and forced to squat for extended periods. [*Al-Kahlout*](#) says that he is not capable of resuming his work due to the physical and mental effects of this torture.

There has also been [*increased violence against journalists*](#) in Israel and the West Bank.

The CPJ is investigating almost 130 additional cases of potential killings, arrests and injuries.

The [*CPJ reports*](#) that **families of journalists are also at risk** of being targeted by Israel. After the Israeli Prime Minister's office accused photojournalist Yasser Qudih of being an accomplice to the October 7th attack (a claim that has been rejected by major media outlets like *Reuters*), **eight members of Qudih's family were killed** when their house in Gaza was struck by four Israeli missiles.

Reporting on the invasion is further hampered by widespread damage and violence, the **displacement of 90% of Gaza's population**, the destruction of **80% of its buildings**, disrupted **communications**, extensive **power outages**, **famine and water shortages** and damage to

media infrastructure and offices. As reported in *The Guardian*, a [*survey of more than 200 journalists*](#) in Gaza by *Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism* found that almost all respondents had been **displaced** and half were **living in tents**.

A sense of responsibility to report

In spite of the risks involved, Palestinians have continued to report on the violence from within Gaza.

Shahd Safi is a 23-year-old Palestinian journalist who until recently was reporting from Gaza where she was born and raised.

Safi says that Palestinian journalists feel a '**responsibility**' to **report the injustices that are being inflicted upon their people**. Her journalism is a form of resistance, a way to reclaim power through her voice and resist dehumanising narratives about Palestinians. However, as the **violence intensified**, Safi found it increasingly difficult to file stories on Gaza.

After interviewing Palestinian detainees about their **treatment by Israeli jailers** (which involved **sexual abuse**), Safi was **too traumatised to write** the article.

'When I hear a Palestinian saying all of this, I imagine it happening to me.'



Shahd Safi, image sourced from *Art of the Working Class* article 'Dreaming of Palestinian Planes in the Sky: We are not numbers.'

*Safi continued reporting for **seven months**, as Israeli airstrikes laid waste to Gaza, killing members of her family, destroying their homes, leaving them homeless and facing severe shortages of food, water and medicine.*

'Everyone's house that I know is destroyed, all of our neighbourhoods, all of our memories, everything. Everything is destroyed,' Safi said.

In May 2024, fearing for their lives, Safi, her mother and three of her siblings **fled their homeland** and sought refuge in Egypt. The IDF's ground invasion of Gaza was nearing their neighbourhood and Safi was concerned that her journalistic work had made her and her **family targets**.

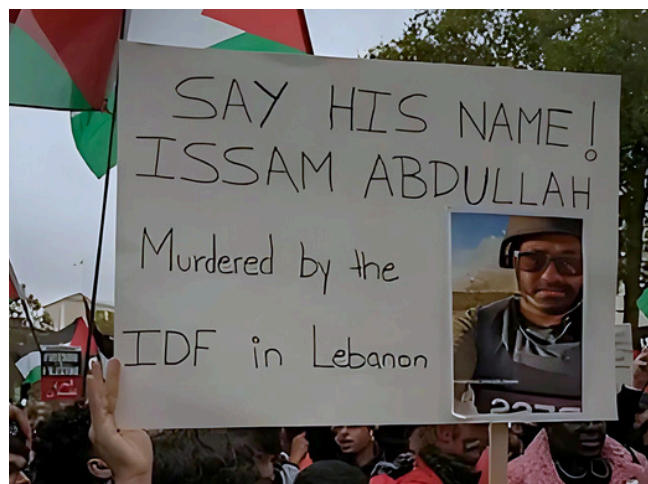
After she fled the country, Safi stopped writing about Palestine. She no longer has direct access to stories about Gaza, but she is also **processing grief, guilt and post-traumatic stress** associated with leaving her home.

Are journalists being targeted?

Israeli Defence Force actions in Gaza raise concerns that they are trying to silence reporting on the conflict by targeting Palestinian journalists and their families.

The *International Federation of Journalists*, the *Committee to Protect Journalists*, and *Human Rights Watch* have each released reports documenting the deliberate targeting of journalists by the IDF. The CPJ has determined that at least five journalists were murdered by Israeli forces and it is investigating at least 10 other possible cases.

'In at least one case, a **journalist** was **killed** while clearly wearing **press insignia** in a location where **no fighting** was taking place. In at least two other cases, journalists reported **receiving threats** from Israeli officials and IDF officers before their **family members were killed**.'



Reuters journalist Issam Abdullah was killed in southern Lebanon by an IDF missile strike at 6pm on 13 October 2023. Photograph by Alisdare Hickson CC BY-SA 2.0.

In May 2023, five months **before** the most recent escalation in violence, the CPJ had already documented a '**deadly pattern**' of Israeli forces killing journalists and evading responsibility for those deaths. One such story was that of *Al Jazeera* journalist and US citizen, **Shareen Abu Akleh**, who was **shot** in the neck **between her helmet and her press jacket** on 11 May 2022.



Shareen Abu Akleh, sourced *Al Jazeera* Media Network CC BY-SA 4.0.

Shareen Safi believes that Palestinian journalists' efficacy in reporting stories from Gaza has made them a target of the IDF.

*'[The Israeli state is] actually very **scared** from journalism because they know it **exposes how intense, how radical** they have become.'*

The IDF maintains that it does not deliberately target journalists, attributing the deaths of media workers to the intense bombardment of the territory.

However, an *investigation by The Guardian* and the Jordan-based non-profit, *Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism*, identified that since 7 October roughly 30% of journalists who had been killed worked for media outlets affiliated with or closely tied to Hamas. At least 23 of them worked for the largest Hamas-run outlet in Gaza, al-Aqsa media network.

In response to questions relating to these findings, a *senior IDF spokesperson described journalists* working for al-Aqsa as 'legitimate military targets' and accused the outlet of employing '**terrorists** **disguised as journalists**'. The IDF cited intelligence sources making it difficult to ascertain the veracity of these claims. The IDF has thus far **resisted calls for more transparency** relating to its rules of engagement with journalists.

According to Haggai Matar, executive director of +972 Magazine, the targeting of journalists in Gaza has created a 'common understanding that if you're a journalist, you bring death with you and that is not unhelpful for the Israeli cause of creating doubt and fright to do the work.'

War crimes investigations

In February 2024, *U.N. experts condemned* the targeting of journalists in Gaza, stating that 'killings, injury, and detention are a deliberate strategy by Israeli forces to **obstruct the media and silence critical reporting**.'

In the [Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions \(1977\)](#), under Articles [79.2](#) and [51.3](#), **journalists** are considered as civilians and are **protected** by **international humanitarian law** provided that they do not play a direct part in hostilities.

[Article 1.4 of the Additional Protocol 1](#) extends protection of civilian victims to include 'armed conflicts in which peoples are fighting against **colonial domination and alien occupation** and against racist regimes in the exercise of their right of self-determination.'

*174 States have ratified **Protocol 1** but **Israel is not a signatory**.*

[PEN International President, Burhan Sonmez](#), denounced as 'war crimes' the deliberate targeting of journalists, and indiscriminate attacks that kill or injure journalists. Sonmez continues, 'All those responsible must be held to account. **Protecting press freedom** and ensuring the safety of journalists is fundamental during times of war and essential in providing the public with **accurate and timely information**.'

Accountability for any such potential crimes may not be pursued domestically - [Israel has never put a soldier on trial for an intentional or unintentional killing of a journalist](#).

However, in May 2024, the International Criminal Court prosecutor, [Karim Khan, filed applications for arrest warrants](#) for Hamas and Israeli leaders - including the Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and his defence minister, Yoav Gallant - on **charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes**.

The eradication of journalism in Gaza

Israeli restrictions on media access to Gaza have hampered reporting on the invasion of Gaza and forced dependence on Palestinian journalists and sources. With this in mind, [RSF has warned](#) that **Israel's refusal to protect media** personnel is going to **eradicate journalism** in the Gaza Strip.

While this is a highly nuanced and complicated issue that demands in depth analysis, independent press freedom organisations like the [IFJ](#), [CPJ](#), and [RSF](#) are all in agreement that IDF actions against journalists are **deliberate attempts to suppress reporting from Gaza**.

[Jodie Ginsberg, the chief executive of the CPJ](#), stated of Israel's actions that: '... [with] the high rate of **journalists' deaths and arrests**, including a slew in the West Bank; **laws** allowing its government to **shut down foreign news outlets** deemed a security risk, which the **prime minister** has explicitly **threatened** to use against **Al Jazeera**; and its **refusal** to permit **foreign journalists** independent access to Gaza all speak to a **leadership** that is **deliberately restricting press freedom**...

*'That is the **hallmark of a dictatorship**, not a democracy.'*

*When the **Israeli state** threatens, detains and kills Palestinian media workers and their family members, they **prevent the world from connecting** with the suffering and destruction in Gaza. Once the **journalists in Gaza** have been **silenced**, there will be **no-one left** to hold the **Israeli state to account**.*



A funeral for journalists in Gaza on Nov. 19. Photograph by Anadolu 2023 sourced from Getty Images.

The story from Inside Israel

Mark Isaacs asks: what are Israelis being told about Gaza?



Palestinian journalist, Sami Shehadeh, wounded in an Israeli strike, lying on floor of Al-Aqsa hospital in Deir al-Balah in the central Gaza Strip on April 12 2024. Photograph by Doaa Rouqa sourced from Reuters.

The Israeli government's **ensorship** and **propaganda** strategies are restricting Israeli media reporting on Gaza, even on the hostages. Israeli law mandates that journalists operating within Israel or writing for Israeli media outlets must submit any articles addressing 'security issues' to the **Israeli Military Censor for approval** before publication. Under these regulations, the censor has the authority to **either partially or completely redact submitted articles**, as well as those published without its approval. Media outlets are **prohibited** from **disclosing** the **censor's involvement**.



An Israeli Defence Force soldier in Khan Yunis, southern Gaza, in January, 2024. Photo: Nicolas Garcia / AFP via Getty Images.

The Intercept reported in December 2023 that the military censor **specifically banned** media in Israel from reporting on eight subjects including: **weapons** used by the IDF; **security cabinet leaks**; and stories about **people held hostage** by Hamas.

In 2023, the Israeli military censor barred 613 articles and redacted 2,703 articles, a record number of interferences.

The censor can **prosecute** journalists, **impose fines** on media organisations, **suspend operations** and **shut them down**.

Left-leaning Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* has been threatened with **financial penalties** over its **reporting on Gaza**. Israel's Communications Minister, Shlomo Karhi, claimed the newspaper was 'sabotaging Israel in wartime' and was an 'inflammatory mouthpiece for Israel's enemies'.

Al Jazeera banned in Israel

In April 2024, the Israeli parliament passed a bill that allows the **government** to **ban** the broadcasting of **international news** outlets in Israel, if they are deemed threatening to national security.

One month later, Israel's cabinet ordered the **closure of** *Al Jazeera's* offices in Israel, **blocked** its **website** and **banned local media outlets** from using the company's broadcasts. *Al Jazeera* has been **consistently reporting** on the conflict; has been **critical** of Israeli policies; and **employs local Palestinian journalists**, many of whom have been the victims of IDF attacks and have been accused by Israel of working for Hamas.

In September 2024, heavily armed **Israeli soldiers** raided the *Al Jazeera* bureau in the occupied **West Bank** and delivered a 45-day closure order.



Image from *Al Jazeera* broadcast on 22 September 2024.

In response to these measures, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) stated that the Israeli government is using 'national security' as an 'excuse to censor critical media'. This has created a media landscape in which journalists are admitting to **self-censorship** due to fear of retribution by Israeli authorities.



Oren Ziv, lead photographer and reporter for *Local Call* (Hebrew language news), in Qaddum.



The funeral of photojournalist Abdullah Darwish of Al-Aqsa TV who was killed in an Israeli raid in the Gaza Strip on 1 December 2023. Photograph sourced from *Andalou Agency* article '71 journalists killed in Israeli airstrikes on Gaza since Oct. 7'.

A wartime government propaganda arm

[Haaretz reporter Ido David Cohen](#), writing in December 2023, accused mainstream Israeli media of becoming a 'wartime government propaganda arm' due to its 'unquestioning reporting of the Israeli military's official accounts.' Cohen said that news channels in Israel have 'devoted themselves to national morale, exclusively relying on official military statements and completely ignoring Palestinian casualties.'

Ido David Cohen spoke to PEN Sydney about the public pressure on any Israeli journalist who presents a narrative that's counter to the Israeli government's line and that, as a result, the Palestinian perspective does not exist in Israel. 'Israeli mainstream media did not show suffering in Gaza and also the **Israeli-Arab voice is not heard.**'

According to [The Seventh Eye](#), Israel's only independent media watchdog, the rate of Arab representation in the main broadcast media in Israel is **2.8%**, despite the fact that approximately **18%** of the country's citizens are Arabs.

The military censor does not explicitly stop Israeli media from reporting about Palestinian experiences in Gaza, or from publishing stories written by Palestinian reporters.

[Haggai Matar, executive director of +972 Magazine, wrote](#), 'The choice to deny the Israeli public the images, voices, and stories of hundreds of thousands of bereaved families, orphans, wounded, homeless, and starving people is one that Israeli journalists make themselves.'

Matar adds that, 'No Palestinian journalist from the occupied territories works for any Israeli media outlet

other than [[+972 Magazine](#)] throughout the country, and what that means is essentially the stories and lives and concerns of 50% of the population are just not there.'

*Matar argues that **without humanising stories** about Palestinians in the mainstream press, **Israeli media** can rely on **racist tropes** and treat **Palestinians** as the **enemy**, rather than 'people who live under this government'.*

Netanyahu undermines the notion of journalism

Propaganda and censorship measures have been a continuation of Netanyahu's attempts to control the Israeli media, some of which have led to a [criminal corruption trial](#).

Netanyahu is currently standing **trial** for **bribing Israeli media** and telecommunications companies with legislative and regulatory changes in exchange for **favourable coverage**.

Speaking to PEN Sydney, Matar stated that Netanyahu is 'trying to **undermine the notion of journalism**' by making it a '**personal political propaganda tool**'.

By **denying foreign journalists** access to Gaza and **undermining the credibility** of Palestinian journalists, the Netanyahu government is creating **ambiguity about facts** in the Gaza Strip and **hinders scrutiny of IDF** actions.

Mark Isaacs is a writer, researcher, photographer, journalist and community worker. He was president of PEN Sydney between 2018 and 2021.

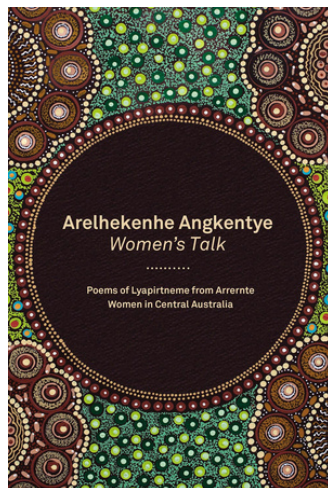
First Nations poetry on country

A tiny press in Mparntwe/
Alice Springs is bringing First Nations poetry to the world

Arnapipe Sandy Bore Homeland is 70kms north of Mparntwe and it's the inspiration for **Amelia Kngwarra** Turner's poem *Thipe Angkeme*. 'I listen to the sounds of the birds and what they're telling us about where the water is and where the rock holes are.'

Amelia is one of 40 writers involved with [*Running Water Community Press*](#), the **first author run co-operative publisher in the world**. Amelia's poem appears in [*Arelhekenhe Angkentye – Women's Talk*](#), written in **both English and Arrernte language**, it is a book of poems of Lyapirtneme.

*'Lyapirtneme is an Arrernte word that means **growing back, returning**. It's like if a bushfire went through the land, and all the trees burnt down, and the **roots underground are still alive**. When the rain comes you see little shoots growing out of the bottom of the tree, growing back again.'*
~ Therese Perrurle Ryder, Arrernte Elder.



The power of truth telling

Truth telling is an integral part of *Running Water Community Press'* work, like the award winning [*Living in Hope*](#). It took **Stolen Generations survivor Frank Byrne** ten years to write. Mr Byrne was born at Christmas Creek, near Fitzroy Crossing, on Gooniyandi Land. At six years old he was stolen from his family and taken to various missions and stock camps. He then spent his whole adult life searching for his **mother**. He found her but she was **no longer alive**. The documentary film [*Case 442*](#) tells the story of his search. Mr Byrne is now buried next to his mother.

Co-op member **Olivia Nigro** travelled with Mr Byrne's family across the Tanami Desert from Mparntwe/Alice Springs to his home, taking the book back. The journey helped them understand that 'the book was much more than a book.' They said 'it was filling in the painful gaps of his absence and **demonstrated the power and healing that the telling of truths and stories has**, not just for external audiences but for people in kin relationship with the stories.' Olivia explains, 'We see the memoir as a form of truth telling, documenting untold histories. ***Running Water Community Press* offers a culturally safe,**

author controlled process mainstream publishers can't offer.' And it's an **intergenerational** process, Mr Byrne's grandchildren are voicing his memoir for the audiobook.

Story and culture come from land and water

Running Water Community Press are also using storytelling as activism, like [*the Water Justice Project*](#).

In 2021 the NT Government granted the Singleton Station groundwater licence to an agribusiness, but it will have a major impact on Kaytetye Land. It's projected that **when the water table drops up to 40 sacred sites will be affected**. The Ali Curung community are trying to stop the licence being used. In the film, produced by *Running Water Community Press*, Elder Peter Corbett says, '**Leave this water alone, it's from the beginning, the creation time.**'

Running Water Community Press also do advocacy around **copyright justice**, training storytellers in how to **retain ownership of their stories** when they are working within mainstream and colonial contexts like with anthropologists.

Going global

The press are also growing internationally. *Living in Hope* was showcased at the Frankfurt Book Fair by the *Australian Publishers Association* in 2019. One of their authors Maureen Nampijinpa O'Keefe was commissioned by a Croatian publisher to write a book for their series *Children of The World*. And there are also commissions with **French and Spanish language publishers** in production.

Amelia Kngwarra Turner has begun working with other co-op members on another **book of women's poetry**, about the experiences of young women living in Mparntwe/Alice Springs. Amelia comes from a family of writers, her sister Shirley Kngwarra Turner is a poet and her mother, philosopher Dr M.K. Turner OAM was a respected Elder, storyteller and educator. It was from her mum that Amelia learned about the power of her favourite bird the Red Zebra Finch 'if you hear those birds, that's where you'll find water.'



Thipe Angkeme

Birds of Sound

Nthakenhe thi-pele ileme anwerne alhemele pmere-werne

**When you go out bush
You hear many sounds the birds make**

Unte awemele thi-pe angkelhe iwenh-ame itne ileme anwerneke
You wonder what they are trying to tell you

Arrpenheme parpe akngerre-arle angkeme

**Some sound sweet
Some sound loud**

Arrpenhele arrpwetheme-arle

Some sound sharp

*Thipe yanhe areye itne kwenhe ileme anwernenhe pwetyele
nhakenhe arle aneme*

The birds are our guide in the bush

Itelaraye! Thi-pe iwenhe-arle arlpwarthe akngakeme

Try to find out which bird is making that sound

Nhenhe anwerne itelaretyeke artityerrityerre willy wagtail

Sometimes it is the artityerrityerre - willy wagtail

*Tyertrye ikwerenhe akngelhe-ante-arle-aneme-tele-ikwerenge
arlke*

Swaying its body and tail

*Atyenge thi-pe apele aneme nyingke mwarre-akngerre rarle
angkeme*

**But my favourite bird
Is nyingke with its beautiful sound
The red zebra finch.**

A poem by **Amelia Kngwarraye Turner**

Amelia Kngwarraye Turner is an Arrernte cultural leader, Angangkere (traditional healer), artist and was leading Akeyulerre's Healing Centre's Angkwerre-lweme (Traditional Healing) Project for over eight years.

She has won many awards and is widely respected by First Nations and non-Indigenous communities across the world for her commitment to Traditional Healing. Amelia's poetry is featured in 'Arelhekenhe Angkentye: Women's Talk' (Running Water Community Press, 2022) and she is a board director for Running Water Community Press.

Amelia's passion is keeping culture and language strong and she has contributed to many local language preservation and strengthening projects for Arrernte speakers. Her language is **Central Eastern Arrernte** which is mainly spoken around Mparntwe/Alice Springs.

**Amelia Kngwarraye
Turner. Photography
by Peter Raftos.**

To see a video
of Amelia
reading her
poem, *Thipe
Angkeme*,
follow the link
below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VyJh2SdJJus&t=1s>



Resistance through literature

Kathy Raheb on Elif Shafak's literary activism

'Literature brings the periphery to the centre and rehumanises those who have been dehumanised. It is the antidote to numbness. Writers cannot stop wars. We cannot make hatred disappear. But we can keep the flame of peace and coexistence and empathy alive.'



Photograph by Marc Sethi
Instagram and Twitter @marcsethi
www.marcsethi.com

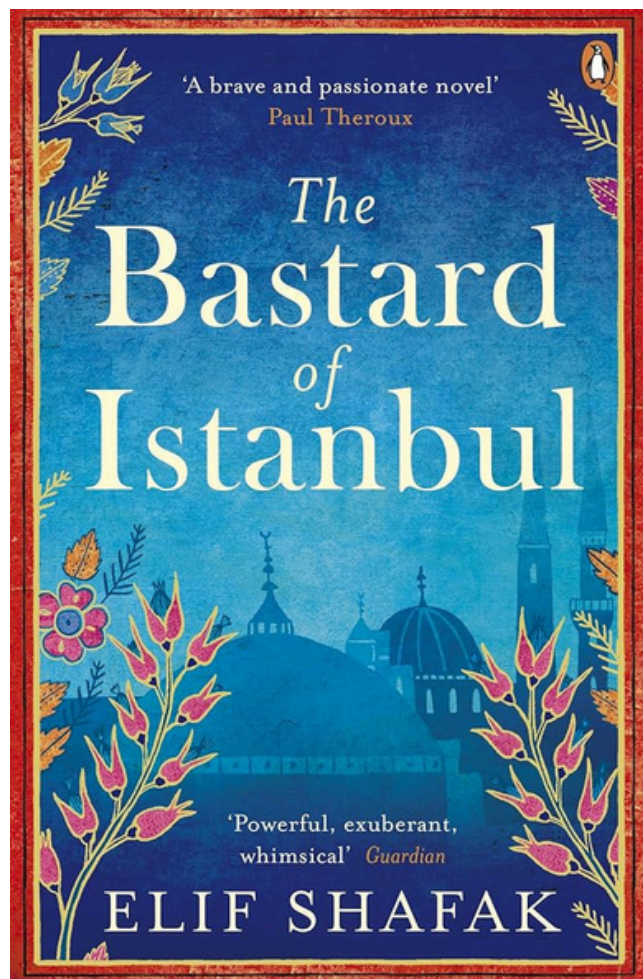
Elif Shafak explained in an interview with [Louisiana Channel](#) that she has:

*'A desire to give more **voice** to people who have been **voiceless**... to make the **invisible** a little bit more **visible**, to change those power **hierarchies** – **topple** it upside down.'*

Hence, minorities of all kinds feature in her writing. For Shafak, the desire to talk about taboos is liberating:

*'Of course **storytellers** are interested in stories, and we love stories, but I think we should equally be **interested in silences** – the things we cannot talk about easily. **Art is about resistance.**'*

Elif Shafak was named among the BBC's 100 most **inspiring and influential women**. Her writing was on their selection of 100 Novels that Shaped Our World. In 2017, [Politico listed her as one of the twelve people who will make the world a better place](#). She has published 20 books, 13 of which are novels, revealing untold histories or cultural amnesia, sexual violence against women and marginalised groups but ultimately her writing draws attention to deep injustices **and the importance of equal human rights for all. Her art is resistance**. Shafak was awarded the Halldór Laxness International Literature Prize for her contribution to 'the renewal of the art of storytelling.'



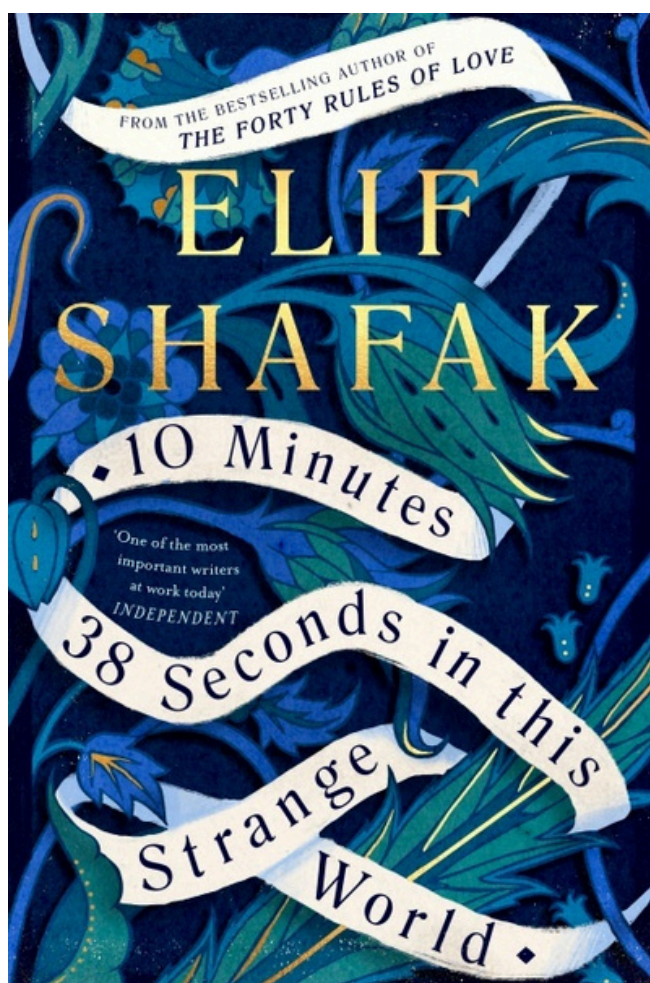
Characters in a novel on trial

In **2006** Elif Shafak was **prosecuted** for violating Article 301 of Turkey's criminal code in her novel ***The Bastard of Istanbul***. It was the first trial in Turkey against a work of fiction. A character in her novel exposes **the deaths of thousands of Armenians in 1915** and names it a **genocide perpetrated by Turkey**. She was accused of contravening Article 301 namely: **'insulting Turkishness'** by exposing these atrocities. Shafak was facing three years in jail. **PEN England advocated** for her during this time and continued to support her during subsequent accusations of obscenity and indecency in her novels.

She was **eventually acquitted** in 2006 but has fled **Turkey because of violence and harassment from Ultra Nationalists**. Shafak explains that since her seminal case in 2006 it has become harder for writers of **fiction** in **Turkey** to express themselves on subjects regarding ethnic minorities, sexuality, gender and politics.

Shafak's 2019 book ***10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World*** became highly controversial as it followed the life of a sex worker in Istanbul and included a trans woman and other marginalised characters oppressed by the country's extremely brutal and conservative socio-political environment. She humanises these outcasts so lovingly in her novel.

Kathy Raheb is a member of the PEN Sydney committee and an English and History teacher working on Gadigal Land.



An elegy to the disappeared

Kathy Raheb reviews Elif Shafak's latest novel *There are Rivers in the Sky*.

This novel features **three characters, two rivers and one epic poem**; all linked by the journey of water.

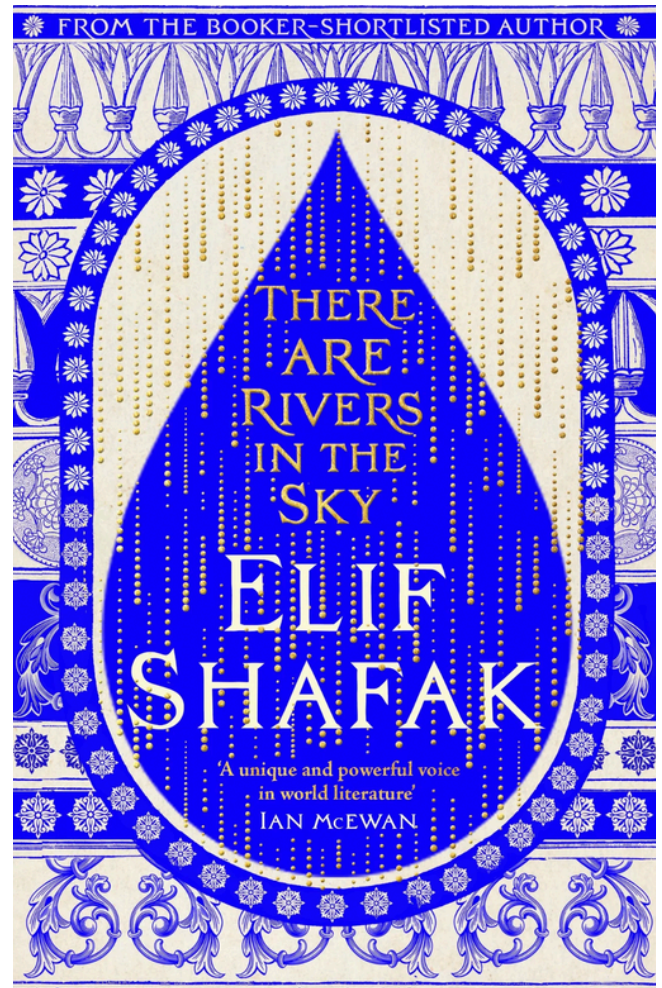
There are Rivers in the Sky begins in a royal and magnificent library in **Ancient Ninevah**, just before its destruction by the Great Flood. The novel begins with one droplet of water falling in **Mesopotamia** on the head of the brutal King Ashurbanipal and from there this extraordinary novel becomes a deluge of fascinating themes such as **climate change, religious intolerance, political violence, censorship, class struggle, collective amnesia, intergenerational trauma and the oppression of women.**

This book interweaves the stories of three distinct characters, spanning time zones and continents. From Mesopotamia, we move to **1840 England** and meet **Arthur**, born in the filthy Thames River yet becomes a **scholar of Assyriology and cuneiform**. Arthur based on a historical character travels to Ninevah in **1872** in search of the missing lines of the *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Next we meet **Narin**, a nine year old **Yazidi girl** living in **2014** Nineveh, Iraq. Narin is going deaf and dreads not being able to hear the stories of her **beloved grandmother**, and worse, that she might **forget** the sound of her **voice** altogether. Alongside this touching personal tale, Shafak recreates the horrors of the **genocide against the Yazidi people by ISIS in 2014** Nineveh.

'To whom does the object belong - the itinerant bards who recited the poem, travelling from city to city; the king who ordered it to be put in writing; the scribe who laboured in setting it down; the librarian who scrupulously stored it; the archaeologist who unearthed it centuries later; the museum that will keep it safe - or does it belong only to the people of this land, and, if so, will minorities like the Yazidis ever be counted amongst them?'

The final protagonist is **Zaleekhah Clarke**, a hydrologist who we meet in **2018**. Through her, we discover that the Thames is a 'zombie river' brought back to life by eco-scientists. She also unearths the principle that **all water holds memory.**



There are Rivers in the Sky discovers **the epic in the tiny**. Shafak reminds her readers that we are facing a **climate crisis**; our freshwater is endangered and our rivers are drying.

Her **central metaphor** of the **translation** of a tablet about The **Great Flood cuneiform** into English anchors the novel. The reader follows with excitement

the connection between the startlingly astute Arthur Smyth and the ancient King Ashurbanipal, through his fascination with the lamassus statues and translating the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The character of **Arthur** is a skilful **narrative portal into the past, present and the future**. He falls in love with Narin's great grandmother in 1872 and his Assyrian translation of the Flood Tablet fall into the possession of the hydrologist, Zaleekhah, in 2018.

'... people fall into three camps: those who hardly, if ever, see beauty, even when it strikes them between the eyes; those who recognise it only when it is made apparent to them; and those rare souls who find beauty everywhere they turn, even in the most unexpected places.'

Arthur, Narin and Zaleekhah are all **outsiders** but are **connected** through **rivers** and **water**. According to the structure of the novel, they are like three atoms in the water molecule. For Shafak, Arthur represents the life or the Oxygen of the novel. All his chapters begin with an Oxygen symbol. Despite being born in a slum in Chelsea, he decodes the Flood tablet of the Gilgamesh epic poem and becomes an academic genius. He is the epicentre of the novel. Narin and Zaleekhah are represented by Hydrogen molecules at the beginning of their chapters to embed their interconnectedness visually.

The voices of the missing

Shafak's political activism is enacted in her deeply empathetic characterisations. She **humanises** society's **dejected** and **discarded**. Through Arthur Smyth, born by the poisoned River Thames in 1840, Shafak unearths the brutality of **class inequality in Victorian England**.

Shafak's novel is a magical eulogy to suppressed voices of all kinds, especially the voices of women.

'Words are like birds, when you publish books you are setting caged birds free. They can go wherever they please. They can fly over the highest walls and across vast distances, settling in mansions of gentry, in farmsteads and laborers' cottages alike. You never know whom those words will reach, whose hearts will succumb to their sweet songs.'

Jamaican poet Safiya Sinclair describes *There are Rivers in the Sky* as being:

'... a love song to the keepers of our stories and history, as well as a tribute to the wise women who know the poetry of rivers.'

Shafak laments the silencing of women's voices through the epigraph she places at the start of her novel.

'To a beloved writer when asked to speak about "women and fiction," sat down by the banks of a river and wondered what the words meant.'

This quote is from Virginia Woolf's famous essay, *A Room of One's Own*, published in 1929. Here, Woolf cries over the **underinvestment of society in women's education** and a lack of **women's voices telling their own stories** which mirrors Shafak's deepest concerns.

What happened to women's stories?

In the ancient world 'Women's stories were erased. As patriarchy came to dominate, the centrality of the **feminine disappears**,' says Shafak in an [interview with Ipek Burnett](#).

Shafak lays this novel at the feet of **Nisaba**, the **Mesopotamian goddess of writing and agriculture**. She writes that King Ashurbanipal has confiscated a heretical text dedicated to the same deity. His regime demands that scribes be dedicated to Nabu the male god and not



Elif Shafak at 90th PEN Congress, Oxford © RoberkBrooks

Nisaba. King Ashurbanipal burns to death the priest who was devoted to Nisaba as punishment for **this heretical centring of the feminine**. While the priest is set on fire he grips onto a lamassu's hoof, screaming until he dies. Later when the statues of the iconic Mesopotamian lamassus are brought to the British Museum, the young Arthur watches on and notes the burnt hoof, wondering what had happened all those millennia ago.

Shafak's research for this novel was extensive. Arthur Smythe is based on the historical character of [George Smith, the famous Assyriologist](#) responsible for the translation of the Flood Tablet XI. **The core irony in the novel is that censorship cannot endure**. Unlike papyrus or paper when **clay tablets are burnt** they are **rendered stronger** and clearer. **Stories must, and will, emerge**.

The power of memory

In Jungian terms, Shafak wants to **unearth** what might be **painful**, through her writing. She wants to bring truths to light, thus creating understanding and **restorative justice**. Shafak suggests that when we **suppress memories, hatred and misunderstandings** proliferate. She is interested in **intergenerational trauma** but she also sees the novel as a place to **overcome political, cultural and religious disharmony**. By bringing understanding, the 'other' is humanised.

In *There are Rivers in the Sky*, Shafak wants to humanise the **Yazidi people** who she sees as one of the most **misunderstood minorities** in the world. They have experienced **72 historical genocides**, the latest in **2014** when **ISIS poisoned their water supply, killed the menfolk and abducted 6000 Yazidi women and girls**. Tens of thousands of Yazidis had to flee their homes and were told to **convert to Islam by ISIS or die**.



Yazidi mourners cry on fifth anniversary of the genocide by ISIS in front of pictures of victims in Baadre, south-east of Duhok Kurdistan region in Iraq, on 3 August 2019. Photograph by Gailan Haji.

Who could possibly forget the deeply shocking revelations of the Yazidi genocide that **Vian Dakhil** revealed to the world? [The Iraqi MP made an impassioned plea](#), calling on the Iraqi parliament and the international community to save the Yazidi minority from annihilation. **Thousands of Yazidi women are still missing**. Shafak wants us to **remember those women and to bring about justice**.



Assyriologist George Smith (image on display near Tablet XI of the Epic of Gilgamesh at the British Museum) and Lamassu statue from North-West Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud (now in the British Museum). Photographs by Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin FRCP CC BY-SA 4.0.

Shafak's novel captures some fundamental elements of Yazidi culture, particularly its strong focus on **song and storytelling**. This primarily **oral nature** of Yazidi history, coupled with the **cultural cleansing and iconoclasm** undertaken by the Islamic State, has resulted in the large scale **destruction** of Yazidi **heritage**. The father of Shafak's Yazidi protagonist, Narin, describes this aching loss:

“We’re here, but our history is elsewhere. It’s like they’ve severed our body into pieces, and they say, Whenever you want, you can come visit your limbs... We are the memory tribe.”

For Elif Shafak the **novel is a democratic space**. In it she brings understanding. As her character **Arthur** unlearns and **challenges** the prejudicial stereotypes about Yazidis, so too does Shafak's reader.

“That place is no good. We should not go there.” Arthur’s expression hardens. “Unless you provide an explanation, I must insist that we do...” “As you wish,” says the guide, turning his face away. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you. Zêrav is home to devil-worshippers.”

It is through the character of Arthur that we learn of the **dignity** of these people and attain a deeper understanding of their belief systems. This humanisation of the other typifies Elif Shafak's oeuvre.

The moment we become indifferent is the most dangerous moment. But literature can poke holes in that world of numbness that can be erected around us. We must remain empathetic and compassionate. Shafak’s philosophy is that what should be feared more than anything is numbness to other people’s pain.

A Sublime Exchange:

Qin Qin meditating on Capital Punishment

I recently came across a Buddhist meditation practice termed 'a sublime exchange'. It consists of mentally exchanging the **suffering of others** for our **own happiness**. 'Picture all kinds of suffering in your mind with graphic precision,' the monk **Mattieu Ricard** writes in *The Art of Meditation*. I wondered where the 'world's happiest man' was going with these instructions.

At least I had a good subject to begin with - **capital punishment** - with all its attendant suffering depicted in graphic detail. The term comes from the Latin word *caput*, meaning 'head', as in behead. While decapitation is no longer a common way for the state to kill someone for a crime legally, there are other equally gruesome methods: execution by **electrocution**, **firing squad**, **lethal injection** and **hanging**.

More experimental techniques are used too, such as **nitrogen gas**, which many vets have deemed unacceptable to use on deemed animals. That's what **controversially killed Alabama death-row prisoner Alan Miller on 27 September 2024, after he survived a botched lethal injection attempt**.

Miller's case gives plenty of detail for the meditation. Or I could turn to **Iran: the country executed a record 93 people in August 2024**. Many killed were potentially innocent.



Miller in a 1999 police mugshot CC fair use.

'It's clear from various reports that torture is used to **obtain confessions**,' **Mai Sato**, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights to Iran said, speaking of the country's legal system. 'There's lawyers not being present during interrogation, reliance on confessions... All these add up to say that the **system isn't safe**... If the country continues to execute, they're executing regardless of knowing that there will be wrongful convictions.'

The death penalty in Japan

Let's have a reprieve from the imagery and turn to **Sato** herself. When I met her, I felt more hopeful. She's devoted her career to researching and advocating against the death penalty. A **fierce abolitionist**, Sato is the kind of person who **founded** and still **co-runs an NGO** which has **changed students' minds** on the death penalty but insists, 'I don't think I can take credit.'

Born and raised in Japan, it wasn't until the 1995 Tokyo sarin attack, with the public calls for the perpetrators to be



Dr Mai Sato, photograph sourced from ICPR, 22 August 2024.

executed, that Sato recalls being exposed to the death penalty for the first time. 'The Japanese death penalty is very much shrouded in secrecy,' she said.

The perpetrators of the subway attack, members of the **Aum Shinrikyo doomsday cult**, were **executed in 2018, 23 years** after the crime. And if you think that's a long time, **Iwao Hakamada** spent **46 years on death row**, not knowing when he would be killed. He claims the grim title of the world's longest-serving death row inmate. In September 2024, at the **age of 88**, he was finally found **not guilty**.



Iwao Hakamada, age 88, sourced from essanews 26 September 2024 © X

When Sato moved to the UK for graduate studies, her initial black and white ideas of crime and justice changed, especially after she **interned at a London women's prison**. Seeing the self-harm scars of the women who had a history of being victimised, she realised the idea she had of female offenders was different from the women she met in prison.

'There was that blurriness between an offender and a victim, and the idea of who goes to prison changed, (for me)' she reflected. 'When you start looking critically at prisons, the death penalty is the extreme end of the punishment. So you inevitably question the use of the **death penalty as a form of criminal punishment**.'



Illustration by Emily Kaye,
Instagram @emilykayeillustration
and www.emilykayeillustration.com

Most executions happen in Asia

It doesn't seem many Asian governments have experienced Sato's change of mind though. Over [90 per cent of the world's executions take place in Asia](#), with **China** being the world's leading executioner. However exact numbers are unknown, given death sentences and executions are a state secret.

'What people may not always fully understand is just how **arbitrary Chinese criminal justice can be**,' said **Nicola Macbean**, executive director of [The Rights Practice](#).

That was the case for Chinese Australian **Yang Hengjun**. Ostensibly convicted on espionage charges in a [deeply flawed trial](#), Yang has **never confessed** to his supposed crimes, likely contributing to his severe sentence. After already long stints spent in solitary confinement, he received a **death penalty 'with reprieve'** in February 2024. This means his execution is delayed for two years. During this time, the sentence can be commuted to life imprisonment, based on his behaviour.

'Obviously it's a better outcome for the person because they're not executed,' Macbean continued, highlighting the low bar of not dying, **despite inhumane treatment, that is considered a victory**. 'It's signalling in cases where they [the courts] are not **100% comfortable with the evidence**. It's not reviewed in the same way. There **isn't the same level of scrutiny** of those cases.'



Yang Hengjun, photograph from Imaginechina via AP Photo.

A **writer** and **democracy activist**, Yang had also worked at the Ministry of State Security, China's civilian intelligence agency. For those who may consider speaking out, the **message was clear: don't go against the regime**.

Yang's harsh punishment is part of a troubling **trend in China to silence dissent**. 'We've seen a number of **prominent Uyghur academics** who have also reportedly been given the two-year suspended death sentence,' said Macbean, referring to [the persecuted ethnic minority](#) primarily in East Turkestan (Xinjiang). Also Chinese authorities recently issued [judicial guidelines](#) to **prosecute** those **advocating** and acting for **Taiwan's independence**, including by the **death penalty**.

What is Australia doing about the death penalty?

Abolitionist countries like Australia **maintain significant trade** with retentionist countries like China. But in **2018** Australia took a stand, and declared an ambitious strategy to lead and advocate for the **death penalty's [universal abolition](#)**. It was a **promising start, but conveniently diverted attention** away from other domestic human rights abuses such as continued deaths in custody (in 2022–23, there were [110 deaths](#)).

Plus, the strategy **needs** to be backed by **proactive** action. Advocacy groups say Australia could do more, including to be [more outspoken](#), put **sustained political pressure** on retentionist governments and [move beyond crisis responses](#), in submissions to the current Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee [inquiry into Australia's efforts](#) to abolish the death penalty.

Compassionate meditation is a form of action

By this point I'd gathered more than enough material on graphic suffering to begin the meditative practice. As instructed, I began with trying to arouse compassion.

A picture came to mind. 'Individuals and groups in China may use films, books, and hold exhibitions... in a small-scale way,' the Rights Practice said, discussing how activists creatively resist the status quo. 'Discussing issues related to death... Not directly discussing

abolition, not directly discussing the death penalty, but the issues around it. **What it means to be a human.**'

I felt the bravery and compassion of those involved in these underground gatherings. People imagining what it's like to free themselves and others, especially in such a politically sensitive environment.

*Then, I visualised taking in the torments of those I came across writing this piece. They blurred into a dense dark cloud: the **desperation of those on death row** - many innocent, condemned and imprisoned for speaking out, the pain of their loved ones, and the **hungry ghosts of those executed across the world.***

*There was also the wretchedness of the **numbed soldiers** ordered to pull the trigger; **judges witnessing** the deaths of those they have sentenced, knowing many may be innocent; and the **indescribable guilt of those complicit in these injustices.** And extending further, there existed all our collective anguish*

at not knowing what more we could do to help those in pain.

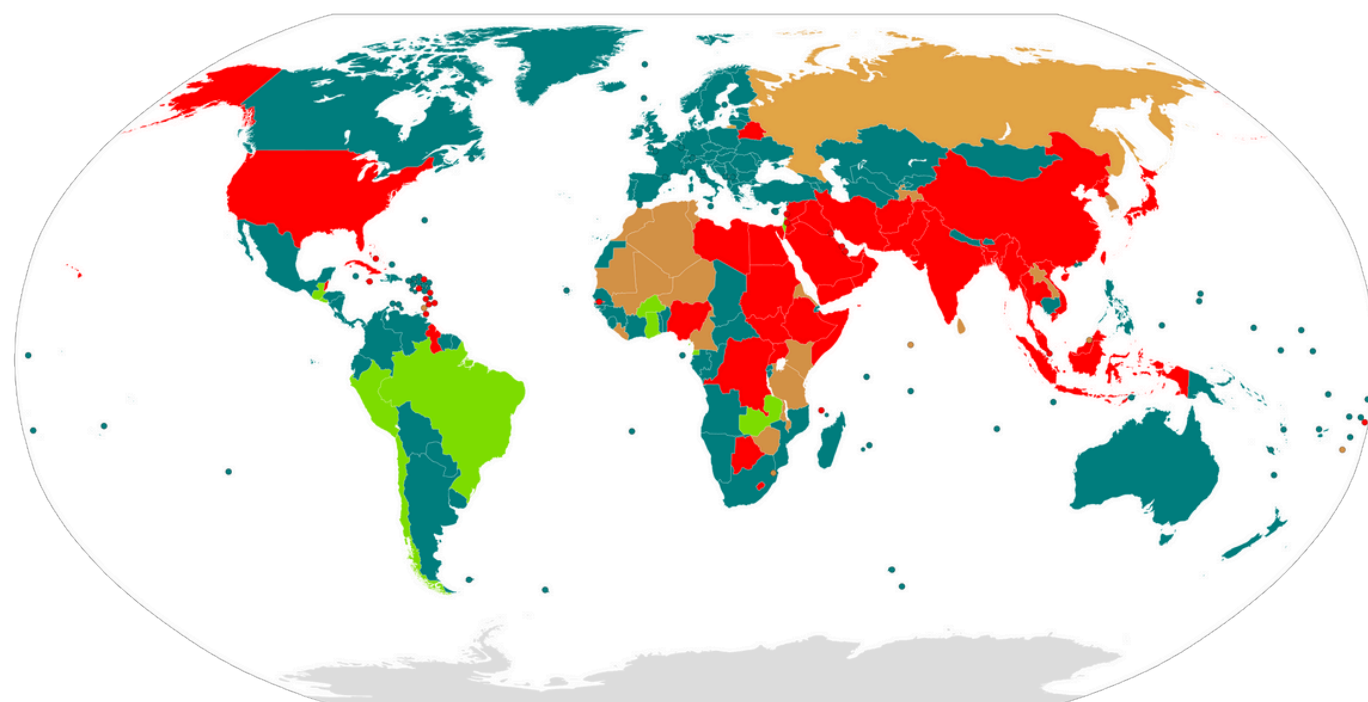
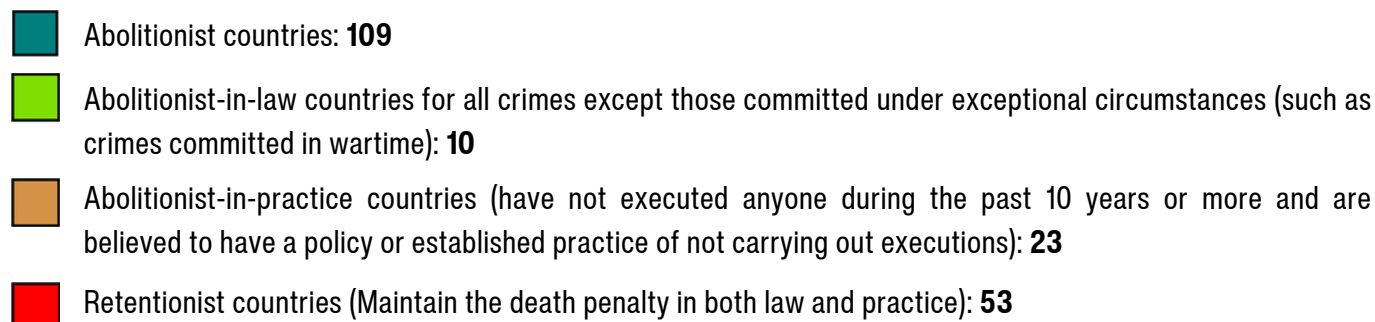
*Breathing out, I visualised giving **comfort, hope, and altruistic love**, my heart streaming out rays of white light and happiness to all beings.*

It's not letter writing or marching in the streets and doesn't seem like much in practical offerings to help. But with each mindful breath - inhaling and transforming others' pain, exhaling and spreading healing light - I pay attention. That is a kind of connection, rather than turning away in overwhelm and indifference. As monk Ricard writes, '**never think you have done enough for those who are suffering.**'

A **sublime exchange** is where **compassionate action** can start.

Qin Qin (formerly Lisa Qin) is a first-generation Chinese Australian writing on the lands of The Ngunnawal, Ngunawal and Ngambri peoples

World map of countries' capital punishment status as of 2024



The unique challenges for Pasifika journalists

Bernadette Carreon reports from Niue on the pressures on journalists and publishers in The Pacific

I imagine the damage caused to the field of journalism in Fiji, with one or two generations of journalists only knowing how to operate in a controlled environment?' asks Anish Chand, West Bureau Chief of *The Fiji Times*.

For Us, By Us, About Us is the title of the first Pacific Islands Media Freedom Index. It surveyed media professionals in some of the youngest democracies in the world who've 'transitioned from traditional to digital technologies in a few short decades – a mere blink of the eye in the context of Pasifika oral histories,' writes Lisa Leilani Williams Founding Coordinator of *Pacific Freedom Forum*, who published the Index. Launched in Niue in September, the report spells out the difficulties in reporting without fear or favour in The Pacific.

The greatest challenge is **economic** and **financial** pressure on media businesses. When advertising revenue is down, there are **incentives for corruption and bribery**.

Social and **cultural pressures** on the media ranked second, including **gender**, **public trust** and **credibility** of the news industry, **diversity**, **nepotism**, and cultural sensitivities.

Political and **legal pressures** were also of significant concern, such as the editorial balance of public media, licensing policies and reporting on elections.

Fiji – a good news story

For the last thirteen years the newsrooms of Fiji have been operating under the **draconian Media Industry Development Act – MIDA**. It imposed heavy fines and



The launch of *For Us, By Us, About Us* in Niue.

prison sentences for journalists and media outlets that breached its provisions, leading to widespread self-censorship.

But last year Sitiveni Rabuka's new government repealed the law and **Fiji's ranking in the global press freedom index, jumped from 89th to 44th**.

Anish Chand, the West Bureau Chief of *The Fiji Times* said that 'the removal of the MIDA Decree was a huge leap forward.' He emphasised that the MIDA was a tool the **government** used to control the media, **stifling independent journalism**.

However, Chand also pointed out that the **Public Order Act** still **allows for sedition charges** against journalists and **should be removed**. He noted that under the previous government, sedition charges were used against politicians and individuals critical of the government or its policies, including against *The Fiji Times* in 2018. And there is still a generation of censorship to undo.

Relationships, community and self-censorship

The report also found that a whopping **60% of journalists often practiced self-censorship due to fear of reprisals** from their communities, families and others, including in some cases, their governments.

Ongerung Kambes Kesolei is the editor of Palau's first newspaper *Tia Belau*. Kesolei said that in a small island community, where everyone knows each other, reporting becomes more challenging because people you're reporting on could be your close relatives or clan members. 'How should you deal with that? **In a small tight-knit culture, where it challenges your journalistic ethics?** For instance, if the story involves a relative or





Neville Choi

senior clan member, you need to be resourceful and engage other media practitioners to ensure the story is still published... When people are unable to speak, to report on a story because often it is a family member, there is also that cultural aspect as well, whether that person has a high title, so you are unable to approach that person.’ she said.

‘I self-censor when I feel the need to, especially in situations where in our society it’s deemed disrespectful to pry or get subjects or contacts to talk to us, like if there was a death.’ said **Lyanne Togiba** - Senior Reporter at Papua New Guinea’s *National Broadcasting Corporation*. Continuing, ‘Or perhaps my reporting would make the community shun someone. I don’t always publish these sorts of stories.’

Social media and the diaspora

Niue, with a population of **1,681**, is a **self-governing state in free association** with New Zealand. **Gustava Esther Pavihi** works as a journalist in this tiny country. She faces many challenges in doing stories about domestic abuse and other crimes against vulnerable people like children. ‘Everybody on the island already knows who it is, even if we say it’s a 37-year-old man who is in prison overnight... and there’s an understanding and respect in the local community that okay, we know that this happened, and we know that that person is in prison awaiting trial.’ She continues, ‘But putting that story



Gustava Esther Pavihi

on **social media** it attracts so much **negative feedback from the diaspora**, from people who don’t actually live here... it will **scare the victims from reporting to the police**. That is when the **damage will then hit the community and you have disharmony**.’

PNG journalists face censorship under proposed law

The Index showed that **Papua New Guinea has one of the lowest rates of media freedom in the Pacific**. Journalists in PNG view a proposed new media law as undermining media freedom. The media council will effectively act as a regulatory agency, journalists will be licensed, which many see as limiting their ability to report freely and independently.

Neville Choi, president of the PNG Media Council, speaking at the Pacific Media Summit in Niue said, ‘We don’t want PNG journalists to experience what Fijian journalists have gone through under the MIDA Act. **The protection of media freedom is also the protection of democracy within the region**.’

Choi said ‘The PNG journalists have dialogued with the government to find some sort of compromise that not only defends media freedom, but also says in law that media freedom in Papua New Guinea is a constitutional right, and one that cannot be challenged in any way.’

The [Media Freedom Index ranked](#) the fourteen surveyed countries, finding that Palau, Niue, and the Cook Islands are the three top Pacific nations in 2023 while **Nauru, Papua New Guinea**, and Tuvalu had the **lowest levels of media freedom**.

Bernadette Carreon has spent over 20 years living and reporting on Palau and the Pacific. Her bylines have appeared in outlets *OCCRP, Al Jazeera, AFP, The Guardian, RNZ*, and *ABC*.

She primarily reports on the Pacific environment, organised crime, and geopolitics. She is also the Project Coordinator of the regional media freedom watchdog, *Pacific Freedom Forum*.



Bernadette Carreon

Listen, don't shout?

Dominic Anderton examines **PEN America's controversial silencing** of a Palestinian protester and the deeper questions it raises about the practise of **freedom of expression**



A member of the audience, the Palestinian writer, **Randa Jarrar**, went on to exercise her right to disagree by reading out the names of **murdered Palestinian writers** in Bialik's presence. Jarrar's vocal rebuke of Bialik was deemed so disruptive that she had to be **forcibly removed** from the venue.

The event sparked outrage in the **literary community**. Novelists, such as Angela Flournoy and Kathleen Alcott, cut ties with PEN America because of Jarrar's removal. Naomi Klein, Hisham Matar, Maaza Mengiste and more withdrew from the organisation's World Voices Festival, eventually culminating in its cancellation.

*PEN America critics contended that the chapter's **stated concerns** for free speech rights **did not match its public actions**.*

Randa Jarrar forcibly removed for protesting by calling out names of 13 authors martyred in Gaza. Artwork by NYT bestselling author and advocate [Daniel José Older](#) (@danieljose1).

Disagreement is a tricky thing. Within the realm of opinion exist views so repugnant that they deserve protest. Thankfully, civil society makes room for dissent - the right to freedom of expression includes the right to disagree. Indeed, no idea is immune from scrutiny. **But the right to challenge controversial ideas does not extend to a right to silence those who advocate them.** Granting protesters the right to override the speech rights of others, in the pursuit of a moral cause, is incompatible with an open democracy.

A recent expression of the latent conflict between free speech and the right to disagree occurred on [January 3rd at a Los Angeles 'PEN Out Loud' event](#). PEN America hosted a panel to discuss comedian Moshe Kasher's new memoir [Subculture Vulture](#). One of the panellists was actress **Mayim Bialik**, a self-identified Zionist, who had **donated** to the **Israeli Defence Forces**, **opposed a ceasefire** in the genocide in Gaza following the October 7 attacks, and created **multiple inflammatory social media posts** on the conflict.

On March 13, in an [open letter](#), writers demanded PEN America apologise to Jarrar for her removal and chastised them for finger-wagging at those 'speaking truth to power in a disruptive fashion.' Furthermore, Bialik's views were considered to be in contravention of the [PEN Charter duty to promote peace](#). **Platforming an individual who opposes peace appears to be at odds with the PEN Charter**, so PEN America erred by hosting Bialik.

PEN America's defence

In response to the backlash, **PEN America CEO, Suzanne Nossel, repudiated the criticism**. She argued that the chapter was not wrong to invite Bialik to speak. Nossel referred to PEN America's longstanding practice of hosting figures with objectionable views. In addition, PEN America had previously issued a press release on October 23rd reaffirming their rejection of 'efforts to hold writers, or indeed any civilians, culpable for the beliefs of a governing authority', in this case, Israel.

On the former point, the organisation had hosted Chinese artist **Ai Weiwei** for a talk about his memoir *Zodiac* on January 23rd 2024, despite the [Lisson Gallery in London cancelling](#) his exhibition after Ai had posted a statement on social media that sparked outrage in the Zionist community and was deemed antisemitic.

In a since-deleted tweet made in November 2023, Ai criticised the United States government's \$3bn aid package to Israel saying that 'it has been touted as one of the most valuable investments the United States has ever made.'

Ai Weiwei's exhibitions in New York, Paris, and Berlin were also cancelled following this tweet. Thus, Suzanne Nossel argued that Ai Weiwei's continued platforming by PEN America was just as justified as Bialik's because hosting individuals, despite their unpopular views, was consistent with the organisation's established policy. Indeed, the October press release stressed that the commitment to freedom of speech was especially important during times of deep strife, and that it is a 'serious mistake...[to] shut down dialogue on the basis of a writer's viewpoint'. Yet, upon closer inspection, the chapter's defence may not be so robust.

Firstly, unlike Ai Weiwei, Bialik was **not the central figure** at the PEN Out Loud event, it was Moshe Kasher who was highlighted to discuss his memoir. As a public-facing organisation, PEN America must **consider the sensibilities** of its audience. It may have been prudent, certainly for optics, **not to have selected a controversial individual like Bialik** for a nonessential role.

Secondly, although PEN America rejects holding civilians accountable for the 'beliefs of a governing authority', Bialik's **views** are her **own**, the fact they

aligned with Israeli policy at the time is incidental. Bialik proudly wears the label of Zionist, this is arguably not comparable with Ai Weiwei's 'cancellation' based on accusations of antisemitism for primarily criticising the US' financial relationship with Israel.

A strong case can be made that PEN America's decision to platform Bialik was a mistake. But even if you accept this conclusion, **whether Jarrar's ejection was warranted is an entirely different question.**

The heckler's veto

Randa Jarrar had every right to protest Bialik's views, however one could argue that she did not have a right to use the '[heckler's veto](#)'. **The heckler's veto occurs when one party, disagreeing with another party, unilaterally suppresses a speaker and shuts down dialogue—typically by shouting them down.** Jarrar 'heckled' the event by crying out the names of murdered Palestinians with such volume that the event was unable to continue. Moreover, her remonstrations encroached on the audience's right to listen and receive ideas. Jarrar ignored requests to stop and refused to leave her seat, resulting in staff forcibly dragging her from the venue.

One could argue that there are many ways Jarrar could have conveyed her message without infringing on the speech rights that led to her ejection. She might have distributed pamphlets, worn a keffiyeh and waved a Palestinian flag, or held up a placard. But ultimately, this backlash against PEN America occurred because protesters felt forced to take extreme measures—they did not feel heard. **When people are listened to, they are less likely to shout.** PEN America's criticism was further amplified in the month following this event as hundreds of writers including Roxane Gay, Maaza Mengiste and Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah wrote an open letter condemning what they called **PEN America's 'silence' over 'Palestinian journalists, writers, and poets murdered by Israel'** outside of 'press releases buried on its website.'

Regardless of who you side with—Jarrar or PEN America—removing demonstrators should always be a last resort. This is doubly important for organisations committed to freedom of speech. Equally, objectors must respect speakers and audiences. The Jarrar affair illustrates how important it is to consider public sentiment. Audiences, speakers, and protestors must have their rights respected so that future disruption is mitigated, debate is enhanced, and dissent is channelled into a more productive discourse.

Dominic Anderton is a Brisbane based writer, editor and the social media producer for PEN Sydney. Among other publications, he has written for *Independent Australia* and *New Matilda*

The poster for the 'PEN OUT LOUD' event features the title in large, bold, black and red letters at the top. Below the title are two circular portraits: Moshe Kasher on the left and Mayim Bialik on the right. To the left of the portraits are three logos: 'PEN AMERICA' in a red speech bubble, 'Writers Bloc presents Los Angeles' in a black circle, and 'SUBCULTURE VULTURE' with a colorful, abstract graphic. Below the portraits, the text reads 'A CONVERSATION BETWEEN Moshe Kasher & Mayim Bialik'. At the bottom left is a small graphic for 'MOSHE KASHER' with the text 'A MEMOIR IN SIX SCENES'.

January 31st at 7:00pm PT | Wilshire Ebell Theatre

You are not alone

Send a message of hope to a jailed writer



Jimmy Lai

Jimmy Lai is a veteran **journalist, writer, activist, publisher,** and a prominent pro-democracy figure in Hong Kong. Known for his outspoken **criticism of the Chinese and Hong Kong governments,** Lai has long been a symbol of the struggle for freedom of expression in Hong Kong. Over the years, his independent newspaper, **Apple Daily,** played a key role in investigating and exposing issues such as **corruption, human rights abuses,** and **government overreach.** In 2020, following the imposition of Hong Kong's National Security Law (NSL), the Chinese and Hong Kong governments escalated their crackdown on pro-democracy activists, with Lai being targeted among prominent figures. He was **arrested in August 2020** under the NSL on charges of **colluding with foreign forces,** which coincided with **police raids** of *Apple Daily's* headquarters. The situation intensified as authorities froze the assets of *Apple Daily,* forcing the newspaper's **closure in June 2021.** This marked the end of Hong Kong's most prominent independent media outlet, **silencing a critical voice** in the region.

Jimmy Lai has been **imprisoned in solitary confinement since December 2020** and now faces prosecution under Hong Kong's National Security Law. If convicted, he faces a **potential life sentence for his peaceful advocacy for freedom and democracy** in Hong Kong.

How you can help:

Email the Hong Kong **authorities.** E.g. 'PEN International calls on the Hong Kong authorities to release Jimmy Lai immediately and unconditionally, drop all charges against him, and repeal restrictive laws that threaten press freedom and freedom of expression in Hong Kong.'

Appeals can be sent to:

Chief Executive of Hong Kong

Mr. John Lee

E-mail: ceo@ceo.gov.hk

Secretary for Justice of Hong Kong

Mr. Paul Lam

Email: sjo@doj.gov.hk

Chinese Ambassador to Australia

His Excellency Mr Xiao Qian

Email: chinaemb_au@mfa.gov.cn

[Write a message of hope to Jimmy Lai](#)

contact through [link](#) or QR code



Alaa Abd El-Fattah

Alaa Abd El-Fattah is an award-winning British-Egyptian **writer, software developer,** prominent **activist,** and Honorary Member of **English PEN.** He has endured years of arbitrary imprisonment on charges directly linked to his outspoken advocacy for **human rights and free expression in Egypt.** Despite fully serving his latest unjust sentence by 29 September 2024, Egyptian authorities **continue to arbitrarily imprison** Abd El-Fattah, refusing to recognise his two-year pre-trial detention as a part of his sentence.

His book, *[You Have Not Yet Been Defeated](#)*, which compiles some of his profoundly influential writings, has received widespread acclaim. He was named the **2024 Writer of Courage** by PEN Pinter Prize 2024 winner, **Arundhati Roy.** In 2022 he was awarded the Electronic Frontier Foundation's [Award for Democratic Reform Advocacy.](#)

Since his imprisonment in September 2019, Abd El-Fattah has faced severe treatment in detention, including **torture, denial of medical care, and restricted communication with his family.** He has been subjected to prolonged solitary confinement and repeatedly **deprived of essential necessities,** including a mattress, clean clothing, books, and newspapers, which are routinely withheld without justification. His requests for medical devices, including glucose monitors, have been denied. The Egyptian authorities have failed to adequately investigate Abd El-Fattah's allegations of torture and ill-treatment, despite a series of complaints filed by him and his family.

Abd El-Fattah received a retaliatory five-year prison sentence in December 2021, after a grossly unfair trial before an Egyptian Emergency State Security Court, whose verdicts are not subject to appeal. He spent more than **six months on hunger strike in 2022,** protesting his arbitrary imprisonment and detention conditions. Despite sustained calls from his family and organisations worldwide, **Egyptian authorities continue to obstruct his access to UK consular support.**



For **PEN International's Day of the Imprisoned Writer** why not spend 5 minutes writing a message to a writer behind bars or send a letter to authorities demanding their release

How you can help:

Write to the Egyptian **authorities**. E.g. 'PEN International is gravely concerned over Alaa Abd El-Fattah's health and renews its calls on the Egyptian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release him.'

Appeals can be sent to:

President of Egypt

Abdel Fattah el-Sisi

E-mail: presidency@op.gov.eg

The Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Email: Contact.us@mfa.gov.eg

The Egyptian Ambassador in Canberra

His Excellency Mr Hani Mohamed Nagi Abdelhamid

Email: embassy.canberra@mfa.gov.eg

[Send Alaa Abd El-Fattah a message of camaraderie](#)

contact through [link](#) or QR code



Kaciaryna Andrejeva (Bachvałava)

Journalist, writer and poet, Kaciaryna Andrejeva (real name Bachvałava) is serving an **eight-year prison sentence** in Belarus on bogus charges of 'state treason'. Andrejeva is currently being held in a medium-security penal colony in Homel, southeastern Belarus.

*And whenever I stray
On paths faraway
Where beasts left
Tracks in the snow
I am scared no longer,
Amused no longer –
No more trouble
No more woe.
The songs around
Have lost their sound
And instead of songs:
The crunch of spines.
In my beloved country
Before spring comes finally,
Through my prison bars
You still shine.*

~ a poem by Kaciaryna Andrejeva, **written from prison in 2021**. Translated from Belarusian by

Hanna Komar and John Farndon for [#FreeAllWords](#)

Kaciaryna Andrejeva was **arrested** in Minsk on **15 November 2020** together with her colleague from Belsat TV, **Daria Čulcova**. They were livestreaming a **peaceful protest honouring** the memory of artist **Raman Bandarenka**, who was reportedly **killed** by Belarusian security officers following the **fraudulent** presidential elections of August 2020. Andrejeva and Čulcova were charged with 'organising and preparing of actions that grossly violate public order'. On 18 February 2021, a court in Minsk found Andrejeva and Čulcova guilty and **sentenced** them to **two years in prison**.

Just before she was due to be released Andrejeva was **sentenced** to an **additional eight years** in prison on charges of 'state treason'. The **trial** was held **behind closed doors**. Andrejeva still has to serve the remaining three months in prison left in her first sentence.

Andrejeva is an award-winning Belarusian journalist and writer. She was working for the leading independent broadcaster *Belsat TV* at the time of her arrest. Her documentary book *Belarusian Donbas*, **co-authored** with her husband, journalist **Ihar Iljaš**, and published in 2020, details their **investigation** into the role of Belarusian **citizens and organisations in the war** in Donbas, Eastern Ukraine. The book was deemed 'extremist' by the Belarusian authorities and was subsequently **banned** in 2021. Andrejeva started composing poetry while in prison.

Her poems, published and translated by the [#FreeAllWords](#) initiative, can be read [here](#).

The situation in Belarus remains of **grave concern**, with **1289 people being held on politically motivated grounds** at the time of writing. The *Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights* **concluded** that some of the violations it documented may amount to **crimes against humanity**. Meanwhile, the **stigmatisation** and **repression of Belarusian language and literature** shows no sign of abating.



How you can help:

Write to the Belarusian **authorities** and Canberra. E.g. 'PEN International urges the Belarusian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release Kaciaryna Andrejeva as well as fellow writers and journalists held in Belarus solely for peacefully expressing their views.'

Appeals can be sent to:

Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus:

Maxim Ryzhenkov

Email: mail@mfa.gov.by

The Ambassador to Australia of Belarus

Ambassador Ruslan Esin

E-mail: japan@mfa.gov.by

[Write a message of solidarity to Kaciaryna Andrejeva](#)

contact through [link](#) or QR code



FREEDOM TO WRITE

FREEDOM TO READ

PEN Sydney has been protecting freedom of expression for **over 90 years**

Raising awareness about writers in prison

Fighting censorship of the media, the internet and publishing

Promoting the voices of writers who are marginalised

Supporting writers fleeing war or political oppression

Defending the right to write and read in any language

Creating a community of writers, readers and activists sharing ideas

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