

Moroccan journalist wins Gebran Tueni Prize

Aboubakr Jamaï, the co-founder and former managing director of the weekly newspaper *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* and a pioneer of the independent press in Morocco, has been awarded the 2010 Gebran Tueni Award, the annual prize of the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) that honours an editor or publisher from the Arab region.



The award recognises Jamaï's constant struggle in publishing some of the region's finest independent journalism while dealing with a monarchy that, despite promises of reform, prefers to maintain control of the Moroccan media. The award to Jamaï was announced Sunday, 12 December 2010, the fifth anniversary of the murder of Gebran Tueni, the Lebanese publisher who was killed by a car bomb in Beirut in 2005.

The award honours the editor or publisher who demonstrates the values incarnated in Tueni: attachment to freedom of the press, courage, leadership, ambition, and high managerial and professional standards.

"Tribute to all Moroccan journalists"

"The awarding of this prestigious prize is a tribute to all Moroccan journalists who suffer as a result of the limitations that have been imposed on their freedom of expression during these last years," said Jamaï, who teaches courses on political Islam and politics in the Middle East at the University of San Diego in the US.

"It is a fine reward for the sacrifices made by all those who contributed to the making of the *Journal Hebdomadaire*, a publication that remained faithful to the end to the noble principles of our profession. I hope that this prize will draw attention to the repeated attacks on press freedom in Morocco as well as, more generally, to the autocratic stagnation our country is undergoing."

The French-language *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* established a reputation for being a leading and persistent critical voice in the Moroccan press. As the country moved towards a more open and democratic society, the publication's irreverent tone and stinging analysis sought to hold authorities to their commitments to tackling corruption, transparency and ending human rights abuses.

Jamaï's reports have thrown light on King Mohammed VI's business dealings and challenged government claims about

economic progress.

Prophet Muhammad cartoon drawings

In reporting on the uproar over the Danish cartoons lampooning the Prophet Muhammad, *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* published a special report, including a photo of a French newspaper that reproduced some of the drawings. So that *Le Journal* didn't further inflame passions, Jamaï inked out the images in the photo. Yet protesters still gathered outside the paper's offices in a demonstration that many believe was orchestrated not by aggrieved Muslims but by Moroccan authorities.

On 26 January 2010, a Casablanca commercial appeals court ruled that *Le Journal*'s publishing group, Trimedia, had fallen into bankruptcy. Bailiffs entered the offices as the latest issue was being readied for press, seizing its assets and effectively turning staff out into the street.

Officially the closing of *Le Journal* was due to a debt of €1.3 million (US\$1.7 million) in unpaid taxes and social contributions, and a €270,000 fine for libel to Claude Moniquet, head of the Brussels-based European Strategic Intelligence and Security Centre. The organisation had published a report on the disputed Western Sahara that *Le Journal* claimed closely reflected the official Moroccan government position. In September 2009, the decision to fine *Le Journal* had been upheld by the Moroccan Supreme Court and effectively condemned the publication to financial ruin.

Jamaï claimed that Trimedia could have paid creditors "had the authorities refrained from regularly ordering advertisers to boycott the publication."

"Dedication to independent journalism"

In making the award, WAN-IFRA said: "The media situation in Morocco reflects a recurring problem in the region, where authorities pledge support to a free press but fail to follow their words with actions. Mr Jamaï and his colleagues at *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* performed a public service with their professionalism, dedication to independent journalism and informed commentary. Yet instead of being celebrated, they were driven out of business. We hope this award will draw attention to the situation in Morocco, which should encourage courageous journalists like Mr Jamaï to ensure transparency and help create the conditions for sustainable development."

Gebran Tueni was a unique figure in the World Association of Newspapers for almost 20 years, as a leading member of its Press Freedom Committee, a board member for more than a decade, a regular participant in missions to press freedom 'hot spots' and a constant advisor and support to the leadership of the organisation on Arab and press freedom issues. WAN and the Tueni family created the award to encourage other courageous and independent publishers, editors and newspapers in the Arab world.

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>