



Founders of Tunisian Press and Publishing Watchdog, OLPEC, Receive 2009 IPA Freedom to Publish Prize during Global Forum on Freedom of Expression

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On 4 June 2009, IPA President Herman P. Spruijt formally awarded the 2009 IPA Freedom to Publish Prize to Sihem Bensedrine, Neziha Rjiba and Mohamed Talbi, founders of the Observatory for the Freedom of the Press, Publishing and Creation in Tunisia (OLPEC) for their exemplary courage in upholding freedom to publish. The Award ceremony took place on Kaholmen Island, site of the historic Oscarsborg fortress, as part of the Global Forum on Freedom of Expression program, a Forum the International Publishers Association (IPA) is a partner of. This Prize “sends a message to the Tunisian authorities that domestic legislation and practice must be amended to meet international freedom of expression standards”.

The Board of the International Publishers Association (IPA) meeting in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina on 24 April 2009, had selected Sihem Bensedrine, Neziha Rjiba and Mohamed Talbi, founders of the Tunis-based Observatory for the Freedom of the Press, Publishing and Creation in Tunisia (OLPEC), as Prize-winners from among many highly commendable candidates. This year's Award was formally presented on 4 June 2009 by IPA President Herman P. Spruijt on Kaholmen Island near Oslo, site of the historic Oscarsborg fortress, as part of the Global Forum on Freedom of Expression program. The Award came following speeches by State Secretary Vidar Harsick, Norwegian Ministry of Culture, and International PEN's International Secretary, writer Eugene Schougin.

IPA President Herman P. Spruijt declared: “Sihem Bensedrine, Neziha Rjiba and Mohamed Talbi have consistently stood up for the right to freedom of expression and have suffered greatly as a result. OLPEC, which is not recognized by the Tunisian authorities, works under extremely difficult conditions. It issues alerts on freedom of expression violations, including an annual list of censored books at the Tunis Book Fair. This remarkable work is incredibly useful and deserves to be honoured. We hope that the IPA Freedom to Publish Prize will encourage the three founders of OLPEC, and OLPEC itself, to continue their important work highlighting repeated freedom of expression and freedom to publish violations in Tunisia”.

IPA Freedom to Publish Committee Chair Bjørn Smith-Simonsen, also present in Oslo, added: “In giving the three founders of OLPEC the 2009 IPA Freedom to Publish Prize,

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we remind the Tunisian authorities that Tunisian legislation must be amended or repealed to meet international standards, and that Tunisian practice must be changed for freedom of expression to flourish again in Tunisia“. He added: “In giving the three founders of OLPEC the 2009 IPA Freedom to Publish Prize, we rise to honour the exemplary integrity, the humanity, the determination, and the courage that they so marvellously demonstrate”.

More about OLPEC’s three founding members, recipients of the 2009 IPA Freedom to Publish Prize:

The Observatory for the Freedom of the Press, Publishing and Creation (OLPEC) was founded by Sihem Bensedrine, Neziha Rjiba (also known as Om Zied) and Mohamed Talbi in 2001. OLPEC’s principal goal is to serve as a monitoring body for all forms of media and literary censorship in Tunisia, and to make these issues public. Despite repeatedly refusing them the right to legal recognition, OLPEC and its members continue fearlessly to highlight censorship in publishing and defend freedom of expression in the face of threats of jail and physical attack.

Sihem Bensedrine, Neziha Rjiba and Mohamed Talbi have consistently stood up for the right to freedom of expression and have suffered greatly as a result. Bensedrine for instance was the victim of an extensive defamation campaign in 2005 and this year designed to shed doubt on her credibility as a human rights activist. The founders of OLPEC are under constant police surveillance. Their guests are harassed. Their mail is intercepted. Their e-mails are bugged, and their access to the internet is blocked. Bensedrine is routinely prevented from travelling and has been assaulted at Tunis airport as recently as August 2008.

In a way, OLPEC emerged from the ashes of a publishing house, Aloes, established by Sihem Bensedrine. In December 1999, the offices of Aloes were burgled twice and its employees threatened by members of the security forces. Police intimidation and threats and break-ins finally led to the closure of this small publishing house, and the emergence in 2001 of a new group, OLPEC, aimed at defending freedom of expression, including the right to publish. OLPEC has no legal status in Tunisia. The Interior Ministry turned down a request for official NGO status in August 2001, citing the organisation’s “unlawful designation”. OLPEC filed a complaint for abuse of power but the administrative tribunal has yet to rule on the case. OLPEC’s website was operated from Morocco due to Internet censorship in Tunisia. It is currently under reconstruction.

More about the IPA Freedom to Publish Prize:

In 2005, IPA re-established the IPA Freedom to Publish Prize, a prize designed to honour each year a person or an organisation that has made an important contribution to the defence and promotion of freedom to publish anywhere in the world. While the 2006 IPA Freedom to Publish Prize was awarded to Iranian publisher Shalah Lahiji during the Göteborg Book Fair, the 2007 Prize was awarded to Zimbabwean publisher Trevor N’cube at the Cape Town Book Fair. Special Prizes were also given posthumously to Anna Politkovskaya (Russia) and Hrant Dink (Turkey/Armenia). The 2008 IPA Freedom to Publish Prize was awarded to Turkish publisher Ragıp Zarakolu during the opening ceremony of an international seminar on neo-censorship co-organised in Amsterdam by Amsterdam World Book Capital 2008 and IPA.

Prize-winners receive the sum of 5'000 CHF. The 2009 IPA Freedom to Publish Prize is sponsored by the Norwegian Publishers Association (DnF). For more, see: www.forleggerforeningen.no

More about the Global Forum on Freedom of Expression and the Award Ceremony of the 2009 IPA Freedom to Publish Prize:

The Global Forum on Freedom of Expression is taking place in Oslo from 1 to 6 June 2009. IPA and the Norwegian Publishers Association (DnF) are partners of the Global Forum, which strives to explore freedom of expression's most pressing issues. Religious intolerance, impunity, technology, and other issues that challenge the way freedom of expression is understood and defended will be the focus of open and productive debate between the various stakeholders. The Global Forum on Freedom of Expression (GFFE) is the first such global gathering from freedom of expression advocates and practitioners to exchange skills, ideas, and inspiration, while building opportunities for cooperation across borders.

The Award ceremony of the 2009 IPA Freedom to Publish Prize took place in Kaholmen Island near Oslo on 4 June 2009 as part of the GFFE program. Important foreign and Norwegian dignitaries, including State Secretary Vidar Harsick, Norwegian Ministry of Culture, and International PEN's International Secretary, Eugene Schougin, as well as IPA President Herman P. Spruijt, took part in the Award Ceremony.

Earlier that day, IPA and NORLA, the Foundation promoting Norwegian literature abroad, had gathered publishers from around the world for a round table at the Oslo House of Literature entitled: "Publishing Across Borders". Publishers, who turn information into knowledge, are at the core of the free flow of knowledge worldwide. Because publishers believe in and promote the free flow of books, IPA therefore supports the ratification of the 1950 UNESCO Florence agreement and its additional Nairobi Protocol (1976), which aims at facilitating the free flow of ideas by fostering the free circulation of educational, scientific and cultural materials through the dismantling of custom barriers and other trade obstacles.

IPA is also involved in GFFE training sessions on the Universal Periodical Review (UPR) of the UN Human Rights Council.

For more about the Global Forum, please see: www.expressionforum.org

More about IPA:

The International Publishers Association (IPA) is the global non-governmental organisation representing all aspects of book and journal publishing worldwide. Established in 1896, IPA's mission is to promote and protect publishing and to raise awareness for publishing as a force for cultural and political advancement worldwide. IPA is an industry association with a human rights mandate. IPA currently has 65 member associations in 53 countries.

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