COMMENT

Israeli press not free? They're joking

ADI SCHWARTZ

A biased report by an inexperienced researcher has led to absurd allegations against Israel

FREEDOM HOUSE, an international NGO conducting research into democracy, political freedom and human rights, has declared in its press freedom index that Israel is no longer a "free" country. It is now only "partially free".

Odd. If anything, the Israeli press is over-aggressive, with little respect for privacy and a tendency towards sensationalism. More so than many other Western media, the Israeli press is robust and boisterous.

On the other hand, Freedom House is a respected organization, quoted frequently in major newspapers, as well as in academic papers and government reports.

Freedom House publishes its index every year. The lower the score, the better. Freedom House regards countries with 0-30 points as "free"; countries with 31-60 points as "par-tially free"; and countries with 61-100 points as "not free". Until now, Israel was regarded as "free" (with 28 points for 2007).

But this year, Israel received 31 points — an obvious PR victory for Israel's enemies.

The report states: "On December 31, the High Court ruled in favour of a Foreign Press Association petition that the Gaza ban be lifted, but the government ignored the court ruling."

But that is not true. The Israeli High Court offered a compromise between the Israeli authorities and the FPA for a few foreign journalists to be allowed to enter Gaza. That did not happen, but the court said later that the government's acts were reasonable.

The strangest part of Freedom House's report relates to "heightened self-censorship and biased report-ing… many media outlets largely reflected and, indeed, fed popular sen-timent and prioritised nationalistic themes".

But most Israelis felt exactly the opposite: that too many journalists were demoralizing the troops and actually feeding defeatist sentiments.

The report's author, Adam Werner, is not a journalist and this is his first year with Freedom House. I asked him how he knew that there was self-censorship. It was based, he told me, on an interview with Yizhar Beer, the director of Keshev, a watchdog group.

Because of Beer's well known, far-left political views, I asked Werner if he consulted anyone else. Communi-cations law experts? Journalists? "No," he said. The assertion of heightened self-censorship (which actually led to Israel's status decline) was based solely on Mr Beer's view.

I then asked about the High Court's decisions. Mr Werner asked me to send him the rulings (rather late, I'd say). I also asked about "pro-peace radio station" RAM-FM, which, accord-ing to the report, was "closed down" by the Israeli police. But the station closed because it didn't have a permit. After a permit was obtained, it went back on air. Six months later it closed — due to financial problems.

So why is this in the report? And why mention that it's a "pro-peace radio station", if not to imply that there was a political reason?

Freedom House says it sends draft reports to three professors of commu-nications studies. Unless they sign a report, it is not approved.

I asked Dr Karin Karlekar, manag-ing editor of the Freedom of the Press Index, which professors it was sent to. She admitted that this year, due to financial problems, the report was not sent to any.

An inexperienced researcher, who is not an authority in his field, writes a report based on an interview with one interviewee with a very clear political agenda. Nobody checks it. And on that basis, Freedom House downgrades Israel from "free" to "partially free".

Adi Schwartz is a Tel Aviv based independ-ent investigative journalist. He blogs at www.adi-schwartz.com/blog