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New book sheds light on repression

Sihem Ben Sedrine is just one of the many voices featured in English PEN's new collection entitled 'Another Sky'. It contains articles, many previously unpublished, from what the organisation calls 'voices of conscience' around the world. These writers decry the brutality and repression of their country's governments and champion the advancement of free expression and non-violence. Whilst they have met with a wide variety of fates, they are unified in the strength of their conscience. Their resistance to censorship has led to their imprisonment, torture, exile or even death. Yet their writing bears witness to the resilience and good humour with which they have sustained themselves. (23-APR-07)

John Hendel reports on the new collection of letters, essays, and short stories published by English PEN, the founding centre of the world's only international fellowship of writers, and the world's oldest human rights organisation.

Sihem Ben Sedrine has experienced her fair share of difficulties in Tunisia. Her recent inclusion in English PEN's collection of writings from formerly imprisoned and beleaguered writers from around the world only continues to show her persistence when it comes to standing up and shouting the truth.

Tunisia, though, rarely approves of anything resembling dissent and has an arsenal of methods to silence its citizens. Sedrine is a founding member and the present speaker for the National Council for Liberties in Tunisia, not recognised by authorities, as well as the General Secretary of the Observatory for the Defense of the Freedom of the Press. She also has been the editor-in-chief of the online newspaper Kalima, which has been banned in Tunisia.

No true independent press exists in Tunisia, and state runs the existing newspapers. The press in Tunisia has often been used to savagely attack people the government considers dissidents, including Sedrine. While the newspapers usually carry slander, they were particularly brutal in their criticism in May 2005 after she published a National Council for Freedom in Tunisia report slamming the disinformation in Tunisian newspapers. The dailies Al Chourouk, Al Hadath, L'Observateur and As Sarih accused her of prostitution, corrupting minors, treason, and more, even encouraging violence against her.

Ironically, Tunisia hosted the World Summit on the Information Society, a major United Nations event set to consider the Internet's future, in November 2005, though RSF called Tunisia one of the world's most repressive enemies of Internet freedom. The state controls all Internet cafes.

'The approach of the WSIS summit has driven the state into a kind of madness,' said Index on Censorship's Rohan Jayasekera, who worked beside Sedrine in Iraq, in a May 2005 Index article. 'They know what a mess their country's free speech rights are in, but are quite literally "in denial" about it.'

Even though the past two years offered initial hopeful signs for more democratic measures, the state continues to control the press with an iron grip. President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali pardoned 1,600 political prisoners, many of whom had been imprisoned for over a decade, on 25 February 2007, but the state still exercises considerable surveillance over the freed prisoners. Tunisia, a country of 10 million people, had a police force of 130,000 in 2006, according to RSF. The police often act as an arm of the regime; in 2000, the police arrested and beat Ben Sedrine when she tried to visit her friend, Taoufik Ben Brik, who was on a hunger strike to protest police harassment.

'Laws are simply decoration, the authorities do what they want, lives can be completely destroyed, people can land in prison without having done anything, only because they protested against a policeman who insulted them,' said Sedrine in a 2003 interview on the Universal Rights website. 'And if they then ask "Why did you insult me?" they land in prison, are tortured, lose their work, their families are harassed, and all this for nothing!'

Sihem Ben Sedrine is just one of the many voices captured in English PEN's new collection entitled 'Another Sky'. It contains pieces, many previously unpublished, from what the organisation calls 'voices of conscience' around the world. These writers decry the brutality and repression of their country's governments and champion the advancement of free expression and non-violence. In many cases English PEN has intervened to help release these writers from prisons in their homelands. Contributors include Orhan Pamuk, Aung San Suu Kyi and Ken Saro-Wiwa as well as Faraj Bayrakdar, Hwang Dae Kwon and Mamadali Makhmudov. The book also contains the final writings of murdered journalists Anna Politkovskaya and Hrant Dink. The collection darkly chronicles the hardships writers face in countries like China, Syria, Cuba, and Korea.

English PEN launched its new book on 2 April at the National Theatre in London. The event included readings from 'Another Sky' by writers and actors including William Boyd, Jung Chang, Moris Farhi, Ronald Harwood, Michael Palin, Prunella Scales, Fiona Shaw and Timothy West. Profile books will publish the collection on 19 April.

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