Algerian authorities arrest freelance journalist

Algerian authorities should immediately release journalist Sofiane Merakchi and drop any charges against him, the Committee to Protect Journalists said.

Police officers are seen at El Harrach prison in Algiers, Algeria, on June 13, 2019. Freelance journalist Sofiane Merakchi was recently sent to the prison for pre-trial detention. Credit: CPJ/Reuters/Ramzi Boudina.

On September 22, police arrested Merakchi, a freelance correspondent for the Beirut-based TV channel Al Mayadeen and other foreign news agencies, at his personal office in Algiers, according to news reports.

Yesterday, the Bir Mourad Rais First Instance Court in Algiers charged Merakchi with working for foreign news outlets without a license and evading customs authorities while importing broadcasting equipment, according to news reports. The court ordered Merakchi to be sent to El Harrach prison, in a suburb of Algiers, for pre-trial detention, according to reports.

If found guilty, Merakchi could face two to seven years in prison for the customs evasion charge, plus a fine in relation to the value of the equipment, according to Algeria's penal code. CPJ could not determine the potential penalty if Merakchi were found guilty on the charge of working with foreign outlets without a license.

Merakchi's lawyer, Fatma Al-Zahraa Ben Berham, told news website *TSA Algeria* that the journalist will appeal the charges and the pre-trial detention.

"Sofiane Merakchi's arrest and the charges against him show that Algerian authorities will stop at nothing to keep a lid on coverage of events taking place in the country," said CPJ Middle East and North Africa Program Coordinator Sherif Mansour. "Authorities must immediately release Merakchi and allow journalists in the country to report freely."

Merakchi recently covered protests in Algiers calling for new presidential elections. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika resigned in April, after protests dissuaded him from seeking a fifth term in office, according to news reports.

Since February, Algerian authorities have censored reporting, expelled foreign journalists covering the protests, blocked websites, and suspended journalists over their coverage of the protests, according to CPJ reporting.

Algeria's Ministry of Justice did not immediately respond to CPJ's emailed request for comment.