

## **Open Letter on Freedom of Information presented by Press Advocacy Groups in Iraq**

**3 May 2010**

Iraq is witnessing democratic transitions resulting in a political course that acknowledges pluralism and ensures the peaceful succession of power through the people's vote at the polls.

The Iraqi constitution ratified in 2005 clearly confirms that the people are the source of authority. The constitution guarantees in several articles freedom of opinion and speech as part of the rights and freedoms without which no democratic society can emerge or sustain itself.

A principle feature of a functioning legal framework that supports an independent media sector and the public's right to know is a Freedom of Information Law, provisions that allow the people's access to public documents created in the course of doing the people's business. World Press Freedom Day 2010 is dedicated to this principle. As citizens and journalists, who bear the responsibility of acting as watchdogs and conduits of information between the governing and the governed, we mark this day by respectfully demanding the passage of a Freedom of Information Law that meets an international standard for access to information.

The Iraqi people have been starved of vital information for decades. As full partners in our emerging Iraqi democracy, it is no longer an option to keep the people in the dark, if we are to succeed as a nation in the development of our homeland.

At stake is more than just a journalistic tool. The Iraqi economy will not rest solely on oil, but on diversification. The World Bank considers access to information a key factor in a strong economy, a consideration for foreign investment, and a bulwark against corruption. We still lack the legal mechanism that guarantees the citizen's right to have access to information, especially when it concerns the interests of citizens such as public sector contracts, bids, development and reconstruction programs. The citizens, especially media workers, who want to have access to information, with the absence of a binding legal text, are confronted with bureaucratic procedures and measures that are often subject to personal whims that aim at concealing information under different pretexts such as public ethics, higher interests, national security and other elastic terms that wrongly restrict the public's right to know.

As a result Transparency International reports that Iraq is one of the most corrupt countries in the world. Who pays for this? The Iraqi people. Corruption is consuming a huge share of Iraq's resources, delaying reconstruction projects and affecting development in the country. Our economy will never reach its full potential and our people will never have the opportunity to fulfill their aspirations, if we do not fully embrace these basic principles.

To meet these challenges, Temkin, a group of concerned Iraqi journalists and activists fighting for media law reform, and the greater media community in Iraq, have worked together to create a draft law guaranteeing the public's right to access information from the public sector. The draft complies with international standards and transparency without which a democracy cannot exist.

Temkin and the Iraqi media present this draft law as an essential partner to the parliament and the government in building Iraq, and not as a destructive tool, as some describe it. The draft law seeks for all citizens, all Iraqis, not only journalists, the right to access information from their government. This draft is now made public for all to see and for the government to act upon with the continued input of the Iraqi people.

By way of the vote, the people have decided who will lead them, but they also demand their rightful place as partners in the ongoing evolution of an Iraqi democracy that is made stronger because it stands on the shoulders of all Iraqis not just a chosen few.

The people of Iraq deserve a government which is open, transparent, and responsive to their needs. Passage of an access to information law will ensure that the government, the media and civil society are all working together for the citizens of Iraq. Passage will ensure that Iraq becomes a leading light of tolerance and access to information in the Middle East.