



Freedom of the Press 2016 - Yemen

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Press Freedom Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 26 / 30 (↓2) (0 = best, 30 = worst)

Political Environment: 34 / 40 (↓3) (0 = best, 40 = worst)

Economic Environment: 23 / 30 (0 = best, 30 = worst)

Press Freedom Score: 83 / 100 (↓5) (0 = best, 100 = worst)

Quick Facts

Population: 26,737,000

Freedom in the World Status: Not Free

Internet Penetration Rate: 25.1%

Overview

The outbreak of civil war in 2015 led to the deterioration of Yemen's already troubled media environment, as the rival factions clamped down on press freedoms and journalists were caught in the crossfire. President Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi and his government fled into exile before attempting to reestablish themselves with regional military support in the southern city of Aden late in the year, leaving the capital and much of the country under the control of the Houthi rebel movement and allied forces loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. Various militias and extremist groups, including Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), also held territory in parts of Yemen, further complicating the operating environment for journalists.

Key Developments

- Houthi forces carried out dozens of raids on media outlets and detentions of journalists during the year in an attempt to suppress dissent.
- At least seven journalists and media workers were killed in connection with their profession, with most falling victim to air strikes by the Saudi-led military coalition supporting Hadi's government.

Legal Environment: 26 / 30 (↓2)

The constitution allows for freedom of expression "within the limits of the law," and the relevant laws are restrictive. The few protections that the legal system provided for journalists' rights were effectively unenforceable during 2015 due to the breakdown of government functions and armed groups' occupation of various parts of the country.

The Press and Publications Law of 1990 requires journalists to uphold "national unity" and adhere to the "goals of the Yemeni revolution." Article 103 bans criticism of the head of state and defamation of "the image of Yemeni, Arab, or Islamic heritage." Article 104 prescribes fines and up to a year in prison for violations. The government has ignored calls to repeal problematic portions of the 1990 law.

In direct contravention of the Yemeni constitution, which forbids exceptional courts, two specialized courts have been regularly employed to prosecute journalists. The Specialized Criminal Court, established in 1999 to handle national security cases, targets political dissidents and journalists, while the Specialized Press and Publications Court (SPPC), established in 2009, tries cases related to the media.

Yemen finalized a freedom of information law in 2012, becoming just the second Arab country, after Jordan, to enact such legislation. Although a commissioner was appointed to manage the new law's implementation in 2013, institutional mechanisms were not adequately funded, and the information agency authorized by the bill had yet to be established in 2015. The effects of the civil conflict further reduced transparency and left state institutions unresponsive to information requests.

Under existing laws, Yemeni news outlets and journalists must obtain licenses annually from the Ministry of Information, and printing houses must maintain a registry of printed materials and submit copies to the Ministry of Information. High capital requirements to establish print publications can exclude new competitors from entering the market. There is no systematic regulation of broadcast media in Yemen, creating legal ambiguities and rendering outlets vulnerable to arbitrary interference.

Political Environment: 34 / 40 (↓3)

Yemen's media grew increasingly polarized in 2015, with the bulk of functioning outlets becoming virtual mouthpieces for various sides in the ongoing civil war. Both the Hadi government and the Houthi rebels invested significant effort in their media operations, pushing nonpartisan writers and journalists to the margins of the information landscape, partly through dismissals and intimidation. Politicians and officials from each faction overwhelmingly privileged allied media in granting interviews and access.

The Houthis and their allies, who controlled most major population centers for much of the year, cracked down on dissent in the capital and elsewhere. In March, as the Saudi-led military coalition began a campaign of air strikes aimed at halting Houthi advances, the Houthi-occupied Ministry of Information threatened to close media outlets if they published false news or insulted the "popular revolution." Houthi forces then carried out a series of raids on the media, ransacking the Sanaa offices of Qatar's Al-Jazeera television network, the newspaper *Al-Masdar*, and two television stations – Suhail and Yemen Shebab – that are affiliated with the opposition Sunni Islamist party

Islah. Scores of similar actions were reported during the year. Internet service providers, apparently acting on orders from Houthi authorities, also blocked numerous online news sources.

The increased threat of violence and arbitrary detention contributed to self-censorship among journalists, as did smear campaigns and other threats. The Houthis repeatedly detained journalists over the course of 2015, including several who were held while reporting on anti-Houthi protests in Sanaa in January. Many of those detained were subsequently released, but nearly a dozen journalists remained in Houthi custody at year's end. AQAP reportedly abducted three journalists in Al-Mukalla in October as they covered a protest against the group.

Foreign journalists were periodically blocked from entering the country by either the Houthis or the Saudi-led coalition, which controlled Yemen's airspace and patrolled its coasts and land borders. Two foreign freelance journalists, Raymond Lidal of Norway and Casey Coombs of the United States, were abducted by Houthi fighters in March and May, respectively. Both were released after weeks of diplomatic efforts on their behalf.

At least seven journalists and media workers were killed in connection with their profession in 2015, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists – far more than in previous years. Other organizations reported larger casualty figures. Khaled al-Washli, a journalist with Houthi-affiliated Al-Masirah TV, died in January while covering efforts to defuse a bomb in Dhamar. In April, an air strike by the Saudi-led coalition hit the Sanaa offices of the television station Yemen Today, killing a journalist and other employees. Two journalists who had allegedly been abducted by Houthi-affiliated militiamen were killed in May when an air strike destroyed the Dhamar building in which they were being held. Another air attack in September killed a cameraman working for Al-Masirah as he covered a previous strike in the capital. In an attack for which the motive could not be confirmed, journalist and pro-Houthi politician Abdulkarim al-Khaiwani was assassinated in Sanaa in March; AQAP later took responsibility for the murder.

Economic Environment: 23 / 30

The state controls the main terrestrial television and radio stations, and these were effectively taken over by Houthi forces during 2015. While there was a variety of privately owned print, radio, and satellite television outlets, many had ties to partisan interests, and their operations and finances were disrupted by the conflict and political crackdowns. Saudi-backed media outlets were organized during the year to promote the interests of the Hadi government.

The state has historically dominated press distribution outlets and print advertising, undermining the ability of the sector to operate without economic pressure. However, production and distribution for all media outlets was impeded in 2015 by lack of security, damage to infrastructure, and shortages of electricity and basic supplies like fuel as a result of the conflict.

Internet penetration was estimated at 25 percent in 2015, though poor infrastructure makes connections unreliable, and the effects of the conflict likely reduced internet access in practice. The state controls the largest internet service providers, and costs are prohibitive for most Yemenis.

Individual journalists are vulnerable to economic pressure from employers and political patrons, and this only increased during the civil conflict. While Houthi forces threatened media workers

under their control with lower wages or dismissal, the Hadi government and its regional allies offered generous incentives to those providing favorable coverage.

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