



## Freedom of the Press 2015 - Yemen

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### 2015 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score (0 = best, 100 = worst): 78

Legal Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 24

Political Environment (0 = best, 40 = worst): 31

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

Media workers in Yemen operated in an extremely difficult environment in 2014, characterized by a breakdown in security and rule of law during the second half of the year, and an increase in political pressure from both the government and armed opposition groups.

### Legal Environment

The constitution allows for freedom of expression "within the limits of the law," and the relevant laws are restrictive. 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 March 2014, Majed Karout, a reporter for the *Online* news website, was sentenced to one year in jail and fined 100,000 rials (\$450) for circulating false news; the case was connected to information Karout had posted on Facebook that implicated a former government official in corrupt activity.

In direct contravention of the Yemeni constitution, which forbids exceptional courts, two specialized courts are 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. Judges at the SPPC may choose from a variety of laws, including the penal code, to punish journalists, and prosecutors can refer cases to the court at their discretion. 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 have not been adequately funded, and the information agency authorized by the bill had yet to be established by the year's end.

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. Additionally, high capital requirements to establish print publications can exclude new competitors from entering the market. There is no regulation of broadcast media in Yemen, creating legal ambiguities. In May 2014, the information ministry presented a stopgap measure to parliament that would grant the ministry and Yemen's Public Corporation for Radio and Television provisional authority to regulate broadcast media, but it had not been approved by the year's end.

## Political Environment

New television and radio stations and news websites have sprung up in the wake of the 2011 uprising that led to President Ali Abdullah Saleh's resignation. Most offer news that is slanted to match the views of their owners, and employees feel pressure to adhere to specific editorial agendas. The government controls editorial policies on certain sensitive issues, such as rebel groups, at state-owned outlets, but public media are granted significant latitude in some elements of their reporting. In 2014, many state outlets featured strident criticisms of the government, particularly when reporting on corruption.

The government in 2014 placed restrictions on reporters operating in Yemen and denied them access to key sites in the country. In May, an official at the information ministry ordered a reporter and a cameraman with Al-Jazeera to leave an area in southern Yemen where government troops were fighting Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The two complied after the reporter was threatened with revocation of his journalist visa. Also in May, the government expelled a U.S. freelance journalist without explanation, and denied entry to another U.S. freelancer; he was forced to board a flight back to Turkey after arriving in Sana'a from Istanbul.

Censorship is common. In February 2014, the government temporarily prevented a state-operated press from printing copies of *Aden al-Ghad*, a newspaper linked with a separatist group based in southern Yemen. In June, authorities shut down the television station Yemen Today and a newspaper of the same name, both of which were owned by former president Saleh, and which had been critical of the administration of President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Authorities also reportedly seized equipment from the outlets. Self-censorship is common, with many journalists avoiding coverage of so-called "red-line" topics such as the movement of rebel groups.

According to the local media advocacy group Freedom Foundation, the first half of 2014 saw a decrease in reported violations against the media compared to the same period in 2013. However, there were still dozens of reported incidents, including physical attacks, threats, and interference with journalistic work, about half of which were perpetrated by agents of the government. The pace of violations increased in the second half of 2014, as fighting between the government and the Houthi rebel movement intensified, and particularly after the capture of Sana'a by Houthi forces in September. Whereas in the first half of the year the government was responsible for most attacks on the press, in the second half of the year armed groups, including the Houthis, took the lead amid almost total state failure that created an environment of lawlessness and impunity.

During their initial assault on Sana'a in September, Houthi forces shelled the offices of state-run Yemen TV, killing six of its employees and temporarily forcing it off the air. The station resumed broadcasting later that month, but Houthi forces maintained tight control over its management. After occupying the capital, Houthis rebels undertook a harassment campaign against outlets they deemed hostile to their cause, primarily those affiliated with the Islamist Islah party; they reportedly insulted, interrogated and detained journalists, and confiscating reporters' equipment. The rebels shortly after entering the capital raided the offices of Suhail TV, which is financed by Sheikh Hamid al-Ahmar, head of the Islah party. It remained off-air at the year's end.

Several journalists were killed in Yemen in 2014. In August, the director of the state-run Sana'a Radio, Abdul Rahman Hamid al-Din, was fatally wounded in a shooting by unknown assailants in Sana'a. Also in August, an explosive device was discovered under the car of the director of Yemen TV, Ibrahim al-Abiad, though it was defused without incident. In December, U.S. freelance journalist Luke Somers, who had been held by AQAP since 2013, was killed during a failed rescue attempt by Yemeni and American forces.

## Economic Environment

The government controls most terrestrial television and radio stations. However, privately owned television and radio stations have proliferated since 2012, with radio experiencing the strongest growth. In the absence of legislation or regulations to control broadcasting, each radio station adheres to its own standards. A number of private television stations broadcast into Yemen from outside the country, increasing the diversity of news coverage. The development of broadcast media is significant because due to low literacy rates and other factors, most Yemenis get their news from television and radio. Print media remain strictly regulated under the Press and Publications Law; only a handful of newspapers provide independent views. The state also controls press distribution outlets and print advertising, undermining the ability of the press to operate without economic pressure. In 2014, about 23 percent of the population had access to the internet, though poor infrastructure makes connections unreliable. The majority of internet users connect at public cafes, which are susceptible to state surveillance. The government owns the country's two internet service providers, and costs are prohibitive for most Yemenis. While news websites often operate with a small budget, the internet has given some newspapers greater reach. The English-language weekly *Yemen Post* has reported receiving more than 60,000 visits to its website per day, far exceeding its print circulation.

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