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Freedom of the Press 2014 - Algeria

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2014 Scores

Press Status: Partly Free

Press Freedom Score: (0 = best, 100 = worst) 59

Legal Environment: (0 = best, 30 = worst) 20

Political Environment: (0 = best, 40 = worst) 22

Economic Environment: (0 = best, 30 = worst) 17

Status change explanation: Algeria improved from Not Free to Partly Free due to the licensing of three private television stations, ending the government's monopoly on domestic broadcast media, as well as fewer physical attacks and legal cases against journalists in 2013.

In 2013, Algeria's media environment saw a decline in physical attacks against journalists and the opening of three new private television stations, ending the government's monopoly on broadcast media. However, the government's secrecy surrounding the health of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika following a stroke in March 2013, as well as the complete media blackout surrounding a terrorist attack on a British Petroleum facility in the In Amenas gas field in eastern Algeria, underscored ongoing problems with access to information and censorship.

The Algerian constitution guarantees freedom of expression. Nevertheless, a state of emergency was in effect from 1992 until February 2011, allowing the government to penalize any speech deemed threatening to the state or public order. Even after the lifting of the state of emergency, substantial legal restrictions on press freedom remain. The threat of criminal defamation and other charges hinders the press's ability to cover the news. A 2001 amendment to the information code criminalizes writing, speech, and cartoons that insult or offend the president, the parliament, the judiciary, or the armed forces. Bloggers, like traditional journalists, are subject to defamation suits, and several have been fined for posting "defamatory material." In September 2013, authorities arrested Abdelghani Aloui on charges of "insulting state institutions" as well as "glorification of terrorism" for uploading cartoons mocking Bouteflika on his Facebook page. In 2009, Algeria adopted a cybercrime law that gives the authorities the right to block websites deemed "contrary to the public order or decency."

A media law that went into effect in January 2012 was hailed by its proponents as an important reform that would enhance media freedom by nominally abolishing prison sentences for press offenses and opening up key media sectors to private ownership. However, the law establishes limitations on media coverage of a variety of subjects – including criminal investigations and state

security – and steep fines of up to \$6,700 for press-related offenses. Journalists who fail to pay the fines can still be subject to jail time. Furthermore, the law contains strict new eligibility requirements for media ownership, including a minimum of 10 years of media-related experience.

The country does not have a law providing for the right of access to official information, and communications officials rarely disclose information on government affairs. The lack of transparency was evident in 2013 as journalists unsuccessfully sought information concerning the status of Bouteflika's health and subsequent treatment in a Paris hospital.

State agencies regularly engage in both direct and indirect censorship. In January, a media blackout was imposed on coverage of the terrorist attack at the British Petroleum-operated gas plant in In Amenas. The Ministry of Communications blocked publication of two newspapers on May 19 when they attempted to print articles stating that Bouteflika's health had deteriorated, despite official reports to the contrary. Self-censorship also remains widespread, motivated largely by a fear of defamation charges or other forms of government retaliation.

Reporters occasionally suffer physical attacks or harassment in the course of their work. For example, Zouheir Ait Mouhoub, an investigative journalist for *El-Watan*, was subjected to harassment by internal security personnel in 2012 for conducting research on organized crime in the country. Few cases of physical violence were reported in 2013 – a notable improvement from the previous year.

There are more than 80 newspapers available in the capital, although only six are considered truly independent, as many are owned by private business interests closely affiliated with the government or the intelligence services. The government has significant economic influence over print media, as most papers are printed on state-controlled presses. In 2008, the government had placed six state-owned printing presses under the direct control of the Communications Ministry, threatening the editorial autonomy of half of Algeria's privately owned newspapers. The state-owned advertising agency favors content with a progovernment bias by controlling the placement of ads for state entities and companies, which form the largest source of income for most papers.

In 2011, the government passed a law allowing for private television and radio stations to be licensed domestically. Three new private television stations began broadcasting in 2013: Ennahar, el-Chourouk, and el-Djazaria. Previously, these and other outlets were forced to transmit from abroad via satellite. While the channels have diverse affiliations and programming, no opposition channel has yet been allowed to broadcast domestically. State-owned television and radio continue to broadcast biased information, display favoritism toward the president, and generally refrain from covering dissenting views. More than 60 percent of households have satellite dishes that provide access to alternate sources of information.

Foreign media outlets continue to face barriers to free reporting. Officials block distribution of foreign papers when they carry content deemed subversive. In particular, foreign media coverage of issues related to national security and terrorism is restricted. The Algeria office of Qatar's Al-Jazeera satellite television network remained closed in 2013.

About 17 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2013, one of the lowest rates in the region. The government monitors e-mail and online chat rooms, and internet service providers are legally liable for the content they host. An outdated communications network and inadequate investment in computers and high-speed internet means that the country lags behind its Arab counterparts in the use of blogs and social networks. The government has been slow to extend these services to the Algerian people – a move viewed by critics as intended to limit access to alternative news sources.

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