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Freedom of the Press 2010 - Lebanon

Status: Partly Free

Legal Environment: 18

Political Environment: 21

Economic Environment: 16

Total Score: 55

- The constitution provides for freedom of expression and freedom of the press under Article 13. Although media do not face direct interference from the government, political developments and violence in recent years have resulted in increased security risks and self-censorship among journalists.
- Article 75 of the country's press law prohibits publishing news that "contradicts public ethics" or is "inimical to national or religious feelings or national duty"; violators are fined if found guilty. Journalists are also prohibited from insulting the president or foreign leaders. Those charged with press offenses may be prosecuted in a special publications court.
- According to the annual report of the Maharat Foundation, a local media freedom organization, Lebanon's press law limits the number of publications circulated per day, prohibits the release of publications without a license, and requires that individuals inform the Ministry of Information before owning or managing a printing press.
- Lebanese authorities use libel laws to deter journalists from criticizing officials. In July 2009, the host of the weekly talk show *Corruption*, Ghada Eid, was served with an arrest warrant for speaking unfavorably about a judge during her show. She was later released on bail set at 6 million Lebanese pounds (US\$4,000). In a later case involving another judge, the court sentenced Eid to three months in jail and a fine of 30 million Lebanese pounds. In November, Simon Abou Fadel, a reporter with *Al-Kalima* newspaper, was charged with insulting President Michel Suleiman while appearing on MTV, a private Lebanese television station.
- Media legislation enacted ahead of the June 2009 parliamentary elections required news outlets to "ensure equity, balance, and objectivity between all candidates and abstain from supporting or promoting any candidate." The law also called on journalists to abstain from libel or defamation.
- The Directorate of General Security (SG) is authorized to censor all foreign periodicals, books, and films before they are distributed, and to ban pornography and political or religious material that is deemed a threat to the national security of either Lebanon or Syria. For example, the SG censored five minutes of the film *One Man Village*, made by a Lebanese director, on the grounds that it

threatened "civil accord." The SG also banned screenings of two of Italian director Paolo Benvenuti's films, claiming they were insulting to the Roman Catholic Church.

- Media in Lebanon are sharply divided according to religious and political affiliations. Most outlets are owned by politicians and influential families, and in the past they have been criticized for fueling violence.
- Political violence continued to threaten journalists' safety in 2009, and impunity for past attacks contributed to self-censorship among journalists. In May 2009, journalist Lucie Barsakhian's car was damaged by members of a political group. In June, Assi Azar, who writes for the website of Prime Minister Saad Hariri's party, was assaulted when he left for work. Also during the year, a crew from Al-Manar, the television station of the Shiite Islamist group Hezbollah, was attacked with stones and gunfire in Beirut.
- Lebanon hosts hundreds of periodicals and nearly a dozen daily newspapers. All national daily newspapers are privately owned, as are most television and radio outlets, including six television and satellite stations and nearly three dozen radio stations. The anti-Syrian MTV resumed broadcasting in April 2009 after being banned for seven years. Access to satellite television has grown substantially over the last decade.
- Roughly 24 percent of the population regularly accesses the internet. The government did not restrict such access in 2009, and there is no specific legislation to regulate internet usage.

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