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Freedom of the Press 2010 - Armenia

Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 21

Political Environment: 25

Economic Environment: 20

Total Score: 66

The constitution protects freedom of the media, but in practice Armenia remains a difficult operating environment. Authorities continued to pressure and harass the media throughout 2009 in the wake of the controversial March 2008 presidential election. The government particularly sought to restrict independent and opposition media before the Yerevan mayoral election in May. Libel is a criminal offense, although no cases were brought against journalists during 2009. Access to public information is frequently curtailed.

In April, the parliament amended the broadcasting law, ostensibly aiming to improve the transparency of the process for awarding broadcast licenses. The revised legislation more effectively details the criteria on which the National Commission on Television and Radio (NCTR) is to base its licensing decisions. However, it failed to improve the independence of the Council on Public Radio and Television, which is composed entirely of presidential appointees. The NCTR is also dominated by the ruling party, and the politicization of the licensing process is evident in the continued suspension of the license for independent broadcaster A1+, which has been off the air since 2002. Despite repeated appeals and a 2008 ruling in the station's favor by the European Court of Human Rights, the suspension remained in place at year's end. A 2008 amendment to the Law on Television and Radio that placed a moratorium on the issuing of television licenses is set to remain in effect until July 2010.

In August, the parliament adopted new media accreditation rules that will further limit journalists' independence. The rules allow for suspensions of journalists whose reports "do not correspond with reality" or violate the "interests, honor, and dignity" of parliament members. The trial of Nikol Pashinyan, editor in chief of the daily *Haykakan Zhamanak*, was ongoing at year's end. He is accused of assaulting a police officer and inciting protests following the 2008 presidential election, which left 10 people dead. The editor, who is known for his critical reporting on the government, was arrested despite an amnesty pardoning all who were involved in the 2008 protests.

The media environment remains nearly as politicized as it was leading up the 2008 presidential election. In 2009, the government continued to stifle reporting on politically sensitive topics, including economic contraction, unemployment, and poverty. Throughout the year, journalists were prohibited from covering controversial trials and were frequently harassed while covering - or banned from attending - protests and opposition events. Violent attacks against journalists took place on several occasions.

The authorities failed to properly investigate the attacks and at times suggested that the journalists were at fault. In April, the editor of the independent news website *Armenia Today* was beaten outside his home by unknown assailants. His colleagues said he was likely attacked due to his investigative journalism. The website has also been harassed by authorities and taken offline on several occasions. A freelance photographer was beaten while covering a protest rally in March, and a commentator for Shant TV was attacked in May, forcing him to cancel his show for two days. The period leading up to the May mayoral election in Yerevan was particularly difficult for the media; attacks and threats against journalists at polling stations were reported, as were confiscations of equipment. Arman Babadzhanian, editor of the opposition daily *Zhamanak Yerevan*, was released from prison in August following a public outcry over his untreated brain tumor. Babadzhanian had been sentenced to four years in prison in 2006 for forging documents to avoid military service, though his arrest and sentence have generally been viewed as punishment for an article criticizing the prosecutor's office.

Television is the country's dominant medium, and the government controls most of the broadcast media. The state-run Armenian Public Television and Armenian Public Radio are the only stations with nationwide coverage. Many of the private television stations are owned by government-friendly business elites, and broadcasters engage in a high degree of self-censorship to avoid having their licenses revoked. Few private newspapers are able to support themselves financially or effectively distribute their editions outside major cities. Regional newspapers sometimes fail to reach the streets if authorities dislike the content. The media struggled financially in 2009, particularly independent and privately owned outlets that are not connected to powerful elites and do not benefit from formal and informal subsidies.

Less than seven percent of the population uses the internet due to poor service, high prices for access, and lack of infrastructure, which leads to extremely slow connection speeds. In recent years, bloggers have played an important role in providing political information, such as after the 2008 presidential elections. The government had restricted access to websites supporting the opposition in March 2008, but there were no reports of such restrictions in 2009, according to the U.S. State Department.

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