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Freedom of the Press 2011 - Lebanon

Status: Partly Free

Legal Environment: 18

Political Environment: 21

Economic Environment: 14

Total Score: 53

Article 13 of Lebanon's constitution provides for freedom of expression and freedom of the press. Although the media rarely face direct interference from the government, political developments and hostilities with Israel in recent years have resulted in increased security risks and self-censorship among journalists.

Article 75 of the press law prohibits publishing news that "contradicts public ethics or is inimical to national or religious feelings or national duty," and violators face fines if found guilty. Journalists are also prohibited from insulting the head of state or foreign leaders, and those charged with press offenses may be prosecuted in a special publications court, though such cases are far less common than in neighboring countries. The penal code contains provisions related to media content and journalism, and prison terms are prescribed for some transgressions. Article 473, for instance, assigns up to a year in prison for blasphemy, though it is rarely invoked. The Ministry of Information grants publication licenses, but a moratorium imposed by the 1963 press law on the number of political publication licenses makes obtaining a new license difficult and expensive. The law also limits publication licenses to up to six days of publication per week, unless a separate license is obtained for the seventh day.

Lebanon's Audiovisual Media Law (No. 382 of 1994) imposes limits on the amount of political coverage in broadcast media, but there are several satellite news channels that violate the coverage requirements without repercussions. The law divides the broadcast media into two categories with different purposes and rights: Category One stations are allowed to broadcast news and political programming, while Category Two may not. Lebanon was the first Arab state to allow private radio and television stations to operate within its borders, and there is wide agreement that the country's media laws need to be updated. The Commission for the Modernization of Laws has begun reviewing legislation, and some draft bills have emerged. One of these, a technology bill, was opposed by press freedom groups in Lebanon, which successfully prevented it from coming to a vote in mid-2010 because of concerns about its restrictions on free speech, the potential for violations of privacy, and a lack of oversight of the regulatory body. Meanwhile, Maharat Foundation, a local media freedom organization, submitted a draft press law to the parliament that was pending at year's end.

The Directorate of General Security (SG) is authorized to censor all foreign magazines, books, and films before they are distributed, as well as pornography and political or religious material that is deemed a threat to the national security of either Lebanon or Syria. Lebanese authorities have also used libel laws to keep journalists from criticizing officials. According to a report by the local press freedom organization SKeyes, there were 13 cases of threats or assaults against journalists in 2010, and more than 50 cases of libel lawsuits, censorship, and blocks on websites. In March, for example, the editor and the director of the Arabic literature magazine *Al-Adab* were each fined \$4,000 in a libel case filed by an adviser to former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein; the fines threatened the magazine with financial ruin. In August, *Al-Akhbar* reporter Hassan Alleik was detained and questioned without a lawyer about the sources for an article he wrote related to the 2005 assassination of former prime minister Rafik al-Hariri. The same month, Ismael Sheikh Hassan was detained after an article he published critiqued public authorities and the army on the reconstruction of the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp, which had been destroyed during a 2007 army assault on an entrenched Islamist militant group. According to Maharat, Lebanese law specifies that journalists can only appear in courts, not in front of security officers, and that publication courts are the only ones authorized to call witnesses and defendants in press-related cases.

Journalists in Lebanon continue to face violence due to tensions along the Lebanon-Israel border. In August 2010, a journalist for *Al-Akhbar*, Assaf Abu Rahal, was killed by Israeli tank fire during a border skirmish with the Lebanese army near the village of Al-Adaysse. Ali Cheaib, a journalist for the militant group Hezbollah's Al-Manar television station, was wounded while also trying to cover the fighting. Impunity for past cases of murder remains the norm and contributes to some self-censorship among journalists.

Lebanon has a diverse, privatized media landscape that is free of state control. With 12 privately owned daily papers in three languages and more than 1,500 weekly and monthly periodicals, Lebanon accounts for about half of the periodicals produced in the Middle East region, according to media experts. There are nine television stations, two digital cable companies, and about 40 radio stations. Access to satellite television has grown substantially over the last decade. Despite this diversity, many media groups are affiliated with particular religious or political groups and reflect their sectarian interests. Most outlets are owned by politicians and influential families, and licenses are allocated to ensure that each confessional group is represented in the media sphere.

Roughly 26 percent of the population regularly accesses the internet, while nearly 25 percent of the population is on the social-networking site Facebook. The government did not restrict internet access in 2010, and there is no specific legislation in place regarding internet usage or publication. In March, blogger Khodor Saleme was detained for posting critical comments about the army and head of state, while in June, the SG detained four young men regarding Facebook comments about alleged electoral interference by the president. Their trial on defamation charges was still pending at the end of the year. In December, hackers attacked the website of *Al-Akhbar*, the only Lebanese newspaper to publish U.S. diplomatic documents about Arab countries that were released by the antisecrecy group WikiLeaks.

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