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Press Freedom Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 20 / 30 (↓1) (0 = best, 30 = worst)

Political Environment: 23 / 40 (↓1) (0 = best, 40 = worst)

Economic Environment: 20 / 30 (0 = best, 30 = worst)

Press Freedom Score: 63 / 100 (↓2) (0 = best, 100 = worst)

Quick Facts

Population: 3,017,106

Net Freedom Status: Free

Freedom in the World Status: Partly Free

Internet Penetration Rate: 46.3%

Overview

Despite constitutional and legal protections, press freedom in Armenia remains hampered by various factors. Journalists face threats, intimidation, harassment, and physical and verbal attacks in the course of their work. The government and media owners exercise significant influence on editorial content, and the overall media environment encourages self-censorship. Independent outlets are able to take advantage of the country's relatively open online space.

Key Developments

- In October, the legislature adopted regulations needed for the implementation of freedom of information legislation.
- Authorities continued to postpone the completion of Armenia's digital transition, reportedly due to a delay in securing decoders for socially vulnerable households.
- Violence against journalists was particularly egregious in June, during a series of protests over planned increases in electricity prices; police unlawfully obstructed the ability of media professionals to cover the events, used water cannons to disperse protesters and media professionals alike, and damaged cameras and other equipment.

Legal Environment: 20 / 30 (↓1)

Article 27 of the constitution and related legislation protect freedoms of expression and the press. However, political and business elites do not always respect these protections, and a number of legal restrictions exist as well. The government eliminated criminal liability for defamation in 2010, but the offense remains subject to high monetary penalties under the civil code, which allows individuals to sue on grounds of damage to their "honor, dignity, and business reputation." Plaintiffs – often politicians, businesses, or other media outlets – frequently seek compensation out of proportion to the damage allegedly inflicted. In 2011, the Constitutional Court ruled that media outlets cannot be held liable for "critical assessment of facts" and "evaluation judgments," and encouraged lower courts to suggest nonmaterial compensation in lieu of hefty fines. Since then, lower courts have been more responsive to claims for disproportionate compensation, often reducing the damages originally requested by plaintiffs. However, corruption and general inefficiencies in the judiciary affect the ability of journalists to receive fair treatment in the courts.

Although security forces, judges, and other officials sometimes pressure journalists to reveal sources, no journalist has been jailed or otherwise held criminally liable for refusing to reveal a source. In June 2015, state investigators launched a case against Kristine Khanumyan, editor of the online news portal Ilur.am, in relation to her source for a story on police misconduct in the Shirak region. Khanumyan faced criminal charges for refusing to comply with a lower court decision to reveal her source, but prosecutors dropped the case amid domestic and international criticism, including from the Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) representative on freedom of the media. In October, the Constitutional Court issued a landmark ruling in its review of the lower court decision, finding that disclosure was not appropriate because the case did not involve a grave crime or the safety of an individual.

Armenia passed freedom of information legislation in 2003, and in October 2015, the National Assembly adopted regulations needed for implementation. The impact of the new regulations was not yet clear at year's end. In the past, the absence of regulations had been frequently cited by state bodies as grounds for denying information requests. Many government departments regularly provide incomplete information, and access to some files – including previously classified Soviet-era data – remains problematic. In an October 2015 report on compliance with access to information legislation, the Freedom of Information Center, a local nongovernmental organization (NGO), noted that the National Assembly, the National Security Service, and the Ministry of Defense were among the least responsive entities at the national level.

The licensing and regulatory framework is not open or competitive, and tends to limit media freedom and diversity. Radio and television outfits must obtain operating licenses from the National Commission on Television and Radio (NCTR). Its eight members serve six-year terms; four are appointed by the president and the rest are elected by the National Assembly. Print and online media do not require licenses.

There are no barriers to entry into the journalistic profession, and media workers are free to form professional groups. Most journalistic associations rely heavily on international funding.

Political Environment: 23 / 40 (↓1)

Editorial independence is affected by pressure from media owners and their relationships with Armenia's political and business elites. The government exercises considerable influence on the content and views of public media.

Self-censorship is prevalent, owing to continued harassment and intimidation of journalists, a climate of impunity, and concerns about reprisals for criticism of the government or prominent public figures. Self-censorship is particularly common in the broadcasting sector. Journalists have more freedom to report online, as a growing number of independent online media outlets serve as platforms for diverse, alternative reporting.

Although grave violence against journalists has decreased in recent years, there were egregious exceptions in June, during a series of protests over planned increases in electricity prices. Police unlawfully obstructed the ability of media professionals to cover these events, forcefully removing some of them from the demonstration site. Security forces also used water cannons to disperse protesters and media professionals alike. At least 14 media workers were injured on a single day during the weeks-long demonstrations, dubbed "Electric Yerevan," and many reported damage to equipment. The head of national police issued an apology to the affected individuals, promising reimbursements for damages. However, at year's end, there was no indication that officers who assaulted or otherwise interfered with the media had faced disciplinary measures. Separately, state actors also interfered with the ability of some reporters to cover Armenia's constitutional referendum in December.

Economic Environment: 20 / 30

Most of the dominant broadcast media are controlled by the government, government-friendly individuals, or other political and business elites. The print sector is small and continues to decline amid a rise in the accessibility and popularity of online sources. Although most print outlets are privately owned, they tend to reflect the political and ideological leanings of their owners, who are often tied to a particular political party or interest. Television is the most popular source of news, and dozens of private channels operate alongside the public broadcaster. Russian and minority-language media are widely available. Although outlets often shield their true ownership structures, the individuals and interests behind most prominent outlets are generally known.

The internet penetration rate was 58 percent in 2015. Online news media and bloggers play an important role in providing a diverse range of news and analysis. The government does not require registration to access the internet or satellite television, and both are freely available.

The country officially began its transition to digital broadcasting in 2010, and in 2015, officials continued to postpone the deadline for completion. The delay has been primarily attributed to difficulties in securing decoders for socially vulnerable households, as required by law. In December, legislators passed amendments to the Law on Television and Radio in preparation for the switchover, explicitly enabling private multiplexes to provide digital transmission. At year's end, most reports indicated that regional analog broadcasters would be permitted to continue operating until multiplexes were able to support their transmissions digitally. Local watchdogs as well as the OSCE representative for freedom of the media have criticized the lengthy process, noting that authorities remain vague about deadlines and that the December amendments set onerous commercial requirements for multiplexes.

Public media outlets receive preferential treatment, enjoying primary access to official news and a high share of government advertising. Small state subsidies are available for private print media, but due in part to high distribution costs, the vast majority of newspapers are not profitable and remain financially dependent on their owners or patrons. Advertising is prohibited on public television and radio, with some exceptions during special cultural and educational programs. Outlets do not always differentiate between editorial and sponsored content.

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