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Freedom of the Press 2017 - Afghanistan

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Press Freedom Status: Partly Free

Total Score: 46/100 (↑4) (0 = Most Free, 100 = Least Free)

Legal Environment: 13/30 (↑1)

Political Environment: 18/40 (↑2)

Economic Environment: 15/30 (↑1)

Status Change:

Afghanistan's status improved from Not Free to Partly Free due to recent legal changes – including the creation of a mechanism to adjudicate complaints about the media without resorting to prosecution, and decrees to improve protections for journalists and access to information – that illustrate the current administration's more favorable stance on media independence. The status change also reflects long-term growth in the diversity of private media in Afghanistan, though the deteriorating security environment further restricted journalists' ability to operate safely throughout the country in 2016.

Quick Facts

Population: 43,600,000

Freedom in the World Status: Free

Net Freedom Status: Free

Internet Penetration Rate: 69.4%

Key Developments in 2016:

- President Ashraf Ghani issued decrees in January and October that called for stronger protections for media freedom and instructed government agencies to facilitate journalists' access to information, respectively.
- The new Mass Media Commission issued a well-received bylaw on the establishment and activity of private media outlets in February.

- Media groups led by the Afghanistan Journalists Federation adopted a national code of ethics in May.
- The Afghan Journalists Safety Committee (AJSC) reported 101 incidents of violence against journalists and media workers over the course of the year, up sharply from 73 in 2015. The total included 13 deaths, seven of which occurred in January when a Taliban suicide bombing struck a vehicle carrying employees of Tolo TV in Kabul.

Executive Summary

Afghanistan is home to a large and diverse array of private media outlets, including dozens of television stations, more than 170 radio stations, and hundreds of print publications. Although journalists faced a relatively hostile legal and political environment under the administration of President Hamid Karzai, the current National Unity Government led by President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah has adopted laws and policies that are more supportive of media independence. For example, the new Mass Media Commission, formed under revised media legislation that was adopted in 2015, includes representatives of the media, journalists' organizations, and the government. It is tasked in part with adjudicating complaints against the media, and law enforcement agencies cannot pursue criminal cases against journalists without consulting the commission.

In February 2016, the Mass Media Commission issued a bylaw on the establishment and activity of private media, laying out minimum requirements for media professionals on issues like contracts, safety, insurance, and pensions. Also during the year, the president signed decrees aimed at bolstering protection for media freedoms, including by investigating unsolved cases of violence against journalists, and calling on government agencies to permit greater access to official information. In May, the president appointed human rights activist Nader Naderi to serve as ambassador for the protection of freedom of speech, and in August the National Security Council collaborated with the Afghan Journalists Federation to adopt new safety guidelines and mechanisms for coordinating the government response to violence against the media.

Despite such positive initiatives, implementation has often been inadequate, particularly on the issue of violence against the press. The security environment in Afghanistan grew worse in 2016, with the AJSC reporting a marked increase in attacks, including the killing of 13 journalists and media professionals. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), using narrower criteria, confirmed the murders of four journalists in connection with their work during the year, but this still represented the largest figure it had reported for the country since 2001. Journalists continue to self-censor, especially in the face of rising threats from the Taliban, the Islamic State (IS) militant group, and regional warlords. However, Afghan government officials and security forces remain responsible for the largest number of reported cases of violence and intimidation, which are often linked to coverage of corruption or other official wrongdoing.

Explanatory Note

This country report has been abridged for *Freedom of the Press 2017*. For background information on press freedom in Afghanistan, see [Freedom of the Press 2016](#).