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Freedom of the Press 2013 - Algeria

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2013 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score: 61

Legal Environment: 21

Political Environment: 23

Economic Environment: 17

The Algerian constitution guarantees freedom of expression. However, a legal state of emergency was in effect from 1992 until February 2011, allowing the government to penalize any speech deemed threatening to the state or public order. Even after the state of emergency was lifted, there remained substantial restrictions on press freedom. The constant threat of criminal defamation and other legal charges hinder the press's ability to cover the news.

A 2001 amendment to the information code criminalizes writing, speech, and cartoons that insult or offend the president, the parliament, the judiciary, or the armed forces. In 2009, Algeria adopted a cybercrime law that gives the authorities the right to block websites deemed "contrary to the public order or decency." The country does not have a law providing for the right of access to official information.

A media law that went into effect in January 2012 was hailed by its proponents as an important reform that would enhance media freedom by nominally abolishing prison sentences for press offenses and opening up key media sectors to private ownership, but little improvement was evident over the course of 2012. For example, at least two journalists were sentenced to prison for libel during the year, though one sentence was overturned on appeal. The law establishes limitations on media coverage of a variety of subjects – including criminal investigations and state security – and steep fines of up to \$6,700 for press-related offenses. Journalists who fail to pay the fines are subject to jail time. Furthermore, the law contains strict new eligibility requirements for media ownership, including a minimum of 10 years of media-related experience.

Bloggers, like traditional journalists, are subject to defamation suits, and several have been fined for posting "defamatory material." In June 2012, blogger Tarek Mameri was given a suspended sentence of eight months in jail and fined roughly \$1,200 after he called for a boycott of legislative elections.

State agencies regularly engage in both direct and indirect censorship. Self-censorship also remains widespread, motivated largely by a fear of defamation accusations or other forms of government retaliation. Reporters occasionally suffer physical attacks or harassment in the course of their work. In March 2012, police assaulted photographer Mohamed Kadri as he attempted to cover an unauthorized protest. In the same month, a police officer attacked journalist Hanane Driss as she reported on a similar protest. In June, supporters of a local governor threatened journalist Illiés Benabdeslam after he reported on allegations that the governor and his sons had attacked a local businessman. Zouheir Ait Mouhoub, an investigative journalist for *El-Watan*, was subjected to harassment by internal security personnel during the year, having conducted research on organized crime in the country.

Algeria has a vibrant but vulnerable independent press. There are currently more than 80 newspapers available in the capital, though many are owned by private business interests closely affiliated with the government or the intelligence services. Domestic television and radio, both of which are entirely state owned, broadcast biased information, display favoritism toward the president, and generally refrain from covering dissenting views. The new media law potentially opens these sectors to private ownership, but the regulatory body required to implement such liberalization has not been created. More than 60 percent of households have satellite dishes that provide access to alternate sources of information. The government has tremendous economic influence over print media, as most papers are printed on state-owned presses. In 2008, the government placed six state-owned printing presses under the direct control of the Communications Ministry, threatening the editorial autonomy of half of Algeria's privately owned newspapers. The state-owned advertising agency favors content with a progovernment bias by controlling the placement of ads for state entities and companies, which form the largest source of income for most papers.

Foreign media outlets continue to face barriers to free reporting. Officials block distribution of foreign papers when they carry content deemed subversive. In particular, foreign media coverage of issues related to national security and terrorism is restricted. The Algeria office of Qatar's Al-Jazeera satellite television network remained closed in 2012.

About 15 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2012. The government monitors e-mail and online chat rooms, and internet service providers are legally liable for the content they host.

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