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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Jordan

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Confronted with mass demonstrations beginning in January 2011, Jordan's government toggled between policies that sought to placate public anger and measures designed to rein in the popular protests. King Abdullah fired his cabinet twice in order to appear responsive to public outrage over the slow pace of political reforms. The second government dismissal came after passage of a new law that made it a crime to publicly accuse someone of corruption. The legislation was widely seen as an official attempt to limit freedom of expression and stymie the ability of journalists to report on corruption.

The constitution guarantees freedoms of speech and expression, but press laws contain vague clauses that restrict media freedoms and allow journalists to be tried under the penal code. Jordan's State Security Court (SSC) tries journalists for violations involving speech and association, and the Press and Publications Law allows for fines of almost \$40,000 for speech that denigrates the government or religion.

In 2010, the legislature passed an amendment that established special courts to prosecute violations of the Press and Publications Law. In 2011, the government appeared divided on whether to allow greater press freedoms or to impose further restrictions. In June, the minister of information and communications resigned in protest over proposed amendments to the Press and Publications Law that he described as a blow to press freedom. Because of the controversy surrounding them, the parliament postponed discussion of the amendments. However, in September the parliament passed the law that criminalized reporting on corruption, including news that defames someone or "impacts his dignity."

The government used the courts to stifle dissent during 2011. In late May, Prime Minister Marouf al-Bakhit ordered the transfer of a criminal defamation case against a journalist, Alaa' al-Fazaa', from a civilian court to the SSC. The SSC detained al-Fazaa' for "working to change the constitution by unlawful means" through his article about a Facebook group that promotes the reinstatement of former crown prince Hamza. Al-Fazaa' was released on bail in early June. Later in the year, he also faced prosecution for an article on the news website Khabarjo in which he accused senior officials of inappropriately allowing convicted business tycoon Khalid Shahin to leave the country. The charges against al-Fazaa' were subsequently dropped as part of a general amnesty.

The 2007 Right of Access to Information Law was supposed to improve freedom of information in the country. However, according to the Amman-based Center for Defending Freedom of Journalists, implementation suffers from arbitrary classification and distribution of information by the different ministries and state institutions. Journalists complain that while the outlets for news have increased, they are often blocked from obtaining information on government policies and officials.

Print news outlets must obtain licenses to operate, and journalists must belong to the Jordan Press Association (JPA) to work legally. Those who are critical of the government have sometimes been excluded from JPA membership, and the organization does not admit journalists who work for internet-based news outlets, leaving them with limited legal protections. Licensing responsibilities for television and radio are shared between the Council of Ministers, the Audio Visual Commission (AVC), and the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC). The Council of Ministers is responsible for granting, revoking, and renewing licenses, but does so based on the recommendations of the AVC. The AVC also handles disputes between broadcasters, issues directions on programming, and takes punitive action against broadcasters who violate their licensing conditions. The TRC is responsible for allocating frequencies to broadcasters, issuing telecommunications licenses, and managing information technology services.

The government tolerates a certain measure of criticism of officials and policies, and allows some room for Islamist movements and other elements of the opposition to express their ideas. However, attempts to influence editorial content occur regularly. In March 2011, several hundred journalists held protests calling for the divestment of all state-owned shares in newspapers. Journalists also demanded that the government stop "meddling" in the coverage of *Al-Ghad*, an independent daily. In June, Agence France-Presse (AFP) reported that it had stopped receiving official government notices and transcripts of speeches after it published news that Bedouin tribes had accused Queen Rania of corruption. In November, a journalist for *Al-Dustour* was ordered to appear before a disciplinary committee after writing an article in which she criticized the "government's takeover of the newspaper." The government closely monitors journalists, and self-censorship is commonplace.

Journalists were harassed and intimidated throughout 2011, in part due to their coverage of protests. In April, the Qatar-based satellite television station Al-Jazeera received telephone calls threatening that its Amman office and correspondents would be attacked. In June, a group of unidentified assailants broke into the AFP's Amman office. Three hours prior to the attack, bureau chief Randa Habib received a threatening phone call from an anonymous source. The intimidation followed an AFP story detailing an incident in which individuals threw bottles at King Abdullah's motorcade. The king's representatives denied that the incident occurred, and government loyalists

2012 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Not Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

63

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

21

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

23

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

19

insisted that the bureau be shut down for its “inaccurate reporting.” Mass demonstrations took place repeatedly over the course of the year, and security forces often moved to rein in both protesters and journalists. In July, police beat and arrested journalists covering a sit-in led by a group called the July 15 Movement that had gathered in a main square to demand government reforms. Media watchdog organizations noted that the journalists had worn special clothing so police would not confuse them with the demonstrators.

Jordan boasts several independent newspapers, but the government has a majority stake in *Al-Rai*, a major daily, and a minority stake in *Al-Dustour*, a second large national newspaper. The 2003 Audio Visual Law ended the government monopoly on broadcasting, and there has been an increase in the number of private radio stations in recent years—mainly regional outlets that cater to a specific demographic, such as women or students. However, terrestrial television stations remain under state control; the country’s first privately owned television channel was launched as a pilot project in 2007 but later stalled. Satellite dishes are allowed, and pan-Arab news channels remain popular. Journalists complain that the government tries to shape editorial content by pressuring advertisers.

The government encourages internet usage, and 35 percent of the population had access to the web in 2011. Jordanian blogs continued to flourish during the year. Some became focal points for the organization of popular protests, and in March bloggers held the fourth annual “blog for Jordan day.” There were no reports of arrests of bloggers in 2011. However, online journalists and media personnel were subject to attacks and harassment throughout the year. A cybercrime law passed in 2010 contains a number of provisions that could easily be used to stifle online expression and information. In August 2011, the government “invited” the country’s more than 100 news websites to “voluntarily” register as media outlets, a status that would give them access to accreditation and government press conferences, though it would also subject them to the Press and Publications Law. It remained unclear whether registered online outlets would also be subject to the relevant portions of the penal code. According to press reports, a government spokesman said the penal code would not apply to online publications, but a media watchdog organization noted that more than 100 cases had already been brought against websites using a host of laws, including the penal code.

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