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## Freedom of the Press 2015 - Algeria

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### 2015 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score (0 = best, 100 = worst): 61

Legal Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 21

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

Economic Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 17

**Status change explanation:** Algeria declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to restrictions placed on the media during the 2014 presidential election. A January law imposed content limitations on privately owned broadcasters, and government agencies withdrew advertising from media outlets that covered opposition parties. Foreign journalists were denied entry visas, had their visas restricted, or faced obstacles to access on the ground.

### Legal Environment

The Algerian constitution guarantees freedom of expression. However, a 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. While the state of emergency has since been lifted, substantial legal restrictions on press freedom remain in place. The threat of criminal and civil defamation charges hinders 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. Bloggers, like traditional journalists, are subject to defamation laws, and several have been fined for posting allegedly defamatory material. A 2009 cybercrime law gives the authorities the right to block websites deemed "contrary to the public order or decency."

Restrictive laws continued to be used to prosecute journalists in 2014. In February, cartoonist Djamel Ghanem was charged with insulting the president and fraudulently accessing a computer network after he inserted a political cartoon mocking President Abdelaziz Bouteflika into his newspaper's computer system. Although the drawing was detected before publication and removed, he faced up to 18 months in prison and a fine of 30,000 dinars (\$380) for his actions. He was initially acquitted in March, but prosecutors appealed the ruling to a higher court, prompting Ghanem to seek political asylum in France.

Journalist Abdelhai Abdessamia remained in pretrial detention as of late 2014 following his August 2013 arrest for facilitating his editor's escape from the country. The editor had been charged with endangering state security and other offenses after his affiliated papers, the French-language *Mon Journal* and the Arabic *Djaridati*, reported on the president's waning health. In November 2014, Abdessamia began a hunger strike to protest his detention.

The country lacks legislation that enshrines the right to access 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. However, the law imposes limitations on coverage of a variety of subjects – including criminal investigations and state security – and steep fines of up to 500,000 dinars (\$6,300) for press-related offenses. Journalists who fail to pay the fines can still be subject to jail time. Furthermore, the law contained strict new eligibility requirements for print periodical ownership, including a minimum of 10 years of media-related experience.

In keeping with the 2012 law, a new law regulating audiovisual broadcasting was passed in January 2014 to formally authorize the creation of privately owned channels, although several had already been operating in Algeria for a number of years, technically in defiance of the law but tolerated by the government. The new legislation sharply limits the extent to which private stations can provide independent news programming, in part by restricting the airtime devoted to news, and mandates the establishment of a new broadcast regulator, with five commissioners chosen by the president and four by the parliament.

### **Political Environment**

State agencies regularly engage in both direct and indirect censorship of private outlets. During the April 2014 presidential election period, the government took measures to limit public access to election coverage and deter journalists from critically assessing the candidates and their platforms, for example by canceling state advertising contracts with targeted outlets. Self-censorship also remains widespread, motivated largely by a fear of defamation charges or other forms of government retaliation.

Foreign media outlets continue to face barriers to free reporting. Officials block distribution of foreign papers when they carry content deemed subversive. Foreign media coverage of issues related to national security and terrorism is considered especially sensitive. The Algeria offices of Qatar's Al-Jazeera satellite television network remained closed in 2014. During the election period, Algerian authorities either denied visas to foreign journalists or granted access with such a delay that reporters were unable to cover the entire campaign. Visas also imposed strict geographic limitations on journalists, requiring additional authorizations to report from certain regions, and expired only three days after the election. The Ministry of Information distributed documents to foreign journalists urging them to discuss only the election, not other political or social issues.

Algerian journalists faced various forms of harassment in the course of their work in 2014. In early March, police beat at least one reporter and arrested several others as they attempted to cover demonstrations associated with the election, though all were later released. Also that month, security forces repeatedly raided the privately owned Al-Atlas TV, seized equipment, and successfully pressured its Jordanian satellite carrier to drop its signal. The station still lacked permission to operate at year's end. In April, three journalists from *El-Watan* were chased and threatened by government supporters while reporting on electoral fraud in the northeastern city of Khenchela.

### **Economic Environment**

There are more than 80 newspapers available in the capital, although only six are considered truly independent, as many are owned by private businesses that are closely affiliated with the government or the intelligence services. State-owned television and radio outlets typically broadcast biased information, display favoritism toward the president, and refrain from covering dissenting views. However, most households have satellite dishes that provide access to alternative sources of information. Only about 18 percent of Algerians accessed the internet in 2014, due in large part to poor infrastructure. Nevertheless, the government monitors internet activity and e-mail, and internet service providers are legally liable for the content they host. Social-media use has reportedly increased along with ongoing improvements to mobile telecommunications.

The government has significant economic influence over print media, as most papers are printed on state-controlled presses. The state-owned advertising agency favors content with a progovernment bias by manipulating the placement of ads for state entities and companies, which form the largest source of income for most publications. During the 2014 electoral campaign, the National Agency for Publishing and Publicity canceled all of its contracts with *Algérie News* and *Djazair News* – owned by the same editor – allegedly because they had offered coverage of opposition groups.

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