Cuba

Country:
Cuba
Year:
2017
Press Freedom Status:
Not Free
PFS Score:
91
Legal Environment:
28
Political Environment:
35
Economic Environment:
28

Key Developments in 2016:

• A number of Cuban and foreign journalists were detained or arrested around the
time of U.S. president Barack Obama’s historic visit to Cuba in March.
• In June, young state journalists from Santa Clara circulated a letter protesting
censorship, low salaries, and political persecution, initiated after they were told by
the official Union of Journalists of Cuba (UPEC) to stop collaborating with the
independent online magazine OnCuba.
• In October, a reporter with the independent Hablemos Press news agency was
detained ahead of his scheduled flight to Trinidad and Tobago, preventing him from
participating in a journalism workshop there.
• Independent outlets, which are technically illegal but tolerated if they do not cross
certain red lines, continued to open and expand.

Executive Summary

Cuba has the most repressive media environment in the Americas. Traditional news
media are owned and controlled by the state, which uses outlets to promote its political
goals and deny a voice to the opposition. Journalists not employed by state media operate
in a legal limbo—they are technically illegal, yet tolerated unless they cross ill-defined lines. Journalists at both state and independent media risk harassment, intimidation, and detention in connection with any coverage perceived as critical of authorities or of Cuba’s political system. Scores of journalists were detained in 2016, with the already restrictive climate intensifying around the time of Obama’s historic visit to Cuba in March.

Despite restrictions on media, independent journalism continued to expand in 2016, with new online outlets cropping up and existing outlets expanding their reach and producing higher-quality news. Official and independent journalists also engaged in limited debate over the role of the media, and on censorship and freedom of information.

**Legal Environment: 28 / 30**

Cuba has the most restrictive laws on freedom of expression and the press in the Americas. The constitution prohibits private ownership of media outlets, and allows free speech and journalism only if they adhere to “the objectives of socialist society.”

Independent journalists are technically illegal, but are tolerated so long as they do not criticize the government. A variety of repressive laws can be invoked to silence journalists and media outlets. Article 91 of the penal code prescribes lengthy prison sentences or death for those who act against “the independence or the territorial integrity of the state,” and Law 88 for the Protection of Cuba’s National Independence and Economy imposes up to 20 years in prison for acts “aimed at subverting the internal order of the nation and destroying its political, economic, and social system.” Laws criminalizing “enemy propaganda” and the dissemination of “unauthorized news” are used to restrict freedom of expression under the guise of protecting state security. Insult laws can carry penalties of three months to one year in prison, with sentences of up to three years if the president or members of the Council of State or National Assembly are objects of criticism. The 1997 Law of National Dignity targets independent news agencies that send their material abroad by authorizing prison sentences of three to 10 years for anyone who, in a direct or indirect form, “collaborates with the enemy’s media.” Authorities continued to detain José Antonio Torres, a former correspondent for the state newspaper *Granma*, who has been in custody since 2011 and was sentenced in 2012 to 14 years in prison for espionage after he published articles denouncing the management of various construction and development projects.

Cuba does not have a freedom of information law, though some academics and journalists at state-run outlets have begun to call for one.

In recent years, the government has undertaken a number of small gestures that have created more space for the practice of journalism. In 2013, authorities removed exit visa requirements for citizens traveling abroad. Since then, several prominent Cuban opposition journalists and bloggers have traveled outside of the country. Nevertheless, passports are still issued at the government’s discretion and have been withheld from select journalists for state-defined “reasons of public interest.” In particular, journalists who formerly served jail time for alleged antigovernment activities have been denied the right to exit Cuba. Some journalists who have traveled abroad have complained of harassment and confiscation of their documents upon their return. In October 2016, a reporter with the independent Hablemos Press news agency was detained ahead of his scheduled flight to
Trinidad and Tobago, preventing him from participating in a journalism workshop there. Police also confiscated his mobile phone to check for “anything illegal.” Authorities have been known to monitor journalists’ activities. In February 2016, a reporter with the CubaNet news website said he was questioned by a state security agent about his salary and his recent visit to the U.S. embassy in Havana.

**Political Environment: 35 / 40**

The Cuban news media are owned and controlled by the state and the independent press is considered illegal. However, the establishment and continued development of independent news outlets such as *Periodismo de Barrio* and *14ymedio* has contributed to a limited opening of space for independent and investigative reporting. Some outlets, both independent and state-run, have been able to criticize the government indirectly by describing problems in the country, such as misuse of resources or local corruption. A number of publications associated with the Roman Catholic Church are occasionally critical of the government. During Obama’s visit to Cuba in March 2016, news outlets reported on some of his speeches, including one in which he spoke about human rights and democracy. However, reporting on foreign affairs generally is filtered through the lens of the Cuban government’s foreign policy objectives, with governments in countries such as Syria and Venezuela receiving sympathetic coverage in state media.

Government publications come out irregularly, and their reports often lack details considered to be “sensitive.” Journalists must receive authorization from the relevant government department to gain access to press conferences and other information; independent reporters are typically denied this access.

The Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) censors official media through its Ideology Department, formerly known as the Department of Revolutionary Orientation. Editors and reporters are responsible for adhering to the department’s “thematic plan,” which details which topics to cover and how to cover them. Some independent journalists who favor the government stay within the guidelines, while some critics try to dance around them and others disregard them and risk the consequences. In June 2016, young state journalists from Santa Clara circulated a letter protesting censorship, low salaries, and political persecution, initiated after they were told by UPEC, the official journalists’ union, to stop collaborating with the independent online magazine *OnCuba*.

The government blocks access to some independent news websites. They can in theory be accessed through proxy servers, but the availability of such tools is limited in practice. Authorities at airports have confiscated printed or recorded materials deemed to undermine Cuban morals from arriving passengers. Self-censorship in the official press is rampant.

The increasing number of independent bloggers and news outlets in recent years has led to a broader range of viewpoints in Cuban media. Additionally, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), about half of Cubans access *el paquete* (the package), a weekly digest of news and entertainment files and software distributed on USB flash drives; the cost to access this material ranges from less than US$1, to several dollars. *El paquete* rarely carries political news, though such coverage is occasionally included in foreign television programs contained within, such as news programming from...
Miami. Authorities have leaned on paquete makers and distributors to tighten control over content.

Journalists frequently encounter interference and harassment by Cuban authorities during the course of their work. In January 2016, 14ymedio editor Reinaldo Escobar and Spanish television correspondent Vicenç Sanclemente were detained for several hours after Sanclemente had tried to interview Escobar. In March, hours ahead of Obama’s visit, a Dutch journalist and cameraman were detained for several hours, along with Hablemos Press director Roberto de Jesús Guerra Pérez and reporter Rolando Reyes Rabanal. Six journalists with the independent news website Periodismo de Barrio were detained in October in eastern Cuba while reporting on the destruction caused by Hurricane Matthew; they were sent to the city of Guantanamo, where they were released.

Foreign journalists frequently have difficulty obtaining visas to cover news in Cuba. Journalists from the Miami-based Radio y Televisión Martí were unable to obtain visas to cover Obama’s 2016 visit. A Colombian journalist traveling on a tourist visa was denied entry into Cuba in September, while in August several journalists from the Miami Herald were denied the visas required to board the first commercial flight from the U.S. to Cuba in 55 years.

Cuban journalists and bloggers who are critical of the government suffer arbitrary arrests, house raids, threats, and other forms of harassment in connection with their reporting. Heightened repression, including the arbitrary arrests of a number of journalists, occurred around Obama’s 2016 visit. The Florida-based Cuban Institute for Freedom of Speech and the Press (ICLEP) reported 255 arbitrary detentions of independent journalists in 2016.

**Economic Environment: 28 / 30**

The government owns virtually all traditional media except for a number of underground newsletters. It operates three national newspapers, five national television stations, six national radio stations, and one international radio station, in addition to numerous local print and broadcast outlets. Content at these outlets is determined by the government. In 2013, the government permitted the broadcasting of the Venezuelan news channel Telesur. While the channel does not criticize the Cuban government, it does give viewers a window into the outside world. Cubans do not have the right to possess or distribute foreign publications, although some international papers are sold in tourist hotels. Private ownership of electronic media is also prohibited. Independent online outlets continue to open and develop, though political and critical coverage is limited by Cuba’s repressive media environment.

The government controls almost all printing presses. The state-owned Cuban Telecommunications Company (ETECSA) is the sole provider of internet service, and blocks some blogs and news portals that are critical of the government. ETECSA continued to expand internet service in 2016 and reduced the cost of the hourly connection rate, though at US$1.50 per hour internet access remains inaccessible to most people in Cuba, which has one of the lowest internet connectivity rates in the world. The majority of users can reach only a closely monitored Cuban intranet consisting of e-mail addresses ending in “.cu” and a few government-controlled or approved websites.
The government funds almost all official media. There is virtually no advertising available to independent outlets. Independent news websites sometimes rely on grants and foreign advertising to finance their work. Many independent journalists rely on friends abroad, who have faster and cheaper internet access, to administer their websites and blogs.

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