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Algeria

Country:

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Year:

2016

Press Freedom Status:

Not Free

PFS Score:

62

Legal Environment:

22

Political Environment:

23

Economic Environment:

17

Overview

Authorities continued to invoke restrictive laws against critical journalists and those deemed to have engaged in blasphemy. The government has significant control over the country's media regulatory bodies. State agencies continued to engage in both direct and indirect censorship of domestic and foreign media outlets.

Key Developments

- A number of journalists were charged or penalized under various laws in 2015 in connection with criticism of public officials, frequently contained within Facebook posts.
- In April, staff at the satirical television program *Weekend* received a directive to overhaul the program's format after airing a segment that referred to Algerian officials' property assets in France; the staff decided to end the program rather than enact the changes.
- The Ministry of Communication continued to block the distribution of foreign media when it deemed their content objectionable.

Legal Environment: 22 / 30 (↓1)

The Algerian constitution guarantees freedom of expression. However, a variety of restrictive laws can be invoked to penalize journalists. Defamation is a criminal offense, and reporters can be penalized under laws against blasphemy. 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. A 2009 cybercrime law gives the authorities the right to block websites deemed “contrary to the public order or decency.”

A number of journalists were charged or penalized under various laws in 2015 in connection with criticism of public officials, frequently in Facebook posts. In April, the cartoonist Tahar Dehejiche was arrested after sharing on Facebook cartoons about the exploitation of shale gas in Algeria, one of which authorities deemed insulting to President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. In October, freelance journalist and frequent government critic Hassan Bouras was arrested on allegations of insulting the state and taking actions aimed at displacing the regime; he remained in detention at the year’s end. In November, Mahda Okasha, an anticorruption activist and the manager of a cybercafé in Algiers, was arrested and detained for four days for posting photographs criticizing state bodies on Facebook. He was interrogated by the public prosecutor and his court case, originally scheduled for December, was postponed twice. Separately, in February 2015 Mohamed Chergui, the editor of *Eldjournhouria*, a government-owned newspaper, was sentenced in absentia by a court in the city of Oran to three years imprisonment and ordered to pay a fine of 200,000 dinars (\$2,000). He had been charged with blasphemy in 2014 for featuring an article that contained nontraditional theories about the origin of the Koran.

The country lacks legislation that enshrines the right to access official information. A 2012 information code 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 (\$5,000) for press-related offenses. Journalists who fail to pay the fines can face jail time.

The state holds great control over Algeria’s regulatory institutions. Journalists must obtain a press card issued by a commission that was established by the Ministry of Information in 2014. This interim commission is composed of 13 members, 11 of whom are professional journalists chosen from the public and private media sectors, with the remaining two representing the ministries of communication and labor. An Algerian journalist who applies for accreditation as a correspondent for foreign media is vetted by the Central Directorate for Army Security (DCSA), which investigates his or her private life.

A 2014 broadcasting law formally authorized the creation of privately owned channels. However, it imposes several strict conditions on shareholders’ license eligibility including having Algerian nationality, no criminal record, and, if born before July 1942, justification that their conduct “was not contrary” to the 1954 revolution. It also sharply limits the extent to which private stations can provide independent news programming, in part by restricting airtime devoted to news. In addition, television stations are legally required to obtain a license from the Audiovisual Regulation Authority; however, there is no specific timeframe for a response, nor are legal challenges permitted in the event of a delay or rejection.

Journalists and editors lack strong representative institutions. The government does not restrict internet access, but is known to monitor internet activity and electronic communications.

Political Environment: 23 / 40

State agencies continued to engage in both direct and indirect censorship of private outlets in 2015. In April, staff at the satirical television program *Weekend* received a directive to overhaul the program's format, after airing a segment that referred to Algerian officials' property assets in France. The staff decided to end the program rather than enact the changes. In October, the private television station El Watan TV was shut down by the Ministry of Communication on grounds of "attacking the symbol of the Republic" and broadcasting illegally. Its closure came after it had aired an interview with Madani Mezrag, a former leader of the armed wing of the banned Front Islamique de Salut (FIS), in which he criticized President Bouteflika for refusing to allow him to create a new political party. Self-censorship also remains widespread, motivated largely by a fear of defamation charges or other forms of government retaliation such as denial of advertising.

Foreign media outlets continued to face harassment and barriers to free reporting in 2015. In March, the communications minister warned foreign journalists that their accreditation would be withdrawn if they failed to respect the rules of the country, warning specifically against violating laws prohibiting defamation and insult. His statement followed the ministry's refusal, also in March, to renew the accreditation of Boualem Ghomrassa, a correspondent for the London-based *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* newspaper, for his criticism of the government in a foreign television interview.

Officials block distribution of foreign papers when they carry content deemed subversive. The Ministry of Communication blocked the distribution of the French magazine *Marianne* in January 2015 for publishing a cartoon considered blasphemous, as well as a February issue of the Paris-based magazine *Jeune Afrique*, which contained a four-page survey on President Bouteflika's relationships with various women. 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 2015.

Algerian journalists faced hostile rhetoric from officials during 2015. In March, a presidential adviser declared in a public address on a national holiday that the opposition media was unethical and aimed "to frighten and demoralize the people." However, the handful of instances of violence and intimidation committed against journalists during the election period in 2014 were not repeated in 2015.

Economic Environment: 17 / 30

In October 2015, the Ministry of Communication reported that there were 269 accredited publications operating in Algeria, 140 of which were printed daily. Six daily newspapers are government operated. Online news media has proliferated with the development of a 3G network. About 38 percent of Algerian residents accessed the internet in 2015, mostly through mobile phones.

The state-run television broadcaster, Entreprise Nationale de Télévision (ENTV) manages five different channels. There are five state-owned radio stations with national reach, operated by the Entreprise Nationale de Radiodiffusion Sonore (ENRS), which also operates and 48 local stations. State-owned television and radio outlets typically broadcast biased information, display favoritism toward the president, and refrain from covering dissenting views. However, many households have satellite dishes that provide access to private television broadcasts. There are

several dozen private television channels, and while most of them have offices and studios in Algiers, the law effectively requires that they these channels broadcast from outside Algeria; most lease equipment from companies in Jordan or Lebanon. Only five of the existing private channels have officially been granted licenses.

The economic model of Algeria's press is based mainly on public advertising, controlled by the state-run National Institute for Publishing and Advertising (ANEP). The ANEP, which forms a significant source of income for most publications, tends to favor progovernment content. Privately owned newspapers, journalists, and academics have called for a legal framework to govern the advertising sector. Private advertising has increased, but has faced criticism for issuing contracts according to political or other biases. In February 2015, the head of Ooredoo, a Qatari mobile phone operator, threatened to cut off advertising to Algerian media outlets that attack Algeria or Qatar.

The government controls the printing and distribution of most newspapers. Several newspapers are heavily indebted to the state printing agency and, in September 2015, many of them received formal payment notices containing threats to revoke their commercial contracts. Only the *El-Watan* and *al-Khabar* newspapers have their own printing and distribution networks.

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