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[Home](#) > Oman

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Country:

[Oman](#)

Year:

2015

Press Freedom Status:

NF

PFS Score:

71

Legal Environment:

25

Political Environment:

27

Economic Environment:

19

Legal Environment

Oman's restrictive media environment remained unchanged in 2014. Articles 29, 30, and 31 of the 1996 Basic Law guarantee freedom of expression and freedom of the press, but the document also forbids material that leads to "public discord, violates the security of the state, or abuses a person's dignity or rights." Oman's 1984 Press and Publications Law is one of the most restrictive statutes of its kind in the Arab world, and ensures that the media remain censored and subdued. Under the law, libel is a criminal offense, and journalists can be fined or imprisoned for criticism of the sultan, the ruling family, the political system, or the religion of Islam.

The Telecommunications Act allows the authorities to prosecute individuals for any message sent through any means of communication that violates public order and morals. In June 2012, in response to growing criticism of the government's lack of progress in fulfilling promised economic and political reforms, the Department of Public Prosecution issued a statement saying that it would take all appropriate legal action against those who publish any content in the media or online that was found to be "offensive" or "inciting others to actions."

Journalists are required to obtain licenses to practice, and since 2005 they have been obliged to reapply each year as employees of a specific outlet, which precludes the

practice of freelance journalism. Journalists and media outlets alike can have their licenses revoked at any time for violating press laws. The government also retains the right to close down any media outlet at any time.

Political Environment

The Ministry of Information is legally empowered to censor politically, culturally, or sexually offensive material in domestic or foreign media and has blacklisted several authors and specific books that it deemed controversial. While information and news are widely available, there is a basic lack of coverage of local topics, such as the economy, unemployment, or the situation of migrants and other minorities in Oman. The only permanent foreign media presence in Oman is a Reuters correspondent in Muscat.

The government exerts considerable control over the internet. The Internet Service Manual establishes an extensive list of prohibitions on defamation of the ruling family, the spread of false data or rumors, and many other types of content. The government routinely blocks websites deemed sexually offensive or politically controversial. Some bloggers and readers use virtual private networks (VPNs) to bypass the censorship of local internet service providers, but VPN access is itself widely blocked. Private communications including mobile-telephone calls, e-mail, and exchanges in internet chat rooms are monitored, and web forums where dissent is voiced, such as Farrq, Al-Harah, and Al-Sabla, have experienced temporary shutdowns.

Journalists widely practice self-censorship to avoid dismissal or arrest; reporters have been jailed in the past even for coverage of colleagues' arrests. As a result, journalists are rarely subject to physical threats or assault in reprisal for their work.

However, the authorities continue to carry out arbitrary arrests and detentions without charge in order to intimidate outspoken bloggers and activists. In July 2014, Muawiyah al-Rawahi was arrested over a blog post that criticized Omani authorities for arresting demonstrators protesting the conviction of a teacher for participating in a strike in October 2013. In early August, a photo surfaced of al-Rawahi detained at the psychiatric ward of Sultan Qaboos University Hospital with his legs shackled; he was released days later. Also in July, another blogger and activist, Noah al-Saadi, was arrested without any official explanation and denied access to a lawyer and his family while in detention. He was also released in early August.

Later that month, prominent blogger and government critic Mohammed al-Fazari was arrested and detained for six days; he was subject to harsh conditions and extensive interrogation while in custody. Al-Fazari was eventually released without charge in September, but he was threatened with prosecution if he did not produce a signed pledge to stop criticizing the government. Police had previously warned him against pursuing his activities in March. Al-Fazari has been arrested and faced criminal charges on several occasions in recent years in connection with his calls for reform.

Writer and online activist Saed al-Darodi was summoned for questioning in October, apparently over his recent posts on social media, and reportedly held incommunicado for 25 days before being released. In December, another writer, Ali al-Rawahi, was arrested

in connection with two tweets in which he criticized the government for corruption and urged people to demand their rights. Activist and blogger Said al-Jaddad was arrested the same month after repeatedly calling for reform online. Both men remained in detention at year's end.

Economic Environment

In addition to the two major state-owned newspapers, the government owns four radio stations and two television stations. There are eight privately run newspapers currently operating in Oman, alongside a dozen other print publications. Private newspapers are able to sustain themselves largely on local and international advertising revenues rather than sales, and many no longer need state subsidies. The country's single privately owned satellite network provides access to foreign broadcasts but refrains from airing politically controversial content. There are several private radio stations. About 70 percent of the population had access to the internet in 2014. The state-run Oman Telecommunications Company had a monopoly on internet and telecommunications services until 2008, when the government allowed a privately owned competitor, Nawras, to begin providing service.

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