

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

Tajikistan

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Freedom of speech is guaranteed by the constitution, but independent journalism has been marginalized under President Emomali Rahmon, and the media situation remained poor in 2011, with physical assaults on journalists and arrests on criminal libel charges. In June, a Draft Law on Mass Media of Tajikistan was proposed to replace the 1990 Law on Press and Other Mass Media. This proposal was met with international criticism for not being up to international standards.

Libel and criticism of the president are criminal offenses that carry prison terms of up to five years. A libel case against *Farazh* and two other newspapers, *Ozodagon*, and *Asia-Plus*, continued in 2011. In January 2010, all three newspapers had printed articles about a press conference held by a lawyer who protested against what he believed to be local judges' unfair sentencing of 33 businessmen. The judges sought \$1.26 million in damages from the papers. In November 2010, Makhmadyusuf Ismoilov, regional reporter for the independent weekly *Nuri Zindagi*, was arrested due to an article critical of local law enforcement officials in Asht. He was convicted of slander in October 2011 but was released under an amnesty; however, he was fined \$7,200 and barred from journalism for three years. Government authorities selectively implement laws meant to protect journalists, such as a ban on censorship.

There is no freedom of information law, and steps have been taken to restrict journalists' access to official information, as well as their participation in press conferences and other official events. The Committee on Television and Radio manages the state-owned broadcasters and regulates licenses for private broadcast stations. Independent media claim that the licensing process is lengthy and excessively complicated. The Community Council for Mass Media, a group of independent and state representatives established in 2009 to improve journalism and media ethics, had been unable to adequately defend independent media from state pressure.

Violence against journalists has declined significantly in recent years from the peak period during the civil war in the 1990s, when at least 50 journalists were murdered. Journalists who criticize the authorities or expose government corruption have continued to report threats and intimidation. While last year there were no reported assaults on reporters, this year there were several alarming incidents. In August, Khurshed Niyezov, the editor in chief of the *Farazh* weekly, was beaten by several men with baseball bats. The attack followed a period in 2010 when *Farazh* and other papers were forced to stop publishing because printing houses refused to accept their order, fearing government retaliation over coverage of a major security operation by government forces against militants in the east of the country. Niyezov, who is also head of the Media Alliance, which unites over a dozen outlets, believes the attack was related to his work, as *Farazh* regularly publishes investigative reports. In February 2011, Hikmatullo Sayfullozoda, press secretary of the political council of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan and editor of the party's newspaper, *Najot*, was beaten on his way to work by three unknown assailants, and hospitalized. The attack was condemned by the European

2012 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Not Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

79

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

25

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

29

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

25

Union Heads of Mission and the U.S. Embassy in Dushanbe, who called for an independent investigation into the assault.

Urinboy Usmonov, the Uzbek correspondent for the British Broadcasting Corp. (BBC), was detained in June and accused of membership in Hizb ut-Tahrir, a movement banned in Tajikistan in 2001 because its members openly criticize Tajikistan's secular government and call for the replacement of Central Asian states with an Islamic caliphate. The journalist had met with the group's members and taken some of their religious pamphlets, and said his activities were part of his professional work. The international outcry over his arrest enabled his release in July, although he was put on trial a month later and ordered to not leave the country. In October, he was sentenced to three years in jail, but following the verdict, the court granted him amnesty and released him.

Although there are more than 200 registered newspapers—many of them privately owned—none are published daily. The broadcast sector is dominated by state-controlled national television stations that praise Rahmon and deny coverage to independent or opposition points of view. Severe electricity shortages limit access to broadcast media, while government control over distribution limits the reach of print media. In addition, widespread poverty, a small advertising market, and the concentration of wealth in the hands of political leaders and their associates hamper the emergence of genuinely independent media outlets. Control over printing facilities is also used as a tool of restricting media freedom and occasionally leads to temporary closures. Although some international media outlets are allowed to operate in the country, several foreign television and radio stations have been denied terrestrial broadcast licenses and reach the country via satellite. Reporters for international media are not invited to official events and press conferences.

Approximately 13 percent of Tajikistan's population regularly uses the internet, and the authorities often impose restrictions on access. Criminal libel and defamation laws apply to internet publications. However, *Asia-Plus*, a popular Central Asian independent news site that is affiliated with a print weekly, resisted repeated instances of pressure, including the blocking of its website and a punitive lawsuit, and continued to provide strong coverage of human rights issues and the government crackdown on militants within Tajikistan.

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