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Freedom Of The Press - Costa Rica (2011)

Status: Free
Legal Environment: 5
Political Environment: 7
Economic Environment: 6
Total Score: 18

Costa Rica's constitution guarantees press freedom and this right is generally upheld; however, punitive press laws, particularly concerning defamation, are occasionally used to restrict the operations of the media. In February 2010, the Supreme Court struck down prison terms for defamation in a landmark decision. The court issued the ruling in a case against José Luis Jiménez Robleto, a reporter with the San José-based daily *Diario Extra*, who had been charged with defamation after publishing a news story on alleged embezzlement. Robleto was sentenced in March 2004 to 50 days in prison based on the anachronistic 1902 press law. His conviction was overturned by the Supreme Court. In 2004, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights had overturned the 1999 conviction of a Costa Rican journalist for criminal defamation, ruling that Costa Rica needed to amend its outdated criminal defamation laws, which are incompatible with international human rights standards. Despite calls for reform of defamation laws and the positive decision in Robleto's case, journalists are still vulnerable to criminal charges for defamation. In addition, the current constitution reserves readers the right of reply to newspapers in response to information that the readers deem inexact or egregious. During the year, congress reviewed a proposed reform that would expand the scope of the right of reply from information to opinions as well. The Inter American Press Association has expressed concerns that this initiative could limit press freedom and expression.

Journalists are not often victims of physical threats or violence in Costa Rica. There were no reports of attacks or harassments against journalists in the year. Challenges to a free media environment tend to stem from the courts, though the majority of recent legal decisions have represented gains for press freedom.

Costa Rica has a vibrant media scene, with numerous public and privately owned newspapers, television outlets, and radio stations. Private media ownership is highly concentrated, however, and tends to be conservative. The press is relatively free to cover sensitive political and social issues, and to openly criticize the government. Radio is the most popular outlet for news dissemination. There are nine major newspapers, and cable television is also widely available. New online news organizations have become very popular. The internet served as an additional source of unrestricted information and was accessed by more than 36.5 percent of the population in 2010.