

[Print](#)

Freedom Of The Press - Jordan (2011)

Status: Not Free
Legal Environment: 20
Political Environment: 24
Economic Environment: 19
Total Score: 63

Jordan made small strides toward greater media freedom in 2010, but concerns remained over a court decision to ban coverage of a corruption trial, the continued prosecution of a former parliamentary candidate, and government employees' lack of access to certain websites. After months of lobbying against a restrictive cybercrime law, Jordan's media celebrated a partial victory in late August, when the government dropped clauses from the law that would have allowed warrantless police searches at online media outlets, among other restrictions. Also in 2010, the country's fifth private radio station aimed at local audiences was launched, and the stations worked together toward establishing an independent federation of community radio broadcasters.

The constitution guarantees freedoms of expression and speech to the extent that they do not violate the law, but press laws include vague clauses and other restrictions that curb media freedom in practice and allow journalists to be tried under the country's penal code, rather than its civil code. Jordan's State Security Courts (SSCs) try journalists for violations involving speech and association, and the Press and Publications Law allows for fines of almost \$40,000 for speech that denigrates the government or religion. Journalists must belong to the Jordan Press Association to work legally, and those who are critical of the government have sometimes been excluded; in addition, the association does not include journalists who work for internet-based news outlets, which leaves them with limited legal protections. In 2007, the parliament passed the Right of Access to Information Law, which was supposed to improve freedom of information in the country. However, according to the Amman-based Center for Defending Freedom of Journalists, implementation of the law suffers from arbitrary classification and distribution of information by the different ministries and state institutions. Journalists complained that while the outlets for news have increased, they are often blocked from obtaining information on government policies and officials.

Jordan's SSCs continued to jail and prosecute journalists in 2010. In February, a court jailed a columnist for criticizing cooperation between Jordanian and U.S. intelligence agencies during a television appearance. The journalist was charged with actions that could damage relations with a foreign country and encouraging the government's overthrow, among other offenses. In March, an SSC banned reporters from covering a bribery case against a petroleum company and several nationally prominent figures, including a former finance minister, on the grounds that the details of the case involved Jordan's "economic security." In May, the presenter of the radio program *Awlad al-Balad* was arrested after allegedly insulting the minister of agriculture and joining an "unlawful mob" while participating in a peaceful

sit-in with a group of workers. In July, the military prosecutor detained a student for writing a poem that allegedly insulted King Abdullah II. The prosecutor relied on several articles in the penal code that criminalize speech, including speech found to stir up national strife. In November, a parliamentary candidate who lost his election bid was jailed for causing "sectarian strife" by publishing campaign materials that decried Jordan's lack of social mobility. Also in November, an appeals court upheld a two-year prison sentence imposed by an SSC on a student found guilty of insulting the king in an electronic message.

Print media are required to obtain a license in order to operate. Jordan's 2003 Audio Visual Law ended the government monopoly on broadcasting, and in 2010 the government allowed the country's fifth privately owned radio station to open, up from just one such station in 2006. The newest station is a student-run outlet in Karak province that has reported on local elections. The other privately owned radio stations include one focused on women in elections and two that feature talk shows and debates. The new station signaled a step toward greater media diversity, but more than a dozen applications to launch other private radio outlets were rejected in 2009. ATV, Jordan's first privately owned television station, has yet to begin broadcasting.

Editorial restrictions, whether official or unofficial, continue to prevent journalists from freely reporting or expressing viewpoints, and the government retains an additional measure of control through its appointments of the editors at some news outlets. In practice, the government tolerates a certain measure of criticism of officials and policies, and allows some room for Islamist movements to express their ideas, but criticism of the royal family is difficult. Moreover, the line between permissible and impermissible coverage is unclear, leading nearly all journalists to self-censor as a precaution. Intelligence agencies watch journalists closely, and the government gave free rein to intelligence officials, police, and prosecutors to clamp down on undesirable speech in 2010. Physical harassment of journalists occurs occasionally, but no cases were reported during the year.

While some print media in Jordan are independent, the government has a majority stake in one of the major daily newspapers and a minority stake in another, enhancing state influence in the press. Television remains under state control, although there have been some openings in the radio sector in the past several years. Access to satellite television and other international media is generally not restricted. In early 2010, Jordan's prime minister announced the removal of a 1 percent "culture tax" on advertising revenues, easing the financial burden of operating a publication. However, journalists continued to complain that the government often tries to shape the content of news coverage by pressuring advertisers.

The government supports access to the internet, and internet usage has increased, reaching 38 percent of the population in 2010; two-thirds of the users were males under the age of 30. Government employees were still restricted in 2010 from accessing many websites while at work. Most of the blocked sites were independent news portals that covered issues the state-owned media typically omitted, including sensitive political subjects such as the rights of day laborers. About 600 websites reportedly remain

blocked. In 2010, the government sought to expand restrictive press laws to include online publications, a move that met with strong disapproval from journalists and media freedom organizations. Ministers voted to approve the 2010 Information Systems Cyber Crimes Law in early August, but under domestic and external pressure, the government later that month agreed to remove vaguely worded provisions prohibiting the electronic dissemination of information "that involves defamation or contempt or slander," or that affects "national security or foreign relations of the Kingdom, as well as public safety or the national economy." The latter article was revised to ban only information concerning those issues that were not already available to the public. In another amendment to the initial version, the government removed a provision allowing warrantless searches of the offices of online news outlets, instead requiring that police obtain a warrant from a court or prosecutor and provide evidence of a crime.