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Freedom Of The Press - Qatar (2011)

Status: Not Free
Legal Environment: 20
Political Environment: 24
Economic Environment: 22
Total Score: 66

While Qatar permits its flagship satellite television channel Al-Jazeera to air critical coverage of foreign countries and leaders, journalists are forbidden from criticizing the Qatari government, the ruling family, or Islam, and are subject to prosecution for such violations. Article 47 of the Qatari constitution "assures" freedom of expression "according to circumstances and conditions" proscribed by law. The 1979 Press and Publications Law is administered by the criminal courts and provides for jail sentences for libel or slander. In addition, broadly framed anti-terrorism legislation can also be used to restrict freedom of expression. The Advisory Council, Qatar's appointed legislative body, began drafting a new press law, but the emir had yet to sign it. The government announced in 2010 that the same press law would be adopted by year's end. The draft law circulated would liberalize press freedom by lifting provisions under which journalists could be jailed for defamation. It also would prohibit officials from questioning journalists without a court order, and permit journalists to keep their sources confidential unless ordered otherwise by a court. Multiple provisions would regulate online media. Despite the government's promises, the law had not been adopted at year's end.

All publications are subject to licensing by the government. The government, the Qatar Radio and Television Corporation, and customs officers are authorized to censor both domestic and foreign publications and broadcast media for religious, political, and sexual content prior to distribution. Disparity exists in the application of press legislation for Qatari and non-Qatari journalists, the latter of which represent the majority of media workers in the country. While local journalists often receive warnings and threats when pushing the limits of permissible coverage, noncitizens employed by Qatari media outlets risk facing harsher measures, including termination, deportation, and imprisonment. As a result, self-censorship is reportedly widespread. All foreign journalists working in the country must be accredited by the Qatar Foreign Information Agency and sponsored by a local institution or the Information Ministry. However, journalists in compliance with these rules can still be barred from entering the country. Five female journalists for Al-Jazeera, all foreign, resigned their posts in June 2010 after having been routinely criticized for wearing clothing deemed immodest. Although there were no reports of physical violence directed at members of the press during the year, journalists continue to face multiple forms of intimidation.

The Doha Center for Media Freedom (DCMF) opened in 2008 under the patronage of the emir's wife and with the support

of Reporters Without Borders (RSF), an international press freedom watchdog group. Its mission was to provide physical protection to journalists, including safe houses and bulletproof vests. Robert Menard, former RSF director, was appointed as director of DCMF. However, Menard wrote a public letter in February 2009 decrying Qatar's oppressive media law and taking issue with the government's refusal to extend visas for foreign journalists threatened in their own countries. In March, a reporter working for the DCMF was barred from leaving the country to attend a meeting abroad. In May 2009, Menard invited the controversial Danish editor, who in 2005 published a series of Mohammed cartoons in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, to a conference in Doha celebrating World Press Freedom Day. This drew public condemnation from government officials and domestic media outlets, and the Advisory Council called for Menard's dismissal. He and several staff members resigned in June 2010. RSF ended its relationship with the DCMF, and the latter remained largely inactive at year's end.

Qatar has seven newspapers that publish in either Arabic or English, all of which are owned by either members of the ruling family or their business associates. The state owns and operates all broadcast media, and there are only two television networks in the country, Qatar TV and Al-Jazeera. While Qatar TV broadcasts mostly official news and progovernment perspectives, Al-Jazeera focuses its coverage on international topics. As a government-subsidized channel, Al-Jazeera refrains from criticizing the Qatari authorities, providing only sparse and uncritical local news. Programming on local radio stations, on the other hand, is more accommodating to voices critical of government services and operations. The concentration of media ownership within the ruling family as well as the high financial costs and citizenship requirements to obtain media ownership licenses continue to hinder the expansion and freedom of the press.

Approximately 69 percent of the Qatari population used the internet in 2010, a major increase from 32 percent in 2007. Sixty-three percent of households have access to the internet. The government censors political, religious, and pornographic content through the sole, state-owned internet-service provider. Both high-speed and dial-up internet users are directed to a proxy server that maintains a list of banned websites and blocks material deemed inconsistent with the religious, cultural, political, and moral values of the country.