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Freedom Of The Press - Tajikistan (2011)

Status: Not Free
Legal Environment: 25
Political Environment: 28
Economic Environment: 25
Total Score: 78

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 2010. Government authorities selectively implement laws meant to protect journalists, such as a ban on censorship. Libel and criticism of the president are criminal offenses that carry prison terms of up to five years. In January 2010, three judges filed a defamation suit against the independent weeklies *Farazh*, *Ozodagon*, and *Asia-Plus*, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. The complaint sought 5.5 million somoni (\$1.2 million) in damages from each for their coverage of a press conference at which a local lawyer denounced the recent convictions of his clients. The case was pending at year's end, and was condemned by Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) representative on freedom of the media. In November, journalist Makhmadyusuf Ismoilov of the weekly *Nuri Zindagi*, a frequent critic of the government, was arrested in the Sogd region. According to the National Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan, he was charged with two criminal counts, defamation and insult through the media, and faced up to two and a half years in prison if convicted.

There is no freedom of information legislation, 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, was unable to adequately defend independent media from state pressure.

Violence against journalists has declined significantly in recent years, but journalists who criticize authorities or expose government corruption continue to report threats and intimidation, particularly when out covering the news. In September 2010, journalists trying to photograph the aftermath of a terrorist attack in Khujand were briefly detained and had their images confiscated. No assaults or killings of journalists were reported during the year.

Although there are over 200 registered newspapers, many of them are privately owned, and 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. In October 2010, *Farazh*, *Ozodagon*, and several other newspapers were forced to stop publishing after a series of printing houses refused to print them, apparently under pressure from the government, which controls the major presses and the supply of newsprint. At the end of the month, the U.S., German, British, and French governments voiced their concern to the Tajik Foreign Ministry. In November, the Islamist opposition party refused to publish the papers at its printing house, saying it feared retaliation from the government. Most of the papers soon resumed publishing, but *Farazh* was printed only sporadically for the rest of the year. 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.

Internet penetration in Tajikistan is about 11.6 percent, and the authorities have imposed restrictions on access. The government has long blocked websites, and in 2010 Tajik internet-service providers rendered the sites of five foreign and domestic news outlets inaccessible for a time under orders from the Transport and Communications Ministry. Criminal libel and defamation laws apply to internet publications. However, Asia-Plus, an independent news site (affiliated with the print weekly) that is popular throughout Central Asia, resisted repeated instances of pressure, including the blocking of its website and a punitive lawsuit, and continued to provide strong coverage of June unrest in neighboring Kyrgyzstan as well as a crackdown on militants within Tajikistan.