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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

Brunei

[Brunei](#) | [Freedom of the Press 2013](#)- Select year -

The absolute monarchy of Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, as well as emergency laws that have been in place for nearly half a century, continue to restrict journalists and limit the diversity of media content in Brunei. Journalists face up to three years of imprisonment if found guilty of reporting “false and malicious” news. Passage of the 2013 Seditious Publications Act worsened the state of press freedom in Brunei by expanding the list of punishable offenses to include criticism of the sultan, the royal family, and the national Malay Islamic Monarchy ideology, which promotes Islam as the state religion and the idea that monarchical rule is the only acceptable form of governance. Under the amended law, persons found in violation of these offenses, or any publishers, editors, or proprietors of newspapers publishing items with seditious intent, face fines of up to BN\$5,000 (US\$4,000). There is no legislation establishing the right to access official information.

Under current press legislation, newspapers are required to apply for annual publishing permits, and foreign journalists must obtain government approval prior to working in the country. The government retains the authority to arbitrarily shut down any media outlet and bar distribution of foreign publications, with no possibility of appeal from the affected outlet. An Internet Code of Practice, included in a 2001 press law, makes individuals as well as content and service providers liable for publishing anything that is “against the public interest or national harmony or which offends against good taste or decency.” It also requires all sites that carry content or discuss issues of a religious or political nature to register with the Broadcasting Authority. Failure to register is punishable by up to three years of imprisonment and a fine of up to US\$200,000.

While no incidents of attacks on or harassment of journalists have been reported in recent years, authorities have previously warned the media to exercise caution when reporting on the sultanate. Consequently, media is generally not able to convey a diversity of viewpoints and opinions, and criticism of the government is exceedingly rare.

The private press, including the country’s main English-language daily, the *Borneo Bulletin*, is mostly owned and controlled by the sultan’s family and practices self-censorship on political and religious issues to avoid confrontation with the government. In 2006, after receiving permission from the sultan, an independent me