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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Jordan

[Jordan](#)[Freedom of the Press 2013](#)

The constitution guarantees freedoms of speech and expression, but press laws contain vague clauses that restrict media activity in practice. Journalists can be prosecuted under the penal code or tried by the State Security Court (SSC) for offenses involving speech and association. A 2011 law criminalized reporting on corruption, including news that defames someone or “impacts his dignity.” The 1998 Press and Publications Law prescribes fines of almost \$40,000 for speech that denigrates the government or religion. A 2010 amendment to the law established specialized courts to prosecute press violations.

Further changes to the Press and Publications Law were approved in September 2012, imposing restrictions on online news content and requiring news websites to obtain licenses to operate. The amendments apply the law’s existing provisions to websites, making it unlawful for online outlets to insult the royal family, harm “Arab-Islamic values,” or incite sectarian strife, among other prohibitions. Site owners are also responsible for patrolling reader comments to ensure that they do not violate the law. The government can block foreign and domestic websites that

fail to comply with the law without a court order. Some website owners have already refused to obey the requirement to register and obtain a license. Media watchdog groups criticized the legislation, which would impact about 400 websites, as a major step in the wrong direction for a country that has maintained a freer press than many of its neighbors. Journalists and activists held a protest against the new amendments, carrying a coffin marked “internet freedom” through the streets in front of the parliament building.

Criminal charges against journalists are often withdrawn before they get to trial, but the government routinely uses the justice system to stifle dissent. In April 2012, journalist Jamal al-Muhtaseb was detained after publishing an article on the website Gerasa News in which he alleged misconduct by the royal court. He was charged in the SSC with “opposing the ruling system,” according to news reports. The article had quoted an unidentified parliament member who said that the palace had directed the parliament not to refer a former minister for trial on corruption charges.

In September 2012, the Council of Ministers approved a draft law that would modify the 2007 Right to Access Information Act. The proposed amendments, if passed by the parliament, would extend the right of access to foreigners, require officials to provide or refuse information within 15 days, and grant the requester the right to appeal refusals. The amendments also stipulate that the president of the press association will become a member of the Council of Information, currently staffed by government officials. According to the Amman-based Center for Defending Freedom of Journalists, implementation of the current law suffers from arbitrary classification and distribution of information by the different ministries and state institutions. Journalists complain that while the outlets for news have increased, they are often blocked from obtaining information on government policies and officials. The amendments had not passed by year’s end.

Print outlets must obtain licenses to operate, and journalists must belong to the Jordan Press Association (JPA) to work legally. Those who are critical of the government have sometimes been excluded from JPA membership, and the organization does not admit journalists who work for internet-based news outlets, leaving them with limited legal protections. Licensing responsibilities for television and radio are shared between the Council of Ministers, the Audio Visual Commission (AVC), and the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC). The Council of Ministers is responsible for granting, revoking, and renewing

licenses, but does so based on the recommendations of the AVC. The AVC also handles disputes between broadcasters, issues directions on programming, and takes punitive action against broadcasters who violate their licensing conditions. The TRC is responsible for allocating frequencies to broadcasters, issuing telecommunications licenses, and managing information technology services.

The government tolerates some level of criticism of officials and policies, and allows some room for Islamist movements and other elements of the opposition to express their ideas. However, government attempts to influence editorial content occur regularly, with top officials and security operatives contacting editors and warning them not to publish stories on politically sensitive issues. Journalists routinely practice self-censorship and know which “red lines” not to cross, including that pertaining to negative reporting about the royal family.

Journalists faced harassment, intimidation, and violence in 2012. In January, reporters were assaulted while covering a protest in downtown Amman. In February, a masked assailant stabbed blogger Enass Musallam after she published criticism of recent remarks by Prince Hassan, the uncle of King Abdullah II. The assailant reportedly said his actions were “in the name of his royal majesty and the prince.” After she was released from the hospital, Musallam was questioned by police for six hours. In April, member of parliament Yahya Saud cornered journalist Eman Jaradat after she took his picture, then verbally abused her and forcibly deleted photographs from her mobile telephone. In November, unidentified assailants attacked a crew from Sky News as they covered a protest, inflicting injuries and damaging equipment. Journalists frequently received verbal threats, in some cases from government officials.

While some Jordanian news outlets are independent, the government has a majority stake in *Al-Rai*, a major daily, and a minority stake in *Al-Dustour*, a second large national newspaper. Bribery threatens independent reporting, and in 2012 dozens of media professionals were accused of accepting payments from the former director of the General Intelligence Department. The 2003 Audio Visual Law ended the government monopoly on terrestrial broadcasting, and there has been an increase in the number of private radio stations in recent years—mainly regional outlets that cater to a specific demographic, such as women or students. However, terrestrial television stations remain under state control; the country’s first privately owned television channel, launched as a pilot project in 2007, has since stalled. Satellite dishes are allowed, and pan-Arab news channels remain

popular. About 41 percent of the population had access to the internet in 2012. Jordanian blogs continued to flourish, and some became focal points for the organization of popular protests during the year.

2013 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Not Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

63

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

21

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

23

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

19

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