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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Laos

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

Press freedom in Laos remains highly restricted. Despite advances in telecommunications infrastructure, government control of nearly all print and broadcast news prevents the development of a vibrant, independent press. Article 44 of the 1991 constitution guarantees freedom of the press. In collaboration with international donors, the country passed a new press law in 2008, but it has had little practical effect on conditions for journalists. Under the criminal code, individuals may be jailed for up to one year for reporting news that “weakens the state” or importing a publication that is “contrary to national culture.” Defamation and misinformation are criminal offenses, carrying lengthy prison terms and even the possibility of execution. However, due to high levels of official censorship and self-censorship, legal cases against media personnel are extremely rare.

The country’s media remain under the tight control of the ruling Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP). Media personnel are appointed mostly from within the LPRP, and publications must be approved by the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism (MICT). Officials review content in private publications, and

have the power to censure outlets. As a result, journalists write primarily about uncontroversial topics, though stories on social issues previously not broached have begun to appear in newspapers. On January 27, the MICT ordered Ounkeo Souksavanh, host of the country's first call-in radio show, "Wao Kao," to cancel his program. Ounkeo had discussed sensitive topics with callers to the show, including government land seizures. The program remained off the air at year's end. Physical attacks and extralegal intimidation aimed at journalists are rare, as reporters avoid covering politically sensitive topics. Foreign journalists are usually permitted to enter and travel to cover specific stories, though they face significant barriers in establishing a permanent presence in the country. However, in October the government denied several international journalists entrance to the country, ahead of the ninth Asia-Europe People's Forum, and others reported intimidation and harassment for their coverage of the event.

The number of media outlets continues to grow. There are around 24 regularly printed newspapers, all government-affiliated. Privately owned magazines, primarily from Chinese-backed companies, covering general interest, health, and other nonpolitical issues, have emerged in recent years. Newspaper and other print media circulation figures remain extremely weak due to low literacy rates and an insufficient distribution infrastructure outside the capital, Vientiane. The government is eager to boost Laos's information and communication technology capabilities, and advancements in this sector have resulted in an increase in television and radio stations. Nearly all 32 television stations and 44 radio stations are government run, though companies are increasingly permitted to buy airtime and run privately produced content. China and Vietnam have provided much of the investment in the broadcast infrastructure. A few community radio programs, covering mostly local interest stories, have sprung up with the help of international development organizations. Foreign television and radio services, such as Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, broadcast in Laos without disruptions. A number of citizens watch Thai television and radio, and wealthier individuals have access to satellite television.

Nearly 11 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2012, and Lao-language content, though minimal, is growing. Young Laotians are increasingly taking to social media to discuss social issues. The state controls all internet service providers. The government's technical ability to monitor the internet is limited, though sporadic reports of blocking web activity have surfaced. However, the government's efforts to consolidate internet infrastructure to a single gateway,

as well as other initiatives, signal interest in adopting the censorship policies and technologies of its neighbors, Vietnam and China.

2013 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Not Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

84

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

26

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

33

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

25

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