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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Maldives

Maldives | Freedom of the Press 2013 |

The media environment deteriorated in 2012, due in part to severe political and social unrest resulting from the forcible removal of President Mohamed Nasheed in February and the succession of his vice president, Mohammed Waheed Hassan Manik. Harassment and violence against journalists increased considerably, and media outlets faced attacks and closures.

The 2008 constitution protects freedom of expression, but it also places restrictions on speech deemed “contrary to the tenets of Islam.” The overall legal framework protecting free expression remained weak in 2012, with many proposed reform bills still awaiting passage. In November 2011, the Maldives Broadcasting Commission (MBC), the legal entity assigned to regulate broadcast media, drafted new regulations that would curtail the power and reach of the country’s broadcasters through high licensing fees and ownership rules favoring international companies over locally owned stations. While these changes have yet to be implemented, they pose a potential threat to Maldivian media. In December 2012, the parliament passed the Freedom of Peaceful Assembly Act, which set out a number of limitations on journalists, including a requirement for accreditation by the MBC. Freedom of information (FOI) has been regulated by presidential decree since 2009. An FOI bill was submitted to the parliament that year, but it has been stalled in committee since then.

A 2008 law called for the establishment of the Maldives Media Council (MMC), an independent body consisting of eight media workers and seven members of the public, tasked with developing a code of conduct for journalists and investigating complaints from the public against both print and broadcast outlets. While advocacy groups warned about the potential for government influence (the minister of information nominates the public candidates) and noted that self-regulation was preferable to statutory regulation, they cautiously welcomed the formation of the council and an end to formal control over media content by the Information Ministry. After a considerable delay, elections to the council were held in 2010. The election process was criticized for not being sufficiently transparent, and former members of political parties were nominated as candidates to the council.

The Maldives Journalist Association (MJA), formed in 2009, regularly made statements regarding media freedom issues and journalists’ rights during the year, accusing the government and political leaders of interference with the private media in a number of cases. Following reports of corruption within the MMC, the MJA joined other media watchdog organizations in calling for the creation of a separate and independent regulatory body.

Over the previous few years, greater media diversity had led to improved coverage of major political events and issues, such as the May 2009 parliamentary elections. However, throughout 2012 the media faced limitations on accessing official information and resistance to coverage of certain topics, such as religious freedom. While there is legal protection for journalists to maintain confidentiality of sources, it has become regular practice for the police to summon journalists for interrogation about their sources and the authenticity of news reports.

Censorship of web-based content is a growing concern. Opposition websites remained accessible in 2012, though sites considered to be anti-Islamic or pornographic are often blocked by the Communication Authority of the Maldives (CAM) at the request of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. In December, a criminal court granted police a warrant to obtain the e-mail and internet protocol (IP) addresses of a user accused of “violating Islamic principles” on the comment board of Minivan News, an independent English-language news website. The individual’s username, “Maai Allah” (Holy Allah), provoked the charges. This marked the first time police have sought out the identity of an internet user on religious grounds.

Journalists and media outlets endured a sharp increase in violence in 2012, including assaults, raids, arrests, and harassment. The most prominent case involved blogger Ismail “Hilath” Rasheed, one of the country’s best-known journalists. In January, Rasheed was released from prison for his involvement in a “silent protest” to promote religious tolerance. The arrest followed the blocking of his blog by the CAM on the grounds that it contained anti-Islamic material. In June, unidentified men stabbed Rasheed in the neck outside his home. Fearing for his safety, he fled the country in July. Journalists faced numerous assaults by demonstrators and arrests while covering political protests during the year. In February, riot police stormed the offices of the Maldives National Broadcasting

2013 SCORES

PRESS STATUS
Partly Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE
55

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT
18

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT
21

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT
16

Corporation (MNBC), taking over the station hours before the coerced resignation of President Nasheed. The raid was reportedly ordered by Vice President Waheed. Assailants attacked three additional media outlets—DhiTV, VTV, and Raajje TV—in 2012, injuring journalists and destroying equipment. In August, Raajje TV sued the police for targeting and harassing its reporters.

Private print media present a fairly wide diversity of viewpoints. However, some publications are owned by allies of former president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom or other political actors, who exercise considerable control over content. Following the transfer of power in February 2012, a parliament-created state broadcaster assumed control of all government-owned media in accordance with a prior court order. Opponents have been critical of the move, arguing that the ostensibly autonomous entity violates its mandate as a public-service broadcaster by ignoring opposition voices and favoring the ruling party. The number of private radio stations has increased to at least six in recent years, while the country's first private television channels, DhiTV and VTV, began operating in 2008 and compete with the state-run broadcaster. Private outlets are authorized through individual agreements with the government rather than new broadcasting legislation, limiting their legal protections. Moreover, broadcasters remain subject to high annual licensing fees and must be relicensed every year. Most newspapers are not profitable and rely on financial backing from businessmen with strong political interests. Private media have been under significant financial pressure since 2009, when the government began publishing its advertisements in the weekly official gazette instead of private outlets.

The internet was accessed by about 39 percent of the population in 2012, and the number of web-based news outlets has greatly expanded.

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