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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Oman

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Oman's 1984 Press and Publications Law is one of the most restrictive statutes of its kind in the Arab world, and serves to create a highly censored and subdued media environment. Articles 29, 30, and 31 of the 1996 Basic Law guarantee freedom of expression and freedom of the press, but these rights are abridged in practice. Libel is treated as a criminal offense, and journalists can be fined or imprisoned for voicing criticism of the sultan or printing material that leads to "public discord, violates the security of the state, or abuses a person's dignity or rights." Youssef al-Haj and Ibrahim Ma'mari, two journalists for the newspaper *Al-Zaman*, were convicted of defamation in 2011 after writing a story that alleged corruption in the Ministry of Justice. In January 2012, their five-month prison sentences were upheld but suspended by an appellate court. A one-month suspension of *Al-Zaman* was also upheld.

The Telecommunications Act allows the authorities to prosecute individuals for any message—sent through any means of communication—that violates public order and morals. The already repressive media environment was further

constrained in June 2012 when, in response to growing criticism of the government's lack of progress in fulfilling promised economic and political reforms, Oman's Department of Public Prosecution issued a statement saying that it would take all appropriate legal action against those who publish any content in the media or online that was found to be "offensive" or "inciting others to actions." In 2012, 32 activists and bloggers were fined and sentenced to at least six months in prison for insulting the sultan or other public officials, often in online forums.

Journalists are required to obtain licenses to practice, and since 2005 they have been obliged to reapply each year as an employee of a specific media outlet, effectively excluding the practice of freelance journalism. Journalists may have their licenses revoked at any time for violating press laws. The government also retains the right to close down any media outlet at any time.

The Ministry of Information may legally censor any material regarded as politically, culturally, or sexually offensive in both domestic and foreign media, and it has blacklisted several authors and specific books that were deemed controversial. While information and news are widely available, there is a basic lack of coverage of local topics, such as the economy, unemployment, and minority and migrant issues. Reporters have been jailed in the past for coverage of colleagues' arrests, and self-censorship is widespread. As a result, physical attacks and intimidation directed at journalists are rare. However, since the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, the government has cracked down forcefully against public demonstrations and other expressions of dissent. During 2012, 12 activists, writers, and bloggers were sentenced to one year in prison and fined roughly \$2,600 for participating in peaceful protests against libel and insult convictions. In an unprecedented move in July, the Oman News Agency published the unaltered photographs and names of six activists in prison uniforms as they were being sentenced for insulting the sultan.

The government exercises considerable control over the internet. The Internet Service Manual stipulates a lengthy list of prohibited content, including defamation of the ruling family and the spread of false data or rumors. The government routinely blocks websites deemed sexually offensive or politically controversial. Some bloggers have been able to use virtual private networks (VPNs) to bypass the censorship of local internet service providers, but in 2010 the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) proposed a new law that would ban the use of VPNs and subject violators to fines of 500 rials (\$1,300). The

proposed law has yet to be enacted, but VPN access has been widely blocked. Popular web forums for voicing dissent, such as Farrq, Al-Harah, and Al-Sabla, have also been subject to temporary shutdowns. Private communications including mobile-telephone calls, e-mail, and exchanges in internet chat rooms are monitored.

In addition to the two major state-owned newspapers, the government owns four radio stations and two television stations. There are eight privately run newspapers currently operating in Oman. Private newspapers are able to sustain themselves largely on local and international advertising revenues rather than sales, and many no longer need state subsidies. There is one privately owned satellite network that refrains from broadcasting politically controversial content. Foreign broadcasts are accessible via satellite in urban areas. About 60 percent of the population used the internet in 2012. Oman's internet and telecommunications sector was monopolized by the state-run Oman Telecommunications Company until 2008, when the government allowed a privately owned competitor, Nawras, to begin providing internet service.

2013 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Not Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

71

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

25

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

27

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

19

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