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## FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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# Tajikistan

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Freedom of speech is guaranteed by the constitution, but President Emomali Rahmon's administration has maintained intense pressure on the country's independent media. In 2010, a draft Law on Mass Media of Tajikistan was proposed to replace the 1990 Law on Press and Other Mass Media. The proposal was met with criticism from international rights organizations, which argued that it did not meet international standards. After more than two years of discussion by government officials, members of parliament, and nongovernmental organization (NGO) representatives, Tajikistan's lower house of parliament passed the bill in December 2012. It contains language assuring media freedom, bans censorship, and obliges public officials to respond to inquiries posed by journalists within three days. At year's end the legislation was awaiting approval by the upper house of parliament and Rahmon. In July, Rahmon had approved a new law that decriminalized libel. However, journalists can still face criminal penalties including fines and jail time for insulting Rahmon or other public officials. Also in July, authorities announced plans to create a volunteer organization tasked with monitoring the internet for insults against Tajik officials. The government itself

already monitors internet activity, particularly on social-networking websites. Tajikistan has had a freedom of information law since 2002, but many journalists are unaware of it, officials do not respect it, and costs associated with requests for information are unregulated.

The country's licensing committee routinely denies licenses to independent media outlets or otherwise obstructs the licensing process. No member of an independent media outlet has ever become a member of the licensing committee. However, the media bill approved by the lower house in December would require all Tajik media outlets to be registered as legally operating entities, potentially easing licensing complications. Foreign media outlets have been denied Tajik broadcasting licenses, and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) reported in September that Tajik authorities had arbitrarily denied accreditation to two of its journalists. Reporters from international media outlets are not invited to official events and press conferences.

The government blocked domestic access to various social-networking and news websites on a number of occasions during 2012, with some sites remaining inaccessible for up to three months. In March, officials blocked access to the independent news websites *Polyarnaya Zvezda*, *Maxala*, *CentrAsia*, and *TjkNews*, and the social-networking website Facebook, blaming technical problems. The blockage came after three of the four news sites published a commentary about a meeting at which Rahmon was said to have ordered increased surveillance of several religious groups; the minutes of the meeting were posted on Facebook. During the summer, as clashes between militants and government forces were taking place in the eastern region of Gorno-Badakhshan, the authorities again blocked access to Facebook, as well as to several independent regional news websites, Russia's RIA Novosti news agency, and the Russian-language version of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) news service. YouTube was blocked after videos of demonstrations in the region were posted to the site. Access to Facebook was blocked once again in late November; the government's director of communications services, Beg Zuhurov, called the website a "hotbed of slander" and said it had been blocked in response to citizen complaints about insults against Rahmon. Access to Facebook and several independent news sites was then restored in early December without explanation. Later that month, Rahmon's administration blocked more than 100 news and social-networking websites in what an official reportedly described as a dry run for an expected crackdown on online dissent ahead of a presidential election set for November 2013. Tajik

journalists report that the government's repeated blocking of Facebook has increased public interest in the site, where robust political debates and criticism of Rahmon's administration can be found. However, only about 15 percent of Tajikistan's population regularly used the internet in 2012.

Investigative reporting is rare in Tajikistan given the difficult conditions faced by journalists. Independent journalists are particularly hampered by a lack of legislation allowing them to protect their sources. Authorities frequently prevent independent reporters from covering the news, for example by blocking access to official events or barring journalists from taking photographs. However, the Danish NGO International Media Support (IMS) reported in September that with the help of an IMS-affiliated investigative network, an investigative reporter had published a piece on corruption within the national motor vehicles department, prompting a government probe into the matter.

Journalists reporting on sensitive issues face threats and attacks. In May 2012, state television journalist Daler Sharifov, who also heads an unregistered NGO aimed at defusing regional tensions among young Tajiks, was beaten badly by two unidentified attackers. Two other journalists—Ravshan Yormakhmadov and Salim Shamsiddinov—were beaten that month, apparently as a result of their work. In September, police attacked several journalists who were trying to cover a fire that destroyed a market in Dushanbe, the capital.

According to the government, there are more than 350 registered print publications, about 200 of which are privately owned. Roughly half of all print publications are issued on an irregular schedule. The broadcast sector is dominated by state-controlled national television stations that praise Rahmon and deny coverage to independent or opposition points of view. Tajik journalists claim that state-run media outlets often publicize letters from fabricated entities in which independent journalists and opposition figures are smeared. Several regions in Tajikistan lack access to independent television and radio stations. Meanwhile, international television broadcasts are becoming increasingly available through satellite services. Electricity shortages limit overall access to electronic media, and government control over distribution limits the reach of print media. In addition, widespread poverty, a small advertising market, and the concentration of wealth in the hands of political leaders and their associates hamper the emergence of financially robust and independent media outlets.

## 2013 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

**Not Free**

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

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**25**

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

**29**

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

**25**

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