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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

United Arab Emirates

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The government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) significantly increased its efforts to silence dissent in 2012, arresting scores of activists and bloggers and further limiting an already constrained media environment. While the constitution provides for freedom of speech, the government uses its judicial, legislative, and executive powers to limit those rights in practice. UAE Federal Law No. 15 of 1980 for Printed Matter and Publications regulates all aspects of the media and is considered one of the most restrictive press laws in the Arab world. It authorizes the state to censor both domestic and foreign publications prior to distribution, and prohibits criticism of the government, rulers and ruling families, and friendly foreign governments. The law also bans publication of information that “causes damage to the national economy.” Violations of the law can result in fines and prison sentences. Journalists can also be prosecuted under the penal code. In early 2009, the Federal National Council (FNC), the UAE’s legislative advisory body, adopted a draft “regulation of media activities” bill that would replace the 1980 law, though after more than three years it has not been enacted. The proposed legislation would impose fines of more than \$1 million for disparaging the head of state or his deputies, and fines of several thousand dollars for publishing “misleading” articles “in a manner that harms the country’s reputation, foreign relations or obligations or defaces its national identity,” or that “harms the country’s national economy.”

Defamation is a criminal offense. In a major case in 2011, blogger Ahmed Mansoor and four other Emirati activists were arrested and charged under Articles 8 and 176 of the penal code for allegedly insulting the leaders of the UAE in posts on the internet forum UAEHewar. In November 2011, Mansoor received a three-year prison sentence, while the others received sentences of two years each. The trial was widely criticized by international human rights groups, which cited a lack of evidence and failure to adhere to proper court procedures. The day after their conviction, the five men were pardoned by the president and released. During 2012, in their ongoing crackdown on political reform advocates, the authorities rounded up several dozen activists and bloggers affiliated with the Islamist group Al-Islah and detained them without charge. Many were arrested for using social media to call for reform, and have had their Facebook and Twitter accounts blocked. In a massive security sweep on July 16 and 17, bloggers Khalid al-Nuaimi, Rashid Omran al-Shamsi, Omran al-Radhwan, Salah al-Dhufairi, and Abdullah al-Hajri were among many others arrested for posting comments that were critical of the regime and for being affiliated with Al-Islah. Most of those arrested were still being held without formal charges and with their whereabouts unknown at the end of 2012.

The 2006 Information and Privacy Cybercrime Law criminalizes the use of the internet to commit a range of offenses—including violating political, social, and religious norms—and subjects perpetrators to prison terms and fines. In November 2012, a highly restrictive cybercrime law was instituted through a presidential decree. Although the law centers on information technology, it has detrimental implications for citizen journalism. Article 28 of the decree states that the publication or dissemination of information, news, or images deemed “liable to endanger security and its higher interests or infringe on the public

2013 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Not Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

74

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

24

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

27

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

23

order” could be punished with imprisonment and a fine of up to 1 million dirhams (\$270,000). Under Article 29, “deriding or harming the reputation, stature, or status of the state, any of its institutions, its president or vice president, the rulers of the emirates, their crown princes or their deputies,” as well as a number of national symbols, is also punishable with imprisonment and a fine of the same amount. Beginning in early December, several bloggers and activists were arrested under the law.

The National Media Council (NMC), created in 2006, is responsible for licensing all publications and issuing press credentials to editors. Members of the council are all appointed by the president. The UAE has three media free zones (MFZ)—areas in which foreign media outlets produce print and broadcast material intended for foreign audiences—located in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Ras al-Khaimah. Although these areas are subject to UAE media laws, the press operates with relative freedom. The Dubai and Abu Dhabi MFZs house bureaus of high-profile media outlets such as the U.S.-based Cable News Network (CNN), the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and Agence France-Presse. Broadcast media outlets based in the MFZs are regulated by the Technology and Media Free Zone Authority, but are also subject to the 1980 press law and the penal code. All free zones must obtain approval from the NMC before licensing any print or broadcast activities.

Journalists, especially foreign journalists working for UAE-based media outlets, have reported having their stories censored by their editors, particularly if they are covering sensitive issues such as religion, politics, or foreign allies of the UAE. Online censorship is extensive, although the government claims that it only censors pornographic sites. Users are directed to a proxy server that maintains a list of banned websites and blocks material deemed inconsistent with the “religious, cultural, political, and moral values of the country.” The OpenNet Initiative has reported a marked increase in the number of political sites blocked since 2007 and categorizes filtering on social issues as “pervasive.” Websites that are considered indecent include those featuring pornography, dating or personal advertisements, and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) content. Some websites based in Israel or covering religions other than Islam, notably the Baha’i faith, are also blocked. The authorities have threatened to restrict use of encrypted e-mail and messaging services, which could facilitate government surveillance of journalists.

Due to vaguely defined red lines on permissible speech, extreme forms of self-censorship are widely practiced, particularly regarding issues such as local politics, culture, religion, or any other subject the government may deem sensitive.

Although there were few reported physical attacks against journalists in 2012, reporters in the UAE suffered multiple forms of intimidation and harassment. Emirati journalists often face warnings and threats if they push the limits of permissible media coverage. However, noncitizen journalists account for the overwhelming majority of those working in the UAE, and they face harsher measures, including dismissal and deportation. In June 2012, Ahmed Abd al-Khaleq, a blogger documenting the plight of his fellow stateless residents, or *bidoon*, was deported to Thailand after his residency documents were confiscated by UAE authorities. Ahmed Mansoor, the blogger who was released and pardoned by the president at the end of 2011, faced physical attacks by unknown assailants in late 2012. He also reported that his computer was hacked.

There are about a dozen newspapers printed in Arabic and English in the UAE, as well as several radio stations and terrestrial television stations. Most media outlets are either government owned or have close government affiliations. The Arab Media Group and Dubai Media Incorporated operate as the Dubai government’s media arm, publishing several newspapers and operating television and radio stations. Privately owned newspapers such as the Arabic daily *Al-Khaleej* and its English-language sister paper, *Gulf Today*, are heavily influenced by the government. Almost all Arabic-language broadcast media that target the domestic audience are state owned and provide only the official view on local issues. However, satellite television service is widespread and provides uncensored access to international broadcasts.

Most major papers receive government subsidies and rely predominantly on the

official Emirates News Agency (WAM) for content and guidance on whether or how to cover sensitive local news. Several publishers have opposed free dailies such as *7DAYS*, arguing that they violate a legal provision requiring papers to print their price on the front page. In 2010, the editors of several papers adopted an initiative to expand the number of local citizens in the workplace, despite concerns that the process, known as Emiratisation, was leading to arbitrary dismissals and insecurity among non-Emirati staff. According to one estimate, only about 10 percent of working journalists in 2010 were native Emiratis. The NMC-supported Journalist Association allocated 1 million dirhams (\$270,000) for training and developing Emiratis' capacity in the field.

About 85 percent of the UAE population had regular access to the internet in 2012. There are two internet service providers, Etisalat and Du, both of which are owned and operated by state corporations. Despite broad restrictions, a majority of news consumers in Dubai rely on the internet, including blogs and news forums, to obtain information, according to the Dubai Press Club's *Arab Media Outlook 2009-2013 report*. *The UAE has* an extremely high mobile-telephone penetration rate, making such devices one of the most popular ways to receive news content.

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