

Lebanon

 freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2014/lebanon

Freedom of the Press

Lebanon's media environment remained among the freest in the region in 2013. However, violence from the conflict in Syria repeatedly spilled over into Lebanon during the year, affecting journalists' ability to cover the news. Lebanon's own political tensions also made reporting difficult. Journalists covering bombings, clashes, and other news events were beaten, detained, or had their equipment confiscated on several occasions. One journalist was sentenced to jail by a military court, and several others were summoned to security offices for questioning.

The constitution provides for freedom of the press, but vague laws prohibiting the publication of news deemed to contravene "national ethics" or trample "religious feelings" remain on the books. Journalists are also prohibited from insulting the head of state or foreign leaders, and those charged with press offenses may be prosecuted either in a military tribunal or a special publications court. Lebanese journalists complain that the media laws are chaotic, contradictory, and broadly worded. Provisions concerning the media can be found in the penal code, the Publications Law, the 1994 Audiovisual Media Law, and the military justice code, giving the government considerable leeway to prosecute journalists at will, though it rarely does so. The Audiovisual Media Law prohibits broadcasting of political or religious gatherings that have not been previously authorized. It also bans "commentary seeking to affect directly or indirectly the well-being of the nation's economy and finances, material that is propagandistic or promotional, or promotes a relationship with Israel." Proposed amendments to the 1962 Press Law put forth in 2009 have not been passed by the national legislature. The amendments include providing greater transparency of media financing and abolishing both jail sentences for journalists convicted of media violations and the licensing system for newspapers, among other proposals.

Legal cases against journalists are relatively rare. However, in November, a military tribunal sentenced Rami Aysha, a Lebanese-Palestinian freelance journalist, to six months behind bars after being convicted of purchasing firearms. The sentence was reduced to two weeks in December. Aysha was detained with two members of Lebanese Shiite militant group Hezbollah in August 2012 while investigating a story on arms smuggling into Syria. The Hezbollah television station, Al-Manar, confirmed that Aysha was working as a journalist at the time of his arrest. Although the prosecutor recommended the charges be dismissed, the tribunal opted to reduce the sentence instead.

A draft law on access to information that was proposed in 2009 would allow citizens to request documents and data held by public bodies. While it was debated in the parliament in October 2012, it still had not been approved at the end of 2013. The absence of such a law continued to impede accurate reporting on government activities and corruption.

Created by the 1994 Audiovisual Law, the National Audio-Visual Council (NAVC) is responsible for the licensing of media outlets. Broadcast licenses are allocated to ensure that each of the country's sectarian groups is represented in the media landscape. After initially handing out six new licenses to sectarian groups, the council has limited new licenses with an emphasis on maintaining sectarian balance in the country's media. The 1962 Press Law limits the number of political dailies to 110, and requires the minister of information to withdraw unused licenses for use by other prospective applicants. However, these licenses are rarely withdrawn and instead owners of unused licenses often sell them for an exorbitant amount, making the establishment of licensed new media outlets cost-prohibitive. The Ministry of

Information (MOI) and the NAVC have the right not to renew licenses for radio and television, and also to require foreign publications to register for a license prior to distribution in the country. In 2012, the Audiovisual Workers' Union was established, and the Journalists' Union membership was expanded, strengthening the professional support network for the media sector.

The MOI failed to pass a bill in 2012 that would have allowed the government to restrict online expression, but bloggers and journalists who published online or posted to social media still faced interrogations from the security forces. The Cybercrime and Intellectual Property Rights Bureau, which was created in 2006 and made part of the Internal Security Forces (ISF), interrogated several journalists for posts made on Twitter, Facebook, or blogs despite the Press and Publications law stipulating that investigations of journalists be conducted by the courts, not the security apparatus. In one instance, a political writer was summoned by the ISF for questioning after posting a criticism of the Maronite Patriarch on Facebook. In another instance, a journalist was summoned for questioning after posting an article on his blog accusing politician and former general Samir Geagea of war crimes.

The Directorate of General Security (SG) is authorized to censor all foreign magazines, books, and films before they are distributed, as well as pornography and political or religious material that is deemed a threat to the national security of either Lebanon or Syria. The French magazine *VSD* was prevented from being sold in March, as the issue published an article about homosexuality and the Vatican.

Lebanon's media environment is broad and varied. News content typically reflects the political viewpoints of the media outlet's owners. Journalists tend to have access to politicians whose sectarian affiliation or political point of view aligns with the outlet they work for. Similarly, politicians often seek out journalists working for publications whose politics or confessional affiliation aligns with their own. The result is fragmented and biased coverage of events from multiple outlets. Many Lebanese journalists practice self-censorship due to the ambiguous media laws as well as pressure from owners. However, the spread of unregulated online media and blogging has added to media diversity, particularly as news websites have gained in popularity and generated advertising revenue.

Media watchdog groups reported multiple threats and attacks against journalists throughout the year. Much of the violence was at the hands of angry demonstrators or carried out by unknown gunmen, with security forces failing to intervene, leaving perpetrators to act with impunity. Shots were fired at journalists covering events on multiple occasions. Hezbollah forces also detained journalists several times. In some cases, security forces also reportedly assaulted journalists. In November 2013, violence erupted outside a Lebanese customs office between security forces and journalists from New TV who were reporting on corruption among customs officials. In March 2013, a Spanish journalist was denied entry into Lebanon and the General Security detained an Al-Arabiya correspondent for seven hours—both because their passports bore stamps from the Free Syrian Army.

Lebanon's media landscape includes more than a dozen privately owned daily newspapers in English, Arabic, and French, and more than 1,500 weekly and monthly periodicals. However, news outlets are affiliated with religious or ethnic groups and politicians or prominent families own the media companies. The two largest Arabic-language dailies are *As-Safir* and *An-Nahar*, owned by Shiite Muslim and Maronite Christian families, respectively. There are nine television stations, two digital cable companies, and about 40 radio stations that are similarly linked to sectarian groups. Lebanese media observers estimate the amount of money earned through advertisements is inadequate to fund most media outlets. Instead, newspapers and television stations rely on political money or sell company shares to well-connected individuals, despite a ban on the receipt of money from sources other than advertising or production. The Audiovisual Law allows the minister of information to ask the Court of Publications to temporarily ban a station or revoke its license if it receives money from other sources. The Choueiri Group, a marketing and advertising company, manages advertising for 25 satellite channels, 15 print publications, and 10 radio

stations, as well as web portals, cinema, and billboard advertising. *Executive Magazine*, a Lebanese business monthly, estimated that the group controls as much as 70 percent of the advertising in Lebanon.

Lebanese law does not restrict access to the internet. Approximately 71 percent of the Lebanese population had access to the medium in 2013. Use of digital and social media to disseminate and share news and information is widespread.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Partly Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

53

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

18

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

21

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

14