

Laos

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Freedom of the Press

Despite recent improvements to the telecommunications infrastructure, press freedom in Laos remained highly restricted in 2013. Article 44 of the 1991 constitution guarantees freedom of the press, but in practice the government controls nearly all print and broadcast news. In collaboration with international donors, the country passed a new press law in 2008, though to date it has had little practical effect on conditions for journalists. Under the criminal code, individuals may be jailed for up to one year for reporting news that “weakens the state” or importing a publication that is “contrary to national culture.” Defamation and misinformation are criminal offenses, carrying lengthy prison terms and even the possibility of execution. However, due to high levels of official censorship and self-censorship, legal cases against media personnel are extremely rare.

In October 2013, the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications announced its intention to impose new social-media regulations modeled on regulatory regimes used in China and Vietnam, two of the most repressive online environments in Asia. According to the director general of the ministry’s E-Government Center, users could face punishment under the new regulations for posting “inaccurate” or “inappropriate” information. The move came in response to a flurry of Facebook activity and criticism that followed the October 16 crash of a Lao Airlines plane that killed 49 people. While the government said the regulations would be in place by the end of 2013, it was still drafting the policy at year’s end.

There is no separate law mandating access to official information, and in practice, the authorities restrict media access to information sources.

The country’s media remain under the tight control of the ruling Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP). Media personnel are appointed mostly from within the LPRP, and publications must be approved by the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism (MICT). Officials provide content guidelines for newspapers, postpublication monitoring of content is routine, and outlets can be penalized for covering issues that fall outside the guidelines. As a result, journalists write primarily about anodyne topics, and the vast majority practice self-censorship. Press releases on noncontroversial activities by international organizations and foreign missions are usually published with minimal edits. Some stories on sensitive social issues and corruption that were previously not broached have appeared in recent years, though the media often fail to cover contentious development issues or land disputes. In 2012, the MICT ordered the country’s first call-in radio show off the air after it raised the issue of land seizures.

The censorship and self-censorship mean that physical attacks and extralegal intimidation aimed at journalists are rare. Foreign journalists are usually permitted to enter Laos and travel to cover specific stories, though they face significant barriers in establishing a permanent presence in the country.

The number of media outlets continues to grow. There are around 24 regularly printed newspapers, all government affiliated. Privately owned magazines, primarily from Chinese-backed companies, have emerged in recent years to cover general interest, health, and other nonpolitical issues. Newspaper and other print media circulation figures remain extremely weak due to low literacy rates and an insufficient distribution infrastructure outside the capital, Vientiane. The government is eager to boost Laos’s information and communication technology capabilities, including for isolated rural populations, and advancements in this sector have resulted in an increase in television and radio stations. China and

Vietnam have provided much of the investment in the broadcast infrastructure. Nearly all 32 television stations and 44 radio stations are government run, though companies are increasingly permitted to buy airtime and run privately produced content. A number of citizens access Thai television and radio, and wealthier individuals have access to cable and satellite television. A few community radio programs, covering local interest stories along with health and social issues, have sprung up with the help of international development organizations. Foreign television and radio services, such as Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, broadcast in Laos without disruptions.

Internet penetration stood at nearly 13 percent of the population in 2013, but the government is concerned that the youth population is increasingly using social media to discuss sensitive political and social issues. Facebook accounts have grown from 60,000 in 2011 to 400,000 in 2013. Though the government's technical ability to monitor internet usage is limited, its efforts to consolidate internet infrastructure into a single gateway, along with the promised social-media regulations, signal an interest in adopting the censorship policies and technologies of the country's more repressive neighbors, Vietnam and China.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Not Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

84

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

26

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

33

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

25