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Freedom Of The Press - Belize (2011)

Status: Free
Legal Environment: 8
Political Environment: 9
Economic Environment: 6
Total Score: 23

The constitution protects the right to freedom of expression, although there are several legal limitations to that right. The government may impose a fine of up to US\$2,500 and imprison for up to three years anyone who questions the financial disclosures of public officials. Newspapers are subject to criminal defamation laws, and the Belize Broadcasting Authority holds the right to preview broadcasts with political content and remove material it deems libelous. There is increasing tension between the media and the government. According to local reports, in December 2010 the government sent out a press release announcing that it was "suspending normal relations with Channel 5," which included forbidding government officials from supplying the channel with any information or interviews. Channel 5 is Belize's premier television station and is watched by a large percentage of the population, and the station had tackled sensitive topics such as alleged illegal immigration. After an outcry by local groups, however, the cabinet decided to rescind this decision at year's end.

While there are no daily newspapers in Belize, there is a vibrant market for weeklies. Papers are privately owned, with two weeklies directly affiliated with political parties. In general, reporting covers a wide range of opinions. Government-operated radio was privatized in 1998, and today there are 8 television stations and 33 licensed radio stations. The People's United Party and the United Democratic Party both have radio stations with which they are affiliated. Concerns over government control of the broadcast industry continues after the 2009 "nationalization" of Belize Telemedia, the country's leading private telecommunications provider, in which the owners allegedly were offered no compensation. The opposition People's United Party branded the action an "expropriation." While the government does not restrict internet access or use, lack of infrastructure and high costs limited usage to 14 percent of the population in 2010.