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## Freedom Of The Press - South Korea (2011)

**Status: Partly Free**  
**Legal Environment: 9**  
**Political Environment: 14**  
**Economic Environment: 9**  
**Total Score: 32**

**Status change explanation:** South Korea declined from Free to Partly Free to reflect an increase in official censorship, particularly of online content, as well as the government's attempt to influence media outlets' news and information content. Over the past several years, an increasing number of online comments have been removed for expressing either pro-North Korean or anti-South Korean views. The current conservative government has also interfered in the management of major broadcast media, with allies of President Lee Myung-bak receiving senior posts at large media companies over the objections of journalists.

Freedom of the press is guaranteed under South Korean law and is generally respected in practice. However, despite having had one of the freest media environments in Asia, since the inauguration of President Lee Myung-bak in 2008 South Korea has experienced a noticeable decline in freedom of expression for both journalists and the general public. Though the government censors films for sex and violence, censorship of the media is against the law. However, Article 7 of the 1948 National Security Law allows imprisonment for praising or expressing sympathy for North Korea. As political tensions with neighboring North Korea have intensified—leading in several cases to armed engagement and skirmishes—officials appear to have become more concerned about the expression of pro-North Korean sentiments, particularly online. In 2010, more than 20 people were booked for making pro-North Korean comments, while over 40,000 pro-North Korean online posts were deleted by operators after pressure from police, more than 100 times the number of deletions five years ago. The government has also blocked access to 13 social networking accounts owned by the North Korean government. Interacting with North Korea's new Twitter account can lead to up to three years in jail.

Defamation remains a criminal offense, and charges are occasionally threatened or brought against those journalists who express critical views. In June 2009, four producers and a writer for the television program "PD Notebook" were indicted on defamation charges for a 2008 report on U.S. beef imports that sparked weeks of protests; the accused faced five-year prison sentences, but were exonerated in January 2010. A Broadcasting Act passed in 2009, which allows investment by conglomerates and newspaper companies in the broadcasting sector, raised fears that media diversity could be compromised through increased cross-ownership.

The government has also been accused of seeking to extend its influence over several state-controlled broadcast media companies. Since Lee's inauguration, former presidential aides and advisers have been appointed to key positions at a

number of major media companies over the objections of journalists who have sought to maintain those broadcasters' editorial independence. Under the Lee administration, approximately 160 journalists have been penalized for writing critical reports about government policies, as well as for their roles in advocating for press freedom since 2008. At the end of 2010, eight journalists remained dismissed from their positions at the YTN station and the public Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) network for their participation in similar acts. The Seoul District Court ruled in November 2009 that the dismissals were an abuse of management's disciplinary discretion. The court ordered YTN to reinstate six of its employees, but the station has failed to comply.

Otherwise, South Korea has a vibrant and diverse media, with numerous cable, terrestrial, and satellite television stations and more than 100 daily newspapers in Korean and English. Many newspapers are controlled by larger industrial conglomerates and also depend on large corporations for their advertising revenue. There are both public and private radio and television stations, including an American Forces Network for the U.S. military. The public Korea Broadcasting System (KBS) and MBC networks maintain the highest viewership. According to Reporters Without Borders, following the March 2010 torpedoing of a South Korean warship, allegedly by North Korea, the South Korean government resumed the dissemination of propagandistic messages via radio.

Approximately 84 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2010, and a significant number of young people get their news exclusively from online sources. South Korean online media are especially vigorous and innovative. For example, an interactive internet news site called OhMyNews, launched in 2000, allows citizens to submit their own news articles for immediate publication on the site. Aside from pro-North Korean content, the internet is generally unrestricted by regulators, but the government requires all website operators to indicate whether their sites might be harmful to youth. In a unique case in 2009, a blogger, Park Dae-sung, who went by the alias "Minerva," was arrested on the charges of spreading online rumors that the prosecution claimed led to dollar hoarding, prompting the government to inject \$2 billion to stabilize the currency market. The prosecution had sought an 18-month prison term, but Park was acquitted by the Seoul Central District Court.