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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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South Korea

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South Korea's media environment has experienced some setbacks since President Lee Myung-bak took office in 2008, and the Lee administration's attempts to censor online content and restrict access to news from North Korea under its strict interpretation of the 1948 National Security Law continued to raise concerns among domestic and international media advocacy groups during 2012. However, these issues drew increased attention during the run-up to the December 2012 presidential election, with political parties and candidates proposing new initiatives to strengthen press freedom. Park Geun-hye of the conservative Saenuri Party won the contest, becoming the first female president in the country's history.

While freedom of the press is guaranteed by the constitution and generally respected in practice, Article 7 of the National Security Law prescribes imprisonment for praising or expressing sympathy for North Korea. Defamation is a criminal offense, and charges are occasionally threatened or brought against reporters or commentators who criticize the government. Chung Bong-ju, one of

South Korea's most popular political commentators, served a one-year jail term after being convicted in late 2011 of spreading false rumors about Lee's connection to alleged stock fraud.

Due to rising political tensions with North Korea, as well as the death of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in December 2011, the Lee administration appeared to grow more concerned about the expression of pro-North Korean sentiment, particularly online. According to the Korea Communications Standards Commission (KCSC), an official body responsible for monitoring online content, the number of South Korean websites or social media accounts shut down for pro-North Korean content rose from 10 in 2009 to 304 in 2011, and then decreased slightly to 267 in 2012. About 14,430 web posts were deleted by the police in 2009 for "threatening national security by praising North Korea, and denouncing the U.S. and the (South Korean) government." That number increased to over 67,000 in 2011, and then decreased to 12,921 in 2012. In January 2012, Park Jung-geun, a 24-year-old photographer and blogger who reposted messages from the North Korean government's Twitter account, was arrested on charges of violating the National Security Law. While Park said his Twitter posts were meant to lampoon the North Korean regime, prosecutors charged that, regardless of his intention, his account had served as a vehicle for spreading the North's propaganda. Park was given a 10-month suspended jail sentence in November 2012.

The Lee government was accused of inappropriately seeking to extend its influence over several state-controlled broadcast media companies. Former presidential aides and advisers were also appointed to key positions at a number of private media companies during Lee's tenure, despite the objections of journalists seeking to maintain the broadcasters' editorial independence. More than 180 journalists have been penalized since 2008 for writing critical reports about government policies, as well as for advocating press freedom. At the end of January 2012, over 700 employees from the privately owned Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) went on strike, claiming that the network president had interfered with fair reporting. The strike expanded to other networks with similar management concerns, including approximately 650 employees at South Korea's largest station, the public Korea Broadcasting System (KBS). The strike officially ended in July, though journalists at both MBC and KBS remained in talks regarding management's political interference in reporting.

South Korea has a vibrant and diverse media sector, with numerous cable, terrestrial, and satellite television stations and more than 100 daily newspapers in Korean and English. Many newspapers are controlled by large industrial conglomerates and depend on major corporations for their advertising revenue. The television and radio sectors feature both public and private outlets, including an American Forces Network for the U.S. military. Five new cable television channels—four general-programming stations and one all-news channel—were launched in December 2011, two and a half years after the government revised a set of media laws to allow investment by conglomerates and newspaper companies in the broadcasting sector. These new channels are expected to affect the market dominance of KBS, MBC, and Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS), all of which had previously held exclusive rights to offer general programming, ranging from news and documentaries to sports and entertainment shows.

Approximately 84 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2012, and a significant number of young people get their news exclusively from online sources. South Korean online media are especially vigorous and innovative. Aside from pro-North Korean content, the internet is generally unrestricted, but the government requires all website operators to indicate whether their sites might be harmful to youth.

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