

Decline in press freedom experienced in key countries - report

WASHINGTON: The number of people worldwide with access to free and independent media declined to its lowest level in over a decade, according a Freedom House study released yesterday, 2 May 2011. The report, *Freedom of the Press 2011: A global survey of media independence*, found that a number of key countries experienced significant declines, producing a global landscape in which only one in six people live in countries with a press that is designated Free.



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A key country, Mexico, slipped into the Not Free category in 2010 as a result of violence associated with drug trafficking that has led to a dramatic increase in attacks on journalists, rising levels of self-censorship and impunity, and overt attempts by non-state actors to control and guide the news agenda.

Substantial decline in MENA region

A substantial decline took place in the Middle East and North Africa region. Due to a severe crackdown preceding the November 2010 parliamentary elections, Egypt declined to Not Free, while smaller setbacks were noted in Iran, Iraq, Morocco, and Yemen. The deterioration in the region, which was already restrictive in terms of media freedom, demonstrates the centrality of freedom of expression to broader democratic rights, and may have contributed to the calls for reform that swept through a number of countries in early 2011.

Balancing the declines were notable improvements in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of the former Soviet Union, many of which came as a result of legal and regulatory reforms. Impressive openings were registered in Guinea, Niger, and Moldova, while smaller positive steps were noted in Colombia, Georgia, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Senegal, and Zimbabwe.

"A country where journalists cannot report freely without fear of interference, by the government or other actors, has little hope of achieving or maintaining true democracy," said David J. Kramer, executive director of Freedom House. "While we have unfortunately come to expect restrictive and dangerous environments for journalists in non-democratic regimes like those in the Middle East and the former Soviet Union, we are particularly troubled this year by declines in young or faltering democracies like Mexico, Hungary, and Thailand."

Of the 196 countries and territories assessed during 2010, a total of 68 (35%) were rated Free, 65 (33%) were rated Partly Free, and 63 (32%) were rated Not Free. The report also noted several key trends driving the ongoing threats to media freedom:

- Misuse of licensing and regulatory frameworks has emerged as a key method of control. Authoritarian regimes have increasingly used bogus legalistic maneuvers to narrow the space for independent broadcasting, effectively countering an earlier trend of growth in the number of private radio and television outlets.
- Repressive governments have intensified efforts to exert control over new means of communication - including satellite television, the internet, and mobile telephones - as well as the news outlets that employ them. Some democratic and semi-democratic states also moved to impose additional restrictions on the internet, including South Korea and Thailand, which increased censorship of online content.
- Worsening violence against the press and impunity for such crimes are forcing journalists into self-censorship or exile. The level of violence and physical harassment directed at the press by both official and non-state actors remains a key concern. These attacks have a chilling effect on the profession, and the failure to punish or even seriously investigate crimes against journalists has reached scandalous proportions.

Five-year trends

The survey recorded a steady deterioration in media freedom from 2005 to 2010, and the trend has affected every region of the world. However, the most pronounced setbacks have occurred in Hispanic America, led by a constriction of media space in a number of Andean countries, as well as in both democracies and authoritarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Over the past five years, countries with significant declines have outnumbered those with similarly large gains by a more than two-to-one margin. Many of these downturns occurred in emerging democracies that were tested by political upheaval, polarisation, coups, or outright civil war, such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Fiji, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Others have taken place in countries with governments moving in a more deeply authoritarian direction, such as Iran, Russia, and Venezuela.

The global trend of decline seems to have slowed in the latest year under review. Although prospects for an outright reversal of the negative trend were enhanced in early 2011 by the protest movements that swept through several countries in the Middle East and North Africa, it remains unclear whether the near equilibrium between gains and declines in 2010 will tip toward an overall global improvement in 2011.

"In 2010, we saw how readily governments in the Middle East turned to repression of the media," noted Karin Deutsch Karlekar, managing editor of the study. "For the recent political openings to be consolidated, broad and sustained reforms of the media sector need to be swiftly implemented. Otherwise, this window of opportunity will be lost."

Key regional findings

The Americas:

There were two negative status changes in the region, with Honduras and Mexico joining the ranks of Not Free countries, as well as significant numerical declines in Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador. Not since 2006 have so many countries in the region been designated Not Free. The regional average score worsened compared with 2009, with the bulk of the decline occurring in the political and economic categories. Colombia proved to be a bright spot due to improvements in combating impunity.

Asia-Pacific:

A modest decline in the average score for the Asia-Pacific region was driven by negative status changes, as South Korea moved from Free to Partly Free and Thailand from Partly Free to Not Free. Cambodia, Fiji, India, and Vanuatu also saw score declines, while Bangladesh and the Philippines registered modest improvements. This region also continues to be

home to two of the survey's poorest performers, Burma and North Korea, and the world's largest poor performer, China, where a crackdown on free expression continued in 2010.

Central and Eastern Europe/Former Soviet Union:

The regional average score remained unchanged for 2010. However, this stasis masked movement in the two main sub-regions. The better-performing sub-region of Central and Eastern Europe showed an overall decline, while the more repressive non-Baltic former Soviet Union benefited from a dramatic opening in Moldova and smaller positive steps in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. In both sub-regions, change was largely concentrated in the political category. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Russia remain countries of concern, while significant negative trends emerged in Hungary and Ukraine.

Middle East and North Africa:

The regional average score suffered the most dramatic deterioration of any region. Egypt was downgraded from Partly Free to Not Free, and scores for Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Morocco, and Yemen also declined. Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Tunisia continued to rank among the worst countries in the world for media independence and press freedom.

Sub-Saharan Africa:

A steep decline in sub-Saharan Africa's regional average score in 2009 was followed in 2010 by the largest numerical improvement of any region. Guinea, Liberia, and Niger all saw status improvements from Not Free to Partly Free, and significant score improvements occurred in Kenya, Mauritania, Senegal, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. However, deterioration was noted in Angola, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, and Sudan.

Western Europe:

In a change from recent years, the regional average score showed the second-largest decline of any region, led by negative developments in Denmark, Iceland, and Turkey. The United Kingdom remains a concern due to its expansive libel laws, while heavy media concentration and official interference in state-owned outlets continues to hold Italy at Partly Free.

Worst of the worst

The world's 10 worst-rated countries are Belarus, Burma, Cuba, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Iran, Libya, North Korea, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. In these states, independent media are either non-existent or barely able to operate, the press acts as a mouthpiece for the regime, citizens' access to unbiased information is severely limited, and dissent is crushed through imprisonment, torture, and other forms of repression.

View the [full Freedom House *Freedom of the Press 2011* report](#).

View the [Freedom House Map of Press Freedom 2011](#).

Freedom House is an independent watchdog organisation that supports democratic change, monitors the status of freedom around the world, and advocates for democracy and human rights. For more information on Freedom House, go to www.freedomhouse.org.

World Press Freedom Day webcast and webchat series

CO.NX, the organisation that connects the world through webchats, is currently hosting a World Press Freedom Day webcast and webchat series (1-3 May). Hosted in the US, this year's theme is "21st Century Media: New frontiers, new barriers", following on Secretary Hillary Clinton's commitment to internet freedom and acknowledging the increasingly important role of social media and citizen reporters.

To access the World Press Freedom Day webcast and webchat series, go to <http://iipconx.org>. Follow Prof Guy Berger

([@guyberger](#)) and The Daily Maverick's deputy editor Phillip de Wet ([@phillipdewet](#)) who are tweeting from the conference.

View the report by Berger, [*Media in Africa 20 Years On: Our past, present and future*](#), commissioned by the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA).

Read more on [World Press Freedom Day](#) on Wikipedia.

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>