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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS 2008

Maldives

Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 23

Political Environment: 25

Economic Environment: 18

Total Score: 66

Continuing a trend from previous years, in 2007, a modest expansion of media diversity and public debate was balanced by official harassment of journalists. Freedom of expression and of the press are not provided for in the constitution and are often not respected by the government in practice. Though regulations from January 2007 dramatically reduced damages for defamation, the legal environment remains harsh. The penal code bans speech or actions that could “arouse people against the government”; a 1968 law prohibits speech considered libelous, inimical to Islam, or a threat to national security; regulations make editors responsible for the content of material they publish; and authorities are empowered by law to shut newspapers and sanction journalists for articles containing unfounded criticism of the government. The Information Ministry, which is spearheading reform efforts, submitted four media-related bills to Parliament in February 2006, including bills on freedom of information, press freedom, a proposed Media Council, and registration of print media. Though discussion continued on them in the Majlis throughout 2007, none had passed by year’s end and two had been withdrawn. In a positive development, the Maldives Media Association, which includes representatives from both pro-opposition and state-run media, began operating in October.

Journalists, particularly those who cover demonstrations or who write critical stories, continue to be subject to arrest or other forms of harassment. In this environment, many journalists practice self-censorship and do not scrutinize official policies. During the year, reporters and photographers from both pro-opposition and state-owned media were arrested while covering protests, illegal prayer meetings, and a taxi driver strike. In April, Ibrahim Mohamed, a reporter for the pro-government *Miadhu* newspaper was held by police for 48 hours after taking photographs of police beating opposition Maldivian Democratic Party leader Mohamed Nasheed. Several journalists were also detained during a demonstration outside a government-sponsored event for World Press Freedom Day in May. Due to *Minivan’s* overtly anti-government stance, its management and

employees have been particularly targeted for official intimidation. In January 2007, Phillip Wellman a foreign reporter for the English-language *Minivan News* website was expelled and banned for two years. Journalist Abdullah Saeed continued to serve a long prison sentence after being convicted in 2006 of apparently fabricated drug charges. In July, *Minivan Daily* journalist Ali Rasheed was arrested for 43 days, several weeks after being interviewed for a program on the English-language *Al-Jazeera*. Following his release he was sentenced in absentia to life in prison on alleged drug charges, but at year's end was not in custody. In a positive development, the government dropped some charges against *Minivan Daily* editor Aminath Najeeb and deputy editor Nazim Sattar, though at year's end, Najeeb still faced potential jail time on charges of "disobedience to order."

Most broadcast media continue to be government owned and operated, and while these outlets have recently provided more diverse and vigorous coverage, they continue to reflect pro-government views. Since a 2005 law liberalized the registration process, six daily newspapers, 15 magazines and 70 other publications have been registered. Most of these are owned by those connected to the government, but some publications, such as the weekly *Adduvas* and the newly registered *Jazeera* and *Hamma*, have generally adopted a more critical, balanced tone. The pro-opposition *Minivan Daily*, which started as an online publication, now circulates a print version in the Maldives. In 2007, the country's first private broadcasters—Capital FM radio, DhiFM radio and Atoll TV—were launched; however, their independence remained limited because operating licenses were granted via individual agreements with the government rather than through reformed broadcasting legislation. The more overtly anti-government Minivan radio was unable to obtain a frequency due to the prohibitive costs of registering. Although the country's sole internet service provider is state owned, the internet is generally not restricted, though the pro-opposition Dhivehi Observer website remained blocked. The Internet was accessed by less than 7 percent of the population in 2007.