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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS 2008

Taiwan

Status: Free

Legal Environment: 7

Political Environment: 7

Economic Environment: 6

Total Score: 20

Taiwan has the freest media environment in East Asia due to its commitment to judicial independence, economic freedom, and a highly competitive media market. The constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, and the government generally respects these rights in practice. Taiwanese media are vigorous and lively, regularly criticizing government policy and top officials. Reports on high-level corruption were particularly common in 2007, with scandals implicating President Chen Shui Bian, his family members and several opposition politicians a key topic of coverage. Media observers have raised concerns, however, over a rise in sensationalism and potential loss of quality. During the year, the National Communications Commission (NCC) fined several television stations after they ran footage later found to have been misrepresenting events. While publications from mainland China are subject to screening and potential import bans by the Government Information Office (GIO), a wide variety of materials from the PRC were available in stores, as well as on the internet.

Physical violence against journalists is rare and both local and foreign reporters are able to cover news freely. In one incident in March 2007, a controversy erupted surrounding an Associated Press (AP) story in which Taiwan's Vice President Annette Lu was referred to using derogatory terms originating with the PRC government. Initially the GIO announced that the responsible reporter's visa would be revoked, but reversed its position the following day; AP later interviewed Lu, providing an opportunity for her to counter the views expressed in the original article. In another incident related to media certification, international media watchdogs criticized the United Nations for barring accreditation to Taiwanese journalists seeking to cover the World Health Assembly (WHA) in Geneva in May 2007. Prior to 2004, Taiwanese journalists had reportedly been permitted to cover the WHA, but this authorization was withdrawn under pressure from Beijing.

Taiwan has over 360 privately owned newspapers, and numerous radio stations, including the English-language International Community Radio Taipei. Satellite television is broadcast on 143 channels. In 2005 cable television was available to 85

percent of the population, the highest cable viewership in Asia. According to a study conducted by Shih Hsin University in Taipei, 95 percent of Taiwanese watch television and 75 percent read newspapers. Print media are completely independent, but electronic media and broadcast television stations had previously been subject to government influence through the authority of the GIO to regulate programming and licensing. In a positive development, that arrangement ended in early 2006, when the NCC was established. The NCC's independence was subsequently questioned, however, and provisions of its founding legislation were declared unconstitutional by the Council of Grand Justices in June 2006 because of requirements for partisan membership selection. Following the legislature's amendment of the law in December 2007, new appointments are to be made in 2008 by the premier, with parliamentary approval. Legislation approved in 2003 barred the government and political party officials from holding positions in broadcast media companies and required government entities and political parties to divest themselves of all radio and broadcast companies. The government refrains from restricting internet access, which is currently accessed by nearly 70 percent of the population. However, several nongovernmental organizations claimed that law enforcement agencies monitored chat-room and bulletin-board exchanges among adults in order to identify and prosecute individuals posting sexually suggestive messages.