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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS 2008

Algeria

Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 22

Political Environment: 23

Economic Environment: 17

Total Score: 62

While the Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, the government used legal and extralegal means to harass and restrict the media. A state of emergency decreed in 1992 remained in effect, authorizing the government to legally penalize any speech deemed as threatening to state or public order. In addition, a February 2006 presidential decree provides up to five years imprisonment for any criticism of the conduct of the security forces during the country's civil conflict of the 1990s. Laws from the 1990 communication law were amended in 2001 to criminalize defamation of the president, parliament, judiciary, or the military, while the penal code imposes penalties ranging from fines to prison terms of up to two years for defamation of high government posts or any authority of public order. In May 2006, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika pardoned journalists sentenced to prison terms; however, no efforts have been made to decriminalize press offenses. While the number of defamation and legal charges brought against journalists declined from previous years, the government continued to use these laws to threaten and arrest journalists, promoting self-censorship among members of the press and media owners. Since 2002, Yasser Abdelhai of the daily *Echourok el-Youmi* has faced 26 defamation cases for his critical reporting. In 2007, he was ordered to pay 4 million dinars (US\$56,000) before the 15th of March for damages relating to four separate cases. Managing editor Ali Fodil and journalist Naïla Berrahal for *Echourok el-Youmi* lost an appeal on April 4 and received suspended sentences of six months imprisonment and fines of 500,000 dinars (US\$7,400) for 2006 convictions of defaming Libyan leader Muammar al-Qadhafi and endangering the security of the Algerian and Libyan states. On May 27, Omar Belhouchet, editor of the daily *El Watan*, and columnist Chawki Amari were sentenced to two months in jail and fined one million dinars (US\$14,000) in a case of libel brought by the region's prefect for comments published in *El Watan* in June 2006. Anis Rahmani, editor of *Echourok el-Youmi*, and journalist Naïla Berrahal were the target of death threats in June from individuals claiming to be affiliated with al-Qaeda who objected to reporting considered to be against al-Qaeda and Islam. In August,

Rahmani was informed by state security services that a “terrorist” in custody confirmed that the editor was indeed a target. Nouredine Boukraa of the daily *Ennahar* was arrested on November 14 after publishing an article alleging corruption within the local security services of Annaba, and less than a week later, Ouahid Oussama, correspondent for the daily *Al Bilad* faced defamation charges brought by the Department of Education of Djelfa for an article criticizing the education system.

Despite such persistent government harassment, Algerian journalists aggressively cover government and international affairs and offer diverse opinions and political commentary. Some topics, however, are more sensitive and subject to censorship and legal repercussions. Coverage of issues relating to national security and terrorism is still highly restricted. Journalists were pressured not to report on the 2007 bomb attacks in the country, and *El Watan* correspondent Jamal Belkadi was charged with “crossing a security barrier” in May for taking photos of the site of the attacks in Constantine. Political parties and candidates reportedly received equal access to broadcast media in the campaign periods leading up to both the multiparty parliamentary elections of May 17th and the November 29th multiparty local elections. However, outside of election periods, opposition parties are rarely permitted access to radio or television.

Algeria allowed for the licensing of private newspapers in 1990, and there are currently more than 100 private daily and weekly newspapers, presenting a variety of political perspectives. The government uses its control over the country’s printing presses and a state advertising agency to influence the independent print media. On several occasions, authorities have punished critical newspapers by suddenly demanding payment for debts owed to the state printer. While radio and television are completely government-owned, widespread satellite dishes provide alternate sources of information such as popular Pan-Arab stations like Al-Jazeera and European-based channels. Non-Berber language channels increasingly introduced programming in Tamazight (the Amazigh or Berber language), including television and radio advertisements. The government exercises little control over the Internet, but online news is not a major source of information for most Algerians. In 2007, 7.4 percent of Algeria’s population accessed the Internet, which reflected a 4,820 percent increase since the year 2000. The government, however, does monitor email and Internet chat rooms. Internet service providers are legally liable for website content on their sites and bloggers are not immune to defamation charges. On June 11, blog administrator Abdulsalam Baroudi was fined 10,000 dinars (US\$148) for charges brought by the Director of Religious Affairs for posting defamatory material on his blog in February.