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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS 2008

Libya

Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 29

Political Environment: 36

Economic Environment: 29

Total Score: 94

Libya's press remains one of the most tightly controlled in the world. Despite continued efforts on the part of the regime to depict the country as a changed nation, little progress has been made to advance political rights or civil liberties. Libyan law provides for freedom of speech and of the press within the confines of the "principles of the Revolution." However, the government severely limits the rights of the media, and journalists who violate the harsh press codes can be imprisoned or sentenced to death. The press avoids publishing any material that could be deemed offensive or threatening particularly to Islam, national security, territorial integrity, or any criticism of Colonel Muammar Qaddafi. Those who criticize the government from outside the country, such as in foreign publications or Internet websites may be arrested upon entering Libya. A vast network of secret police and informers exists to ensure that state critics are known to the regime.

A well-known writer and critic of the Libyan government, Jamal al-Haji, was arrested on February 16 along with 11 other men who were planning a peaceful demonstration in Tripoli to commemorate the one year anniversary of the February 2006 clash between police and protestors in which 11 people were killed. According to Human Rights Watch, the twelve men were accused of planning to overthrow the government, arms possession, and meeting with an official from a foreign government. If convicted, they could face the death penalty. While Al-Haji is a Danish citizen, Libyan officials have refused to allow visits from the Danish government. Human Rights Watch reported that a few days before his arrest, Al-Haji wrote an article that called for "freedom, democracy, a constitutional state, and law." According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), three suspects were sentenced to death in July for the 2005 murder of journalist Daif al-Ghazal al-Shuhaibi. Al-Ghazal had worked for the state-owned daily *Azahf al-Akhdar* and had contributed to London-based websites focused on Libya. In the months leading up to his death, Al-Ghazal had published online articles critical of the

government. Little information was released on the trial of the three suspects, prompting concerns about the sincerity and veracity of the process.

The Libyan press features praise of the “Brother Leader” Colonel Qaddafi and his policies. Newspapers, television, and radio are almost completely government controlled, and journalists working for official media refrain from criticizing the authorities. As Libya has moved to present a more business friendly face to the outside world, there has been some mild criticism of certain government policies, but this criticism is carefully managed from the top and does not represent spontaneous or sincere opposition. Journalists practice a high degree of self-censorship in all reporting. The General Press Institute (GPI), a branch of the Information Ministry, owns three of the four major Libyan newspapers, while the fourth is owned by the Movement of Revolutionary Committees, a state-supported ideological organization. Broadcast media are also equally controlled by the government and reflects official positions. For the first time since Qadhafi’s rule, ostensibly private media were permitted to operate in 2007. A subsidiary of the Qadhafi Development Foundation, the 1/9 Media Group launched a satellite television station, Al-Libiya, a radio station, and two daily newspapers, *Oea* and *Cyrene*. Popular Pan-Arab satellite television stations such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya do not have local correspondents covering Libya, and no foreign publications were available. Satellite television, on the other hand, was easily accessible and the Internet also served as an alternate source of news. Internet penetration, however, remained relatively low, and only 3.8% of the population used the Internet in 2007. Access is provided by a single government owned service provider. Despite occasional government blocks on political opposition sites, the Internet serves as a medium for Libyans based outside the country to criticize the government. Nevertheless, there have been several cases over the past few years in which the government has harassed or imprisoned Libyans who attacked the government from Europe-based websites.