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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS 2008

Tunisia

Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 27

Political Environment: 30

Economic Environment: 24

Total Score: 81

Despite continued prosecution of critical reporters and tight government control over media outlets, citizens' access to information improved slightly in 2007 due to the increased availability of satellite television and increased internet usage. The constitution guarantees freedom of the press except under "conditions laid down by law," but the government did not respect these rights in practice. The Press Law criminalizes defamation, and those who violate it can be imprisoned and fined. The print media are also required by law to obtain registration from the Ministry of the Interior, while authorities continue to vet and censor newspapers published locally as well as those coming from outside the country. In a move that ended overt censorship, the president signed a law in January 2006 abolishing a procedure whereby all printed material had to receive government approval prior to publication. Nevertheless, self-censorship and government interference in distribution following publication remained routine. According to the U.S. State Department, in one incident in March 2007, the authorities reportedly purchased all copies of the opposition weekly *Al-Mawqif* to prevent circulation of a photo showing Tunisian and Israeli parliament members participating together in a Euro-Mediterranean parliamentary council meeting in Tunis.

Journalists who cross the government's red lines face harassment, beatings and potential imprisonment. According to Reporters Sans Frontieres, at least a dozen journalists were physically attacked by police in 2007. Lotfi Hidouri of *Kalima* and Ayman Rezki of an Italy-based Tunisian satellite channel were reportedly beaten by police and Rezki's boss was briefly detained. In another incident, Slim Boukhdar, a contributor to the London-based *Al Quds al Arabi* and several online news sites was arrested in November 2007 and sentenced the following month to one year in prison on questionable charges of "assaulting a government employee in the exercise of his duty."

Tunisia's print media comprise several private pro-government and government-owned newspapers. Editors of the private media are close associates of President Ben Ali's government and typically praise the leadership and its policies, while the

government reportedly withholds advertising funds from publications that do not provide sufficiently favorable coverage. A small number of independent newspapers, including *Al-Mawqif*, attempt to cover human rights issues and to publish mild criticisms of the government despite the difficult conditions, but their circulation is small owing to financial constraints. Many foreign satellite stations can be viewed in Tunisia, although the government has been known to block France 2 and Al-Jazeera for their negative coverage of Ben Ali.

Nearly 16 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2007, almost double the year before. The government blocks access to a number of sites, particularly those belonging to domestic human rights organizations, opposition groups, and Islamist associations, as well as websites that post material critical of the Tunisian government. In November 2006, a collaborative university study found that the government blocked roughly 10 percent of the 2,000 websites it tested. Punishments for online dissidents are severe and remain similar to those for print and broadcast journalists who publish information deemed objectionable by the government.