

Press Freedom in 2003

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Press freedom worldwide suffered a substantial decline in 2003 as journalists and media outlets faced renewed legal harassment, political pressure, and violence at the hands of both police and security forces and armed insurgent groups. This was the second year in a row that the global level of freedom for news media declined, with the downward trend being particularly noticeable in the Americas and in Central and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union. Of particular concern is the fact that threats to press freedom are occurring not only in authoritarian states but also in faltering democracies and countries in transition. In 2003, even a long-standing democracy such as Italy witnessed a decline in media independence, demonstrating that threats to press freedom are widespread and can emerge in a diverse range of polities.

The annual Freedom House survey of press freedom assesses the degree of print, broadcast, and Internet freedom in every country in the world, analyzing events that take place during each calendar year. Ratings are determined on the basis of an examination of three broad categories: the legal environment in which media operate, political influences on reporting and access to information, and economic pressures on content and the dissemination of news. The survey provides a numerical rating from 0 (the most free) to 100 (the least free) for each country as well as categorizing the level of press freedom as “Free,” “Partly Free,” or “Not Free” based on each country’s numerical rating.

In 2003, out of the 192 countries and 1 territory surveyed, 73 countries (38 percent) were rated Free, while 49 (25 percent) were rated Partly Free and 71 (37 percent) were rated Not Free. The year saw a continued deterioration in press freedom worldwide, as measured by a shift in category. Overall, 5 countries (Bolivia, Bulgaria, Cape Verde, Italy, and the Philippines) declined from Free to Partly Free, while 5 countries (Gabon, Guatemala, Guinea-Bissau, Moldova, and Morocco) declined from Partly Free to Not Free. Only 2 countries—Kenya and Sierra Leone—registered a positive category shift in 2003 from Not Free to Partly Free.

In terms of population, 17 percent of the world’s inhabitants live in countries that enjoy a Free press, while 40 percent have a Partly Free press and 43 percent have a Not Free press. This situation represents a considerable decline over the past two years, as the proportion of the world’s population able to enjoy access to a Free press has declined by 5 percentage points while the percentage of people who live in countries with a Not Free media environment has also increased by 5 percentage points.

Worryingly, much of this deterioration has taken place in newly established electoral democracies, where a free press is one of a number of necessary components in promoting a vibrant, transparent, and accountable environment. In fragile or emerging democracies, backsliding on a commitment to uphold press freedom can often take place as civic institutions struggle to take root and new leaders unused to scrutiny clamp down on critical or dissenting voices in the media.

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In addition, in 2003 the survey noted that a decline had also taken place even in Italy, an established democracy. Long plagued by an inadequate legal and institutional framework and a relatively lower level of press freedom than its European neighbors, Italy was downgraded to Partly Free in 2003 due to an unprecedented concentration of media ownership and a resulting increase in and misuse of political pressure on media outlets. Silvio Berlusconi has used his position as prime minister to exert undue influence over the public broadcaster RAI, in addition to manipulating coverage at his family's own sizable media empire, which includes Italy's three largest private television stations. During the year, a number of claims arose that the government had intervened to exert control over the tenor and type of news coverage. In addition, the editor of a major daily newspaper resigned in May, allegedly under official pressure.

The dangers for press freedom inherent when a media baron turns ruling politician can also be seen in the case of Thailand, which was downgraded in 2002 and showed a continued decline in 2003 as cases of legal harassment and editorial interference with critical news outlets increased during the year. Corporations controlled by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's family or with ties to the ruling party own or have shares in a growing number of private media outlets and exert influence over editorial policy. Business associates of members of the government also withheld advertisements from news outlets in a further attempt to stifle critical coverage.

Regional Trends

The regional declines noted in 2002 in the cases of the Americas and of Central and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union continued during 2003. In the Americas, 17 countries (49 percent) were rated Free, 13 (37 percent) were rated Partly Free, and 5 (14 percent) were rated Not Free in 2003. Although just under half the countries in the region have media that remain classified as Free, the negative regional trends noted last year continued, with the downgrades of Bolivia to Partly Free and Guatemala to Not Free. During the past two years, the percentage of countries whose media are classified as Free has declined from 60 percent to 49 percent, while the percentage of countries with Not Free media has increased from 6 percent to 14 percent. In Central and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union, the downward trend continued in 2003 as two countries—Bulgaria and Moldova—were downgraded. In this year's survey, 8 countries (30 percent) were classified as Free, 8 (30 percent) as Partly Free, and 11 (40 percent) as Not Free. The situation for the press in Central Asia and, to a lesser extent the Caucasus, remains deeply troubled. Of the former Soviet Union and Soviet bloc countries that remain outside the expanded EU, none are Free, 3 are Partly Free, and 11 are Not Free.

The greatest movement in 2003 took place in Sub-Saharan Africa, where three countries declined in category while two registered positive category shifts. Overall, 7 countries (15 percent) were rated Free, 17 (35 percent) were rated Partly Free, and 24 (50 percent) remain rated Not Free. The overall level of press freedom remained largely unchanged in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, although one country was downgraded in each region. The region with the worst conditions for the media continued to be the Middle East and North Africa, with 1 country (5 percent) rated Free, 1 (5 percent) rated Partly Free, and 17 (90 percent) rated Not Free. In 2003, Morocco slipped over the cusp

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to be rated as Not Free, primarily as a result of restrictive anti-terrorist legislation and a legal crackdown on critical media voices.

Western Europe continued to boast the highest level of press freedom worldwide, with 23 countries (92 percent) rated Free and 2 (8 percent) rated Partly Free. Nevertheless, in 2003 Italy joined Turkey as the only countries in the region to be rated as Partly Free. It is the first time since 1988 that the media in an EU member state have been rated by the survey as Partly Free. The Asia Pacific region also exhibited a relatively high level of press freedom, with 17 countries (44 percent) rated Free, 8 (20 percent) rated Partly Free, and 14 (36 percent) rated Not Free. When one examines the figures in terms of population, the outlook is less positive; only seven percent of Asia's population had access to Free media in 2003. However, this is largely due to the fact that China, with its large population, continues to be ranked as Not Free. After being rated as Free for the past six years, the Philippines slipped back into the ranks of the Partly Free countries, largely as the result of a sustained high level of violence against journalists. Afghanistan, which had registered the largest numerical improvement in 2002, remained Not Free in 2003. Despite a continued expansion of independent print and broadcast media outlets, journalists remain subject to legal pressures as well as threats from political and military leaders.

Positive Trends during the Year

Despite the continued downward trend in global press freedom conditions noted above, two positive category shifts did occur in 2003, both in Africa. In Sierra Leone, an official end to the civil war in January 2002 led to a status upgrade this year from Not Free to Partly Free. Although journalists are still subjected to criminal libel charges and other forms of official harassment, an increased level of political stability over the past two years has meant that they are generally able to operate more freely. Similarly in Kenya, under a new government elected in December 2002, the media have demonstrated greater editorial independence and the number of press freedom abuses has decreased, raising Kenya's status from Not Free to Partly Free. Elsewhere in Africa, Angola showed continued signs of improvement as a result of the 2002 signing of an accord between the government and rebel fighters and the consolidation of the peace process over the past year.

However, the year's most dramatic media-environment opening took place in Iraq, which had previously ranked as one of the world's most repressive environments for the press. With the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in April 2003, hundreds of new publications covering a wide range of opinions emerged, while Iraqis also gained access to the Internet and to uncensored foreign broadcasts. Nevertheless, a continuing security vacuum in which at least 13 journalists were killed, coupled with an ambiguous legal and regulatory media framework, meant that Iraq remained in the ranks of the Not Free countries in 2003 despite its impressive gains.

Media Affected by Political Turmoil and Electoral Competition

While upheaval in Iraq led to positive changes for the media, in a number of other countries political turmoil or government crackdowns preceding and during elections had

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a negative impact on the press. In Bolivia, media outlets became polarized during the course of a mass uprising against the president in October 2003. Journalists faced increased threats and physical harassment from both the government and opposition supporters, which led to a decline in Bolivia's rating to Partly Free. Likewise, in Guatemala journalists were subjected to intensified intimidation prior to and during the November 2003 elections. In an environment in which media outlets already operated under legal restrictions and other forms of official coercion, this additional form of pressure was enough to push Guatemala's rating into the Not Free category. Election-related intimidation and violence against the media was also a concern in Argentina, Azerbaijan, and Guinea during the year.

Even before the campaigning or voting has begun, an impending vote can also spur ruling administrations to crack down on the press. This was the case in Guinea-Bissau, where governmental attempts to silence the opposition's viewpoints in both the public and private media during 2003 led to a status downgrade from Partly Free to Not Free. The country's main independent radio station, Radio Bombolom, was shut in February, while the national radio station's editor-in-chief was assaulted and expelled from his office in March. Meanwhile, officials in Rwanda denied all candidates equal access to media coverage while using the state-run media to lambaste the opposition. Elections scheduled for 2004 prompted campaigns against the independent media during 2003 in Algeria, Cameroon, and Tunisia, mostly in the form of increased legal harassment and pressure. In Ukraine, which is facing important elections in the fall of 2004, concern has been raised that the declining level of media independence noted over the past several years will have a negative impact on press coverage of the campaign and election process.

New Legislation Threatens the Press

In several countries, new laws passed during the year contributed significantly to a category downgrade. Moldova's rating decreased to Not Free after the government enacted a Law on Combating Extremism, which provided authorities with another possible tool of media repression. In addition, new civil and criminal codes that went into effect in January 2003 contain increasingly harsh penalties for libel, including prison sentences of up to five years. The Moroccan media were also downgraded to Not Free in 2003 due to the controversial passage of a new antiterrorist law in May that reversed many of the press freedoms only recently protected in the 2002 revised press code. Since May, the government has invoked Article 41 of the antiterror legislation to suppress press freedom—setting stricter limits on and penalties for speech offenses—under the pretext of ensuring Moroccan territorial integrity. In Tonga, the king's desire to silence a critical independent newspaper led to the enactment of new legal restrictions on foreign ownership and stringent licensing requirements. Meanwhile, the Zimbabwean government used repressive legislation passed in 2002 to harass the independent press repeatedly during 2003.

Political Influence over the Media on the Rise

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The press freedom rating in a number of countries was downgraded in 2003 as a result of increased political pressure, which most often took the form of governmental control of the media (particularly the broadcast media) or official influence over press content. Ruling administrations also attempted to harass the press by bringing politically motivated lawsuits against journalists as well as using restrictive legislation to suspend or close media outlets.

In Bulgaria, the government exerts influence over the press through its control of state broadcasters, a politicized process of allocating licenses, and its practice of rewarding pro-government media outlets with advertising revenue. These practices coupled with a rise in the number of libel suits filed against journalists and publishers caused Bulgaria's rating to drop from Free to Partly Free. Cape Verde was likewise downgraded to Partly Free in 2003, primarily due to convergences in ownership and influence over the media. In Cape Verde's case, the combined facts of state ownership of broadcast media and ruling party control over many private media outlets have led to a decline in editorial independence and a reported increase in self-censorship on the part of journalists.

The government of Gabon made more extreme attempts to exert control over the media, orchestrating a clampdown on the private press that included revoking the licenses of, suspending, or banning a number of private publications. These and other inhibitions on the ability of journalists to work independently led to Gabon's downgrade from Partly Free to Not Free. In Russia, which was downgraded to Not Free in 2002, the situation for the media continued to worsen as the Kremlin consolidated its nearly total control over the broadcast media. Authorities also used legislation and financial pressure to further restrict critical coverage, particularly on sensitive topics such as the war in Chechnya or in the run-up to parliamentary elections held in December.

The numerical scores for Panama and Romania also worsened sharply during 2003 to reflect authorities' increasing use of lawsuits against independent media outlets or critical journalists. In Romania, more than 400 criminal cases were brought against the media during the year, the vast majority concerning defamation, which remains a criminal offense. Most prosecutions resulted in excessive financial penalties or suspended prison sentences. Meanwhile, Panamanian officials frequently invoked repressive press and *desacato* (insult) laws to silence criticism, restrict circulation of information, and create an environment of intimidation and self-censorship among journalists. Currently, over half the members of the media work force have criminal libel or slander cases pending against them.

In the most authoritarian of the world's regimes, flagrant state repression of the media continued unhindered. The five worst-rated countries in 2003 were Burma, Cuba, Libya, North Korea, and Turkmenistan. In these states, independent media are either nonexistent or barely able to operate, the role of the press is to act as a mouthpiece for the ruling regime, and citizens' access to unbiased information is severely limited. After some hints of improvement in 2002, Cuban authorities cracked down on the independent media in March 2003, when 27 journalists were arrested, tried, and sentenced to lengthy prison terms. Press-freedom conditions remained dire in Zimbabwe, Eritrea, and Equatorial Guinea, where authoritarian governments use legal pressure, imprisonment, and other forms of harassment to sharply curtail the ability of independent media outlets to report freely.

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Conclusions

As noted above, the level of press freedom worldwide has declined for the second year in a row, and threats to media independence are coming from both democratically elected governments and the world's most repressive states. While authoritarian regimes flagrantly disregard the right of journalists to report freely, political leaders and ruling parties around the world are devising a range of ingenious ways to stifle the media in their own countries as a way of restricting criticism or scrutiny. Representatives from Partly Free and Not Free states are also able to join forces in support of international initiatives that may seek to regulate press freedom.

In the current environment, the role of international organizations assumes considerable importance. Groups such as the United Nations, the European Union, and the Council of Europe, as well as lending institutions such as the World Bank, have a potentially vital role to play in terms of setting acceptable standards and holding violators accountable. While these bodies do support initiatives to promote greater media independence, too often they do not offer enough resistance to restrictive efforts, instead acting in a complicit manner. It is important that the statements and actions emanating from these groups offer unequivocal support for press freedom. In this regard, the UN has a special responsibility to ensure that basic standards of press freedom such as Article 19 are not threatened or compromised by initiatives such as the WSIS. Joined by the sustained advocacy efforts of a wide range of freedom-of-expression groups around the world, a clearer message from the international community may go some way to reversing the recent downward trends in media freedom seen during 2003.