

Press freedom caged in 2003

Press freedom suffered a substantial worldwide decline in 2003, according to a major study released internationally today by Freedom House. Legal harassment, political pressure, and violence by state and non-state actors against journalists combined to worsen conditions in many countries, resulting in the second consecutive year of a global decline in freedom for news media.

The study, *Freedom of the Press 2004: A Global Survey of Media Independence*, revealed that some of the most serious setbacks took place in countries where democracy is backsliding, such as in Bolivia and Russia, and in older, established democracies, most notably Italy.

The survey assesses the degree of print, broadcast, and Internet freedom in every country in the world and assigns to each a category rating of Free, Partly Free, or Not Free. It analyzes events during the calendar year 2003.

Global Trends

Overall, the study shows that ten countries-Bolivia, Bulgaria, Cape Verde, Gabon, Guatemala, Guinea-Bissau, Italy, Moldova, Morocco, and the Philippines-declined in category, while only two countries-Kenya and Sierra Leone-registered positive category shifts.

The Middle East/North Africa features the least media freedom, with 90% of the region's countries rated Not Free. Of the 193 countries surveyed (including the Israeli-Administered Territories/Palestinian Authority), 73 (38%, representing 17% of the global population) were rated Free, with no significant restrictions on the news media; 49 (25%, 40%) were rated Partly Free and are characterized by some media restrictions; and 71 (37%, 43%) were rated Not Free, with state control or other obstacles to a free press.

The proportion of the world's population living in countries with free media has declined by five percent over the last two years, while the number of people living in not free media environments has increased by five percent.

"Fewer and fewer people throughout the world have uncensored and unfettered access to information about their own countries," said Freedom House Executive Director Jennifer Windsor. "Most distressing is that some of this deterioration is taking place in democracies, where a free press is a necessary component of vibrant democratic life."

In Italy, increased media concentration and subsequent political pressure led to the downgrading of the country from Free to Partly Free.

"Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has been able to exert undue influence over the public broadcaster RAI," said Karin

Deutsch Karlekar, the survey's managing editor. "This further exacerbates an already worrisome media environment characterized by unbalanced coverage within Berlusconi's enormous media empire."

Berlusconi's media holdings include Italy's three largest private television stations.

Bright Spots

The most dramatic media opening of the year took place in Iraq, previously ranked as one of the world's most repressive press environments.

With the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in April, hundreds of new publications are covering a wide range of opinions. Iraqis were able to gain unfettered access to the Internet and to uncensored foreign television broadcasts. Nevertheless, a continuing lack of security, the murders of at least 13 journalists, and an ambiguous legal and regulatory media framework kept Iraq in the ranks of the Not Free countries despite its impressive numerical gains, as noted in the survey's rating system.

Notable improvements took place in Sierra Leone, where increasing political stability after the end of civil war has allowed journalists to operate much more freely. The country moved from Not Free to Partly Free. In Kenya, the media have demonstrated greater editorial independence and the number of press freedom abuses have declined considerably under the new democratic government. Kenya's status also improved from Not Free to Partly Free.

"Despite some specific recent improvements, and an overall upward trend towards greater press freedom worldwide during the late 1990s, the last two years have seen a dramatic deterioration," said Dr. Karlekar.

"State-directed intimidation and attempts to influence the media are being perpetrated by governments that seem to be increasingly unwilling to tolerate critical coverage."

Political, Economic, and Legal Pressure

In a number of countries, political turmoil and election-related violence negatively impacted the press.

In Bolivia, the government and opposition supporters threatened and physically harassed journalists, leading to a decline in that country's rating to Partly Free. In Rwanda, officials denied all candidates equal access to media coverage while using state-run media to lambaste the opposition.

Other election-related intimidation of the press took place in Argentina, Azerbaijan, Guatemala, and Guinea. Elections scheduled for 2004 prompted campaigns against the independent media in Algeria, Cameroon, Tunisia, and Ukraine, mostly in the form of increased legal harassment and pressure.

The survey noted growing political and economic influence over the media in other countries. In Romania, for instance, the increasing use of lawsuits by authorities against independent media outlets and a rise in attacks against journalists led to a significant decline in the country's numerical rating.

In Bulgaria, which dropped to Partly Free, the government maintained its control over state broadcasters and awarded advertising revenue to pro-government media. In Gabon, the government orchestrated a clampdown on private media, including revoking publishing licenses and suspending or banning a number of private publications, leading to a ratings downgrade to Not Free.

Conditions worsened in Russia, which was downgraded to Not Free in 2002. In 2003, the Kremlin consolidated its near 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.

"Economic pressures can lead to an increase in self-censorship among journalists," said Ms. Windsor. "Unfortunately these factors are often overlooked when examining levels of press freedom."

In other countries, new legislation led to category downgrades, including in Morocco, which regressed to Not Free after thirteen years at Partly Free. In May, the government invoked Article 41 of new anti-terror legislation that set stricter limits on and penalties for speech offenses.

Regional Trends

Americas: Of the 35 countries of the Americas, 17 (49%) are Free, 13 (37%) are Partly Free, and 5 (14%) are Not Free. Although just under half the countries in the region have media classified as Free, the negative regional trends noted in 2002 continued, leading to the downgrading 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% to 49%, while the percentage of countries with Not Free media has increased from 6% to 14%.

Asia Pacific: Of 39 Asian Pacific countries, 17 (44%) are rated Free, 8 (20%) are Partly Free, and 14 (36%) are Not Free. While the region exhibited a relatively high level of press freedom, the Philippines, rated Free for the past six years, slipped back into the ranks of Partly Free countries in 2003, largely as the result of a sustained high level of violence against journalists. In Afghanistan, which saw the largest numerical improvement in 2002, media remain Not Free. Despite a continued expansion of independent print and broadcast media outlets in 2003, journalists remain subject to legal pressures as well as threats from political and military leaders.

The percentage of the population having access to Free media in the Asia Pacific region was reduced to just 7% in 2003.

Central & Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union: Of the 27 countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union, 8 (30%) are rated Free, 8 (30%) are Partly Free, and 11 (40%) are Not Free. Declines outweighed gains in 2003 as two countries--Bulgaria and Moldova--were downgraded. Other than Georgia, the situation for the press in Central Asia and the Caucasus remained deeply troubled. Of the former Soviet Union and Soviet bloc countries that remain outside the expanded European Union, none are Free, 3 are Partly Free, and 11 are Not Free.

Middle East & North Africa: Of the 19 Middle Eastern and North African countries, only one (5%), Israel, is rated Free. One country (5%), Kuwait is Partly Free, while 17 (90%) are Not Free. In 2003, Morocco slipped over the cusp to Not Free, primarily as a result of restrictive anti-terrorist legislation and a legal crackdown on critical media voices. The Middle East is the only region with an average rating of Not Free.

Sub-Saharan Africa: Of 48 Sub-Saharan African countries, 7 (15%) are rated Free, 17 (35%) are Partly Free and 24 (50%) are Not Free. The region showed the greatest movement in 2003, with three countries declining in category and two registering positive category shifts.

Western Europe: Of 25 Western European countries, 23 (92%) are rated Free and two countries (8%), are Partly Free. While Western Europe continued to boast the highest level of press freedom worldwide, Italy joined Turkey as the only other country in the region rated Partly Free. It is the first time since 1988 that the media in a Western European country (other than Turkey) have been rated Partly Free.

Worst of the Worst

The five worst rated countries in press freedom 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 2003, Cuban authorities in March cracked down on the independent media 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 severely curtail the ability of independent media outlets to report freely.

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