

Global Declines in Press Freedom

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“Blasphemy Laws and Censorship by States and Non-State Actors: Examining
Global Threats to Freedom of Expression”

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Introduction

Chairman Pitts, Chairman McGovern and members of the commission, it is an honor to testify before you today.

Freedom House’s most recent *Freedom of the Press* report, which measures political, legal, and economic dimensions of press freedom in every country in the world, paints a grim picture. It found that press freedom is currently at its lowest point in 12 years. Only one in seven people in the world, just 13 percent of the world’s population, enjoys a Free press. Particularly in the era of the internet and digital media, these are remarkable and deeply disturbing figures.

The declines we documented are not confined to particular regions or economic levels. There were troubling trends around the world, including in Bangladesh, Turkey, Burundi, Serbia, Yemen, Egypt, Macedonia, and Zimbabwe. But the erosion of media freedom is also evident in leading democracies such as France. The persistence and in some cases intensification of declines in media environments that are generally considered to be firmly in the Free category demonstrates that freedom of the press is not a right that is secure once it is achieved, but rather is something that must be actively protected and defended even in the most hospitable settings.

Our recent analysis identified six topics that are frequently targeted by governments and nonstate actors for censorship. These topics are wide-ranging; together they demonstrate that many, many subjects are being ruled off-limits for public discussion—dispatched by repressive governments and in some cases extremist groups down Orwell’s memory hole. Journalists are often the most vulnerable to violence, censorship, and intimidation, but ordinary people also suffer greatly when they do not have access to unfiltered news and commentary on the critical issues of the day.

First on the list of commonly censored topics is organized crime. From Central America to South Asia, journalists take their lives in their hands when they investigate criminal networks. The risk is particularly high in areas with weak rule of law.

Second is corruption. Reporting on corruption in business and in government can earn journalists beatings, arrests, assassination, and threats to their families. This is a problem in virtually every region of the world.

Third, land development and the environment: Investigating stories related to the environment, particularly when land acquisitions or extractive industries are involved, poses great danger to reporters. Environmental journalists in many countries are routinely subjected to harassment, threats, and sometimes worse when carrying out their assignments.

Fourth on the list is areas of disputed sovereignty. Regions where autonomy and self-determination are in question, such as Western Sahara, Crimea, or Tibet, are often completely off-limits to independent journalists.

Fifth, anything perceived as an insult to the head of state or top officials is against the law in a wide range of countries.

Last on the list of targeted topics is religion. Reporters who cover sensitive religious issues are often prosecuted by government authorities or attacked by extremist groups. Many governments use laws that ostensibly protect religious harmony to censor unapproved views. In fact, blasphemy laws limit religious freedom by identifying and privileging a specific faith—often a particular strain or interpretation of that faith—and restricting the religious expression of those who hold other beliefs. This in turn encourages violence against the affected individuals or groups.

Blasphemy laws are disingenuous in other ways. They are frequently invoked to smother criticism of any kind, even that which has little or nothing to do with religion. Because so many of these laws are vaguely written, they can be used to silence anyone with an officially unwelcome perspective. Some of the most repressive countries carry death sentences for these kinds of offenses, but even in countries where offenders are not imprisoned, legal proceedings and fines can be financially crippling. Blasphemy laws are inherently inimical to open discussion and debate, and they have no place in a free society.

The 12-year low that we have documented in press freedom coincides with a similarly troubling period of decline in the broader array of political rights and civil liberties that Freedom House tracks. Given this context, the press has an especially important role to play in the fight for greater rights and freedoms for people in democratic and authoritarian countries alike. We must accept the reality that the global deterioration in media independence, which has persisted year after year, is not a momentary blip that will self-correct, but a growing challenge that we must confront head on.