

THE MEDIA, CIVIL AND POLITICAL FREEDOMS SCENE IN LEBANON



INTRODUCTION

The year of 2022 in Lebanon witnessed a number of events, positions, and developments that took place in terms of civil and political media freedoms.

The journalism practices, freedom of speech, expression of opinion, and digital publishing still faces legal and realistic challenges with the phenomenon of impunity within the violations against journalists, activists, and media professionals.

The period of the parliamentary elections that took place on May 15, 2022 also witnessed threats to the practices of civil and political freedoms, specifically the right to run for elections and vote. The phenomenon of digital violence against women candidates, who faced political, social, economic and legal challenges hindered their effective participation and representation in the parliamentary symposium.

Independent deputies were also subjected to a campaign of infidelity and blasphemy from religious figures due to their propositions in introducing the optional civil marriage legislation that promotes civil liberties and equality between the Lebanese. Adding to that the continued oppression of democracy and freedom of parliamentary action due to the domination of the main traditional political power.

Journalists work in Lebanon in an insecure social, political and professional environment, and the exercise of freedom of expression is still met with treacherous rhetoric, death threats and bloodshed.

In addition, Journalists faces difficulties within their professional work in light of the economic crises and the absence of social and health insurances, which pushed many to leave, searching for job opportunities outside of Lebanon.

The communications and Internet environment in Lebanon continues to threaten the work of vital public and private bodies, as well as individual and commercial institutions, and constitutes of an unstable, yet encouraging and/or attractive environment for investment within the digital knowledge and communication technology sector in Lebanon.

Violation of the rights in the field of digital media

Judicial public prosecutions still deal with journalists, particularly those working in digital publishing, with bias and violation of the law with regard to the summons issued against them to appear before the security services instead of the Publications Court, as a competent reference in publishing cases.

Security investigation detachments, such as the Central Criminal Investigation Department, which mainly focuses on major crimes, or the Information Crimes Office, mainly concerned with prosecuting financial crimes and digital extortion operations, are still directed by political figures to pursue activists and journalists, on charges related to opinions they expressed, their thoughts and statements are scrutinized, pressure is applied, interpretation of publications is demanded, as well as they are enforced to be deleted under penalty of arrest or procrastination in detention until the interrogator is subjected to the deletion or retraction of what he/she published, in addition to the risks of searching their phones and digital devices that they used to publish and which may be confiscated.

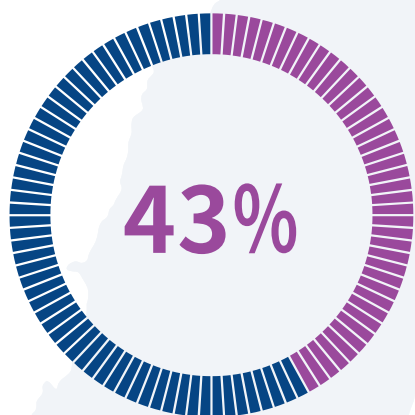


Attacks and impunity

In 2022, a group of attacks against journalists and human rights centers was monitored, and they varied between physical attacks and death threats. The political discourses continue to create a hostile environment for the press and opposing activists, as it is reflected in the threat of death and physical harm to journalists. Many journalists have revealed that they have been subjected to physical threats. Photojournalist Hassan Shaaban recorded several threats and assaults because of his coverage of movements of the people in southern Lebanon due to the lack in the provision of basic services and water. Media threats also affected Dima Sadek due to a publication that was deemed offensive to Iranian leaders following the assassination attempt on writer Salman Rushdie, as well as other journalists who were subject to harassment . Furthermore, The worst thing lies in the continuation of the policy of anonymity of the perpetrator, which perpetuates the principle of impunity.

Digital violence against women candidates

Online violence against women in public affairs increased during the recent parliamentary elections, specifically with the 118 monitored female candidates who were active on their social media platforms. According to a study prepared by Maharat Foundation, the analysis shows that 43% of female candidates had been subjected to violence on their personal pages. In addition to what happened to both the hosts, Dalia Ahmed, who was subjected to a hate and racist campaign , and Dima Sadek, who was targeted in a hate campaign that sometimes affected her daughter.



Of the female candidates who have been subjected to violence on their personal pages

Civil and political attacks and suppression of freedom of expression

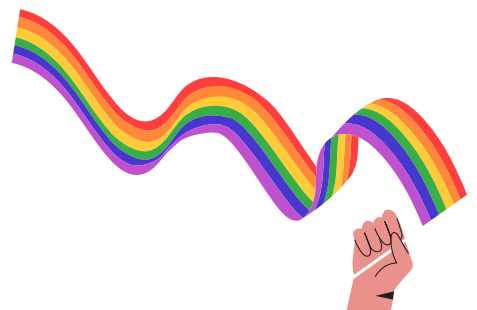
The elections of May 2022 witnessed violations of civil and political liberties, affecting the opposing lists representing civil society, which appeared in the “South for Change’ list in the Southern District 2, targeting the party announcing their list and its cancellation under threat, in addition to the pressuring campaign exerted on opposing candidates in the Baalbek-Hermel district to withdraw from the elections under the pressure of the social environment as one of them was beaten and hospitalized.

The security and judicial authority’s suppression over cynical public opinion emerged in the case of Shaden Al-Daif, after she shared a video promoting women’s health rights during the quarantine period, as a ruling was issued against her in the military court.



Hate campaigns against the LGBTQIAs community

Hate campaigns against the LGBTQIAs community took official steps in which some media outlets participated through the decision of Interior Minister Bassam al-Mawlawi on June 24, 2022, as a result of pressure from religious institutions and groups that promote violence by rejecting diversity. The decision of the Minister of the Interior was characterized by illegality and transgression of the limits of authority, as described by human rights groups that challenged the aforementioned decision, in the context of creating new crimes not stipulated in the law, describing the activity of members of the LGBTQIA community as promoting “sexual perversion.’ This decision also constitutes a precedent in terms of perpetuating discrimination, and a violation of the civil rights of individuals based on their personal choices in determining their sexual identity.



An environment that does not motivate journalistic work

Journalists live in a state of professional and social instability as the work environment is highly affected by the economic and public financial crises with the collapse of the value of financial wages and the decline in health and social insurances and services.

This reality prompted many journalists to leave their local media organizations and search for better opportunities, especially outside of the country. Some of them tended towards working in the free press, considering that the dismissal, within the economic and financial contexts, had gradually imposed itself, especially in the traditional media institutions that previously absorbed a large part of the workers within this profession.

Despite the issuance of Law No. 263 of January 5, 2022, which allows independent press workers to benefit from health care insurances in the event of illness and maternity, this law still faces obstacles in terms of issuing decrees specifying on how to calculate the contributions collected by the Social Security Fund, as well as the period of two years from the date of joining the Editors Syndicate to benefit from its provisions, which necessitates working to lift unjustified restrictions and barriers to benefit from comprehensive and immediate health coverage for all journalists.

A decline in communication and internet services

The right to access the Internet is implicitly highlighted in international human rights laws, in particular Article 19 of the Covenant, which guarantees freedom of expression and access to information in all its available forms and by any means he/she chooses, regardless of any geographical borders. The Internet forms the backbone of human and commercial activity in the current era.



The financial crisis reflected a decline in the quality of telecommunications and internet services, especially the shortage in the supply of electric power to the exchange centers and aerial towers. In addition to the high cost of maintenance and the inability of the noticeable budgets for network service to pay its actual expenses. This matter developed into the implementation by the Ogero employees union on September 1 of a comprehensive strike with the aim of pressuring the state to correct their wages in line with the cost of living. It was preceded by previous warnings in March and April 2022 to stop working if the conditions of workers in the sector were not settled.

The strike led to the disconnection of the fixed network in many Lebanese regions, affecting the efficiency of the cellular network in some areas, and stopped the vital public and private institutions from working, such as emergency operating rooms, hospitals, banks, and commercial institutions that rely on doing their business on the fixed internet networks.

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