

New media law a setback for Lebanon's media freedom

The Lebanese Parliament's Administration and Justice Committee is on the verge of concluding discussions behind closed doors on a new media law.



Source: © 123rf [123rf](#) A new media law will be a dangerous setback for freedom of expression in Lebanon

This is according to the Coalition to Defend Freedom of Expression in Lebanon, which reviewed the latest draft of the law.

“If approved in its current form, this law would be a dangerous setback for freedom of expression in Lebanon in an environment where defamation laws are already being used to harass and intimidate journalists and other individuals who criticize the authorities,” says the Coalition.

The Coalition notes many alarming provisions that will stifle freedom of expression and press freedoms.

This includes that it upholds criminal penalties, and in some cases increases prison sentences and fines, for insults and defamation.

Defamation remains a crime

In recent years, defamation and insult laws have been increasingly weaponised by the Lebanese authorities to silence human rights defenders, journalists and other critics.

The draft law also retains prison terms of up to three years for insulting “recognised religions”.

The Coalition has recorded a surge in prosecutions targeting journalists, activists and other government critics in recent years.

“Defamation and insult laws have been repeatedly used as a tactic to intimidate individuals who are critical of the authorities and curtail their ability to operate independently and report freely on social, economic and other human rights issues.

“In a recent example, a court in July sentenced journalist Dima Sadek to one year in prison and fined her LBP 110 million (equivalent to around \$1,200 at market rate) on criminal defamation and incitement charges after she criticised members of a political party on X,” says the Coalition.



Tunisian journalist detained after criticising president

Tarek Amara, Stephen Coates 21 Jun 2023



International standards

The draft law also restricts the rights of journalists and media workers to freely join and create associations, as it dictates that there can only be one media syndicate.

Further, the draft law hinders the public’s access to critical information by banning the publication of the minutes of government sessions, the decisions of parliamentary committees, and investigations conducted by the Central Inspection and Administrative Inspection Department.

It also imposes onerous fees and licensing requirements for media outlets, which would stifle free and open speech in the country.

International standards for the protection of the right to freedom of expression, which are binding on Lebanon, underscore the need to abolish laws that allow for imprisonment as a response to peaceful criticism of individuals, including individuals exercising the highest political authority such as heads of state and government officials.

The impending legislation is set to replace the current Publications Law of 1962 and the Audiovisual Law of 1994.

“The failure to engage Lebanese civil society in discussions around the law means there is a real danger that the legislation could grant the authorities free rein to harass, intimidate and silence critics, and perpetuate an environment of censorship. The Lebanese authorities must urgently refrain from approving this draft law and amend all provisions in line with international human rights standards,” says the Coalition.

The head of the Committee rejected requests from members of the Coalition to attend the closed sessions leaving no opportunity to participate in discussions about the proposed law.

The Coalition statement was originally published [here](#).

This article was originally published on [IFEX](#) an organisation that defends and promotes media freedom.

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