

## **JAMAICA**

### **A SLIGHT DROP BUT REMAINS AMONG THE TOP RANKS FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND A FREE PRESS**

#### **Executive Summary**

Jamaica fell this period by one place – to third – on the Chapultepec Index measuring Freedom of Expression and a Free Press in the region, dropping from 80.40 points previously to 76.78 points for free press performance. It is also notable that the current points score is below the 78.36 points attained in 2020-21 period. This, however, is still a respectable position to be on the Index and the northern Caribbean country remains relatively stable in terms of freedom of the press and freedom of expression.

#### **Introduction**

State action threatening freedom of the press and freedom of expression is usually the main focus in measuring performance of a country, but it might become more necessary to put greater weight on third party threats in countries like Jamaica, where threats from government is non-existent over long periods of time.

One heated incident in May 2023, involving the press and the opposition political party, as well as a physical attack on a press crew by thugs in November 2022 bear out this statement.

In the May incident, Jamaican journalists expressed grave concern over the episode which occurred a week after World Press Freedom Day was commemorated, when a supporter of the Opposition People's National Party (PNP) threatened a woman journalist with rape, while another was verbally attacked while covering a demonstration at the PNP headquarters in the capital. The deputy general secretary of the party was involved in the threat to the journalists.

Ironically, it was the government that came out in defense of the press against the attack, even if it could be seen as a self-serving gesture against a political contestant. "These actions represent a serious attack on press freedom and require swift and decisive action against those responsible," said the Information Minister Nestor Morgan.

In the earlier incident in November 2022, the Press Association of Jamaica (PAJ) and the Media Association Jamaica condemned an attack on a cameraman and newspaper reporter covering industrial action by staff members at a school near the capital.

However, for yet another year, the Jamaican media operated without hindrance from the Jamaica Labor Party Government of Prime Minister Andrew Holness, which has been in power

since 2016 and is now past the mid-way point in its second term underway since September 2020. The number three position on the Chapultepec Index therefore leaves Jamaica in a good place.

Despite that, journalists were not always happy with the Information Minister, mainly because he failed to keep his promises made in 2021 to speed up response by government agencies to requests under the Access to Information legislation. The Minister's response to criticisms was to point the blame at the Attorney General's (AG) Department, with further promises that once completed, the law would quickly go to another Joint Select Committee of Parliament for review.

As has been the case in recent years, there was no let up in murders and crimes in general, making journalistic work more difficult in certain parts of the country. According to Statista Research Department, Jamaica's murder rate in 2022 was at a staggering 52.9 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, the worst in Latin America and the Caribbean. This compares with a rate of 47/100,000 the year before.

According to DataPortal, Jamaica's Internet penetration rate stood at 82.4 percent in January 2023, compared with 68.2 percent of the total population at the start of 2022, constituting the main driving force behind the continued growth in media, notably niche market radio stations. Consistent with world trends, online media continued its steady growth path.

Print, online and broadcast media, referred to here as the traditional media, are still largely private-sector run, with the notable exception being the state-run Jamaica Information Service, and the Broadcasting Commission which is responsible for monitoring and regulating the broadcast media. The Commission which also advises the government on media policy matters, has been active in providing an oversight role for license applications and operations of licensees, and in receiving a growing number of complaints about breaches from the public.

Jamaica, the largest of the English-speaking Caribbean islands, has a population of 2.9 million people and a per capita income of US\$5,670, according to 2022 figures. The unemployment rate for April 2023 fell to a record 4.5%, representing a 1.5% drop from the corresponding time line in 2022.

The number of unemployed males fell by 26.3%, to 24,900, while the corresponding figure for unemployed females dropped from 47,200 in 2022 to 36,400 in 2023. The unemployment rate for youth aged 14-24 was 24,600 in April 2023, a decrease of 6,800 or 21.7 per cent. The Statistical Institute (STATIN) reported that there were jobs increase in all age groups. Service workers and shop and market sales workers had the largest increases.

Jamaica continues to earn most of its foreign exchange from tourism, remittances and bauxite/alumina, all areas that are steadily recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Environments: Healthy freedom of Expression**

Despite dropping one place on the Chapultepec Index for 2022, Jamaica still received an impressive 76.78 points, placing it at third and keeping it among the highest ranking countries for press freedom and freedom of expression in Latin America and the Caribbean. The fall to third place, while, not desirable, suggests that there were no reports of infractions by institutional authorities.

However, there were at least two threats against journalists from third parties, including the main Opposition party, during the period under review. Journalists and media owners can

therefore not remain complacent or be lulled into a false sense of security by the relatively sustained period of freedom of the press enjoyed under the Jamaican Constitution.

It was encouraging to note that of the two incidents of attacks on journalists - one verbal and the second in which an attempt was made to snatch camera equipment from a television news crew – the police started immediate investigations after complaints by the Press Association of Jamaica representing journalists and the Media Association Jamaica representing media owners.

### **Realm A: COVID-influenced growth in Internet penetration continues to build**

The strong growth in Internet penetration that was driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, continued exponentially, even after schools reopened and workers began to return to their work places. Internet penetration rate jumped from 68.2 percent of the total population at the start of 2022, to 82.4 percent in January 2023, according to DataPortal. This growth ensured that new media continued to expand, with more traditional media adding online services.

The expansion in media has ensured that Jamaica continues to be a well informed society, underpinned by the broad perspective that the country's media has not taken sides with any of the political parties, at least not overtly. This is believed to engender greater freedom of expression.

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### **Realm B: Journalists free to practice in Jamaica**

For at least the last decade, the Jamaican media has enjoyed freedom to practice without government interference. This is reflected in the high ranking the country enjoys on the Chapultepec Index, as well as on other media watch organizations. However, there are occasional threats on journalists from third parties – two occurred during the period under review – which suggests that government obstacles are not the main problems affecting freedom of the press, at least in countries like Jamaica.

### **Realm C: High crime rate not directly hampering journalists**

In Dimension C, Jamaica scored 29.94 points out of a theoretical maximum of 42. Despite the fact that the performance in this dimension had a relatively low perception by the judges, with regard to the subdimensions corresponding to Protection -1 out of 5-, Impunity -2.25 out of 8.50-, and Persecution -in which it appears better with 6 points out of 7; the picture remains pristine when it comes to violent attacks against journalists and media outlets.

This is confirmed by the Chapultepec Index with a score of 20.71 out of a possible maximum of 21, in the score corresponding to the target record of attacks against journalists. The murder statistics do not include any communicators, despite the seemingly out-of-control crime rate, in

which murders frequently exceed 1,400 a year. The population, in general, is pro-media. Still, there are areas of the country where journalists prefer not to work due to the crime rate. The attack on a television crew in November remains a cause for concern, as it took place in one of these "no-go zones".

## **Realm D: Jamaican media not under government control**

In the year 2021-2022, the Jamaican media operated without government control, as it has for many years now. The State-controlled Broadcasting Commission remains the main regulator for the broadcast media, having no jurisdiction over general media content but actively monitoring for any breaches of the terms of their operating licenses.

From all indications, the media and the government agree that the country is best served by a free press and freedom of expression. This mutuality of interests has augured well for the media over a long stretch of time. Minor skirmishes occur from time to time but nothing of a nature that affects the free operation of the press. At this time, there appears to be no immediate threat on the horizon of any adverse governmental action against the press. However, the Press Association of Jamaica continues to advocate for a more efficient Access to Information legislation.

## **Conclusion**

It is the same script over and over again. Jamaican journalists continue to enjoy the freedom to operate and practice freedom of expression. Yet it is clear that there is no place for complacency as can be deduced from two incidents in which third parties have threatened journalists during the period under review. Threats can come from other sources than government.

The country is still highly regarded because of its top ranking on the global media monitoring groups for freedom of the press and freedom of expression. Its position at number three on the Chapultepec Index places the English-speaking Caribbean country in the esteemed company of the Dominican Republic, first and Chile, second.

Most of the Jamaican media is free of state control in ownership and content marketing, firmly in the hands of the private sector. Newsroom policies remain out of the clutches of the executive, legislative and judicial branches, the exception being the Jamaica Information Service and the Broadcasting Commission, both government-controlled agencies.

There were no reports of journalists being physically harmed during the review period and no complaints about pressure on media outlets to censor their content at the behest of any organization or entity.

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