

JAMAICA: A MODEL OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND A FREE PRESS

Executive Summary

Jamaica continues to be a model of Freedom of Expression and a Free Press, as evidenced by the country's consistent rise on the Chapultepec Index, which shows its current ranking at the coveted number two position - an impressive 80.40 points - in the region for free press performance. This improvement compares with an already respectable 78.36 points in the previous review period and represents a movement of one position up from number three. This consolidation continues a well established, rarely interrupted trend of freedom of the press and freedom of expression in the northern Caribbean island.

Introduction

It could be argued that Jamaica's most immediate threat to press freedom and freedom of expression is complacency, attributable to the long stretch of unfettered media operations that could lull journalists into a false sense of security. The 2021-2022 period under review was no exception. The media operated without hindrance under the Jamaica Labour Party Government of Prime Minister Andrew Holness, in power since 2016 and midway through its second term, which started in September 2020. Once again, Jamaica ranked high on the international press freedom gauges, and notably improved its position on the Chapultepec Index.

It is noteworthy that Jamaica's oldest newspaper, the 188-year-old daily Gleaner, believes that the threat to the news media comes from outside Jamaica. "Ironically, the immediate source of the threat is not within, directed by the Government or powerful private interests keen to prevent the media's spotlight on their actions. It comes from the big technology companies (Big Tech), the so-called hyperscalers that dominate the Internet, which are largely accountable to no one, and whose impunity countries around the world have been attempting to rein in," the paper suggested in an editorial on World Press Freedom Day 2022.

Still, within Jamaica, access to government information is supported by the Access to Information legislation, which this year marks 20 years old. Journalists, however, are not satisfied with the pace at which state agencies respond to requests for information under the legislation, despite a promise by the Minister of Information in 2021 to speed up the flow.

The lifting of restrictions imposed by the government in 2020, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, has allowed for greater freedom of movement by journalists, especially in the national distribution of newspapers. It is to be recalled that when the government first introduced the measures to restrict freedom of movement, it included the media. However, that restriction was quickly removed after strong protests from the media organisations – the Press Association

of Jamaica representing professional journalists and the Media Association Jamaica representing the media owners.

The resumption of face-to-face press briefings by government officials, consequent on the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions, has been welcomed by journalists.

In the period under review, there were no physical attacks or incarceration of journalists. Notably, a television journalist was reported stabbed in a domestic incident at home, but that was not associated with his professional work. A newspaper journalist had his weekly Sunday column suspended indefinitely for alleged breach of the paper's internal code of ethics. However, a continuing increase in crime, particularly murder, forced journalists to take greater care as they work in certain areas of the country. The police Periodic Crime Statistics Review recorded a two per cent increase in the murder rate between January 1, 2022 and July 16, 2022. This is a rate of 47/100,000 - which largely makes some areas of the country difficult for journalists to carry out their work.

Facilitated by Jamaica's Internet penetration rate which stood at 68.2 per cent of the total population at the start of 2022, the media, especially niche market radio stations, continued to grow. Internet users in Jamaica increased by 8,161, or 0.4 per cent between 2021 and 2022. Online media, in keeping with world trends, are on the growth path. The main media - print, online and broadcast - remained in the hands of private entities. The notable exception are the state-run Jamaica Information Service, and the Broadcasting Commission, which is responsible for monitoring and regulating the broadcast media. The Commission provides an oversight role for licence applications and operations of licensees, and receives complaints of breaches from the public, while advising the government on media policy matters.

Highlights

Jamaica, though small, is the largest of the English-speaking Caribbean islands, with a population of 2.9 million people and a per capita income of US\$4,650. The unemployment rate for April 2022 decreased to 6.0%, or 3.0 percentage points lower than in the same quarter of 2021.

The male unemployment rate fell to 4.7% from 7.5%, while the unemployment rate for females declined to 7.6% from 10.8%. The unemployment rate for youth aged 14-24 was 15.5% in April 2022, which represents an 8.6 percentage point decline when compared to April 2021.

The unemployment rate for male youth declined by 6.0 percentage points to 15.1% while the decrease for females (12.0 percentage points) was twice that of males moving from 28.0% to 15.9%. There were 1,269,300 employed persons in April 2022.

This was an increase of 5.2% compared to April 2021. These persons were engaged in economic activities for at least one hour during the reference week March 20 – 26, 2022. Females accounted for just over one-half of the increase in the number of persons employed (33,600 persons or 53.1%). Female employment grew by 6.2%, while male employment increased by 4.5%. (STATIN)

Jamaica's main source of revenue is services which account for 70% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The primary earners of foreign exchange are tourism, remittances and bauxite/alumina; all of these areas took heavy blows from the pandemic but are beginning to

grow, following the lifting of lockdown restrictions in 2021.

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Report

Environments:

Freedom of Expression doing well

Boasting an impressive 80.40 points on the Chapultepec Index, placing it at number two, Jamaica is among the highest ranking countries for press freedom and freedom of expression in the world, taking pride of place in Latin America and the Caribbean. The number two position represents a movement of one place, from third in the last review, as there were no reports of infractions by institutional authorities. It is important that journalists and media owners remain vigilant and not become complacent while enjoying this relatively long period of freedom of the press enshrined in the Jamaican Constitution.

For a brief period, there were fears that this peace between the government and the media might have been breached when reports surfaced that a television journalist had suffered stab wounds and had to seek medical attention. However, the media fraternity breathed a sigh of relief after it was confirmed that the injury resulted from a domestic dispute at his home. The journalist recovered after a brief stay in hospital. A second journalist had his weekly opinion column pulled by his newspaper because of an alleged breach of internal code of ethics.

Realm A: Pandemic influences growth in Internet penetration

While the COVID-19 pandemic devastated countries from one end of the globe to the next, including Jamaica, one positive for the island was the growth in Internet penetration, which came about because schools were closed and the need for work-from-home arrangements skyrocketed. Many workers had to work from home. Jamaica's Internet penetration rate stood at 68.2 per cent of the total population at the start of 2022, which facilitated the growth in the number of niche market radio stations. Internet users in Jamaica increased by 8,161, or 0.4 per cent between 2021 and 2022. Stronger Internet penetration also facilitated an increase in media turning to online publication.

Still, it can be concluded that Jamaica continues to be a relatively well informed society, served by a wide array of media outlets. The Jamaican media benefits from the perception that it is free of political bias towards any of the political parties, a factor which helps in ensuring greater freedom of expression.

Jamaicans were able to follow the international news on a real time basis. As the creator of the globally popular Reggae music and producer of the fastest women in the world, Jamaica gained its fair share of international attention. Unfortunately, however, a good deal of the news from the island centred on bad news, namely crime – the number one social issue for Jamaicans.

Realm B: Journalism in Jamaica is unfettered

Against the backdrop of a healthy 9.2 per cent out of 10 on the Chapultepec Index, it

continues to be the view that because of a long stretch without any interference from institutional authorities, Jamaican journalists run the risk of becoming complacent and not vigilant enough in guarding press freedom. The umbrella organisations, which represent professional journalists and media owners, are rarely called into action in defence of freedom of the press. Indeed, the Press Association of Jamaica spends more time worrying about training and welfare needs of journalists, while the Media Association Jamaica, tends to focus on technological issues.

Realm C: Crime rate a major social issue but not directly hurting journalists

No Jamaican journalist has been a victim of the country's extremely high murder rate, during the period under review. The fact that homicides are still running at levels over 1,400 per annum, suggests that there is a great deal of respect for journalists who remain unscathed. There is, however, concern that some journalists may be loathe to work in certain crime-infested areas of the country, out of an abundance of caution about their safety.

It is also noteworthy that no media infrastructure has been damaged by any physical attack.

Realm D: Jamaican media operates free of government control

The jump from an already high score of 22 out of 25 to 23.8 out of 25 and a complete lack of complaints from journalists are clear evidence that the Jamaican media operated without government control in the year 2021-2022. While the state-run Broadcasting Commission continues to be the principal regulator for the broadcast media, it has no jurisdiction over general media content beyond monitoring for any breaches of the terms of their operating licences.

Khara East, a leading defamation lawyer who works for the Jamaica Observer newspaper again reports that there have been far fewer defamation actions against the media in the review period, as journalists improved their quality of reporting.

Both the journalism fraternity and the government are mutually satisfied that an environment for freedom of the press and freedom of expression in Jamaica is best for the country's democracy. The occasional criticism of the press by government officials has not been followed by any concrete action against the media. There are no indications on the immediate horizon that this state of affairs will be interrupted. However, the Press Association of Jamaica did not follow through on its promise to seek to get freedom of the press enshrined in the Constitution as a separate right from the broader right of freedom of expression. Indeed, the Association has suffered from some amount of lethargy and could barely get a quorum to start its annual general meeting, its highest decision-making body.

Conclusion

Jamaica can regard itself as fortunate that it has been able to enjoy a free press and freedom of expression for yet another year. But it is important that journalists not to be lulled into a false sense of security, keeping a watchful vigilance, as colleague journalists in other regional

countries continue to suffer under less democratic regimes.

Jamaican journalists may have become over accustomed to the long stretch of free media, making complacency the main threat against freedom of the press and freedom of expression from institutional authorities. That might explain the fact that the Press Association of Jamaica is suffering from lethargy. The 79-year-old organisation had a difficult time finding a quorum, which is the minimum number of members that must be present, to start its annual general meeting earlier this year.

Still, there is a great deal to celebrate as Jamaica remains highly ranked on all the global media watchdog listings for freedom of the press and freedom of expression. Its highest ranking came from the Chapultepec Index which has the Caribbean country at second place, just behind only Canada.

The Jamaican media operated free of state control and largely remained in private hands. Editorial policies are outside the purview of the executive, legislative and judicial branches, except for the one media entity – the Jamaica Information Service – that is controlled by the Government.

Journalists were able to exist without violence against them in respect of their professional work. There were no complaints about harassment of journalists or pressure on media houses to change their content to suit any parties.

Media houses experienced fewer defamation suits, possibly because of higher standards of output or fear of the high cost that successful lawsuits can bring under the countries strict libel and defamation laws. No incidents of systemic or institutional pressure on the media were reported in the August 2021 to July 2022 period.

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