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Rules are for bending...

In the absence of enforcement, Lebanon's audiovisual media continue to disregard public interest

"In democratic regimes, the media is considered a fourth authority, but in Lebanon, this sector faces a major credibility problem, with opinion polls showing that media agencies are deemed biased in their news coverage. Moreover, the media does not sufficiently cover corruption issues, which deprives public opinion of an objective outlook that would establish a foundation for positive change and enforce a system of accountability." (Lebanese Corruption Report, 2000).

The end of the civil war almost 14 years ago saw players replace their traditional arsenals with new 'weapons', like media institutions and economic tactics. The audiovisual law that was enacted in 1994 did little to solve the sector's problems, when it legalized channels that had been broadcasting for political advantage during the war and accorded licenses based on political and confessional interests.

The media, say critics, reflects a picture of general disorder in which political and sectarian interests play key roles in policy – a situation that prevails in many public and private institutions in Lebanon. There are many inconsistencies in the application and enforcement of the law (see li Monthly Issue 5), such as many stations still broadcasting without a license, while licensed stations do not abide by regulations.

Historical Background

Some of the main laws and decrees aimed at organizing Lebanon's media sector include:

- Decree No. 22, issued in 1952, which annulled all decrees passed during the French Mandate era.
- The first press and publication law, issued in 1962.
- Law No. 382 issued on 4 November

1994, which outlined the organizational framework of Lebanon's audiovisual media.

■ Decree No. 7997 issued on 29 February 1996, which defined the requirements for stations applying for licenses.

Table 1 on the following page lists the stations that were granted a Category One license, which entitles stations to broadcast news and political programs.

Media law violations

In the absence of a monitoring, technical or financial committee to enforce the audiovisual media law, there are numerous violations by most broadcasters. Some of those are:

● Lack of an action plan

The law requires a permanent action plan in organizing the use of channels and frequencies. This is to ensure that licensed audiovisual institutions comply with technical requirements.

The law, in accordance with Decree No. 7997/96 and Law No. 382/94, formed a two-step process for handing out licenses

■ A decision by the Council of Ministers assigning the channels and their frequencies.

■ A licensing decree to be issued one year after assigning the frequencies, registering the channels at the International Union for Telecommunications (UTI) and submitting all necessary documents verifying that license requirements have been met.

Despite the fact that Decision Nos. 49 and 53 issued by the Council of Ministers (4 November 1999) included the

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