South Sudan

Country: South Sudan
Year: 2017
Press Freedom Status: Not Free
PFS Score: 70
Legal Environment: 19
Political Environment: 33
Economic Environment: 18

Key Developments in 2016:

• Security officials on a number of occasions took action to prevent the dissemination of news items authorities did not approve of.
• In August, journalist John Gatluak was shot and killed during an attack by government forces on a hotel complex that primarily housed international aid workers.
• Security forces arrested and detained Alfred Taban, a veteran journalist and the editor in chief of the Juba Monitor, in July after he penned articles sharply criticizing the country’s leaders, including an opinion piece calling on both First Vice President Riek Machar and President Salva Kiir to step down for failing the country. He was held incommunicado for nearly two weeks before being released on bail.
• Hyperinflation placed severe financial strain on the country’s newspapers and broadcasting outlets.

Executive Summary

Conditions for the media in South Sudan have remained repressive amid an ongoing conflict between armed factions loyal to President Kiir and First Vice President Machar. The government in recent years has ordered the closure of several newspapers, and more
recently has moved to block the press runs of newspapers that placed articles it disapproved of. Self-censorship is entrenched due to continued intimidation, arrests, and deportations of journalists. The combination of direct censorship and self-censorship has left citizens with a growing information vacuum. Meanwhile, economic constraints stemming from hyperinflation have put immense pressure on media houses, many of which struggle to afford printing, fuel, and salary costs.

Renewed fighting in Juba, the capital, erupted in July 2016 and resulted in the deaths of hundreds of people. The events instilled a renewed fear among journalists working in South Sudan, prompting a number to leave the country. That month, government troops stormed the Terrain hotel complex, which housed a number of foreign aid workers, among others, and tortured and gang-raped those inside. The attackers fatally shot Gatluak, a journalist and radio manager working with Internews, a project backed by the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

Security forces intensified scrutiny of the media in 2016 as the civil conflict dragged on, arresting journalists who questioned the government or reported on rights abuses. Taban, editor in chief of the Juba Monitor newspaper, was arrested in July and charged with criminal defamation after penning articles criticizing the country’s leaders over the renewed fighting between government and opposition forces in Juba, including an opinion piece in which he called for both Kiir and Machar to resign. He was charged under a provision of the 2008 penal code, rather than under the 2013 Media Authority Act, which outlines an adjudication process for defamation claims that contains safeguards for media freedom. Taban was held incommunicado for nearly two weeks before being released on bail, and the case against him appeared to be open at year’s end.

Security agents also deployed to printing sites to halt the publication of certain articles. For example, in August, security forces moved to prevent the circulation of editions of the newspapers Al Maugif and the Nation Mirror that contained articles about Machar having fled South Sudan for the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Nation Mirror’s staff reported that earlier in the month, they had been ordered by officials to remove an article about a former government official’s calls for international intervention in the country. Additionally, in November, the National Security Service (NSS) ordered the closure of Eye Radio, which is backed by USAID. Although the reason was initially unclear, a journalist familiar with the incident later said the NSS indicated the closure came in connection with a particular broadcast of remarks by Machar that had apparently angered government officials. Separately, in December, American freelance journalist Justin Lynch, who often reported for the Associated Press (AP) and had filed a number of stories about human rights abuses in the country, was detained without formal charge and deported; Lynch said officials indicated that he was being removed in connection with his reporting.

Economic turmoil continues to play a major role in destabilizing media across South Sudan. In October 2016, it was reported that year-over-year inflation of the South Sudanese pound had hit a record 835 percent; the crisis has had a direct effect on the cost of production and daily operations for newspaper, radio, and television outlets. Major newspapers have increased the cost of a daily newspaper in order to meet increased printing costs. However, this could result in lower readership, because general salaries have not kept up with inflation, leaving fewer people who can afford newspapers.
This country report has been abridged for *Freedom of the Press 2017*. For background information on press freedom in South Sudan, see *Freedom of the Press 2016*.

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