Côte d'Ivoire

Country:
Côte d'Ivoire

Year:
2017

Press Freedom Status:
Partly Free

PFS Score:
51

Legal Environment:
14

Political Environment:
19

Economic Environment:
18

Key Developments in 2016:

- The offices of the private *L’Éléphant Déchaîné* newspaper were broken into, as were two journalists’ homes, in incidents that appeared to be related to journalistic work.
- The National Press Council (CNP) continued to suspend publications in connection with complaints of unprofessionalism and publishing false information.
- In December, the broadcast regulator announced that four new private television stations and two multiplex operators had been awarded licenses, paving the way for reduced government influence in the broadcast sector.
- A new draft press law was introduced to the parliament in November. If approved, it would decriminalize most press-related offenses and reduce fines for infractions, and classify those who publish online or over mobile devices as journalists.

Executive Summary

Côte d'Ivoire’s media environment has liberalized over the last few years under President Alassane Ouattara. Notably, media were largely free to cover the presidential election in 2015, as well as December 2016 legislative elections and an October 2016 constitutional referendum. While state-run outlets dominate the media landscape, space for independent media outlets is expanding. There is no official censorship in Côte d'Ivoire and the climate
of fear that often led journalists to self-censor under the administration of former president Laurent Gbagbo has largely dissipated. However, critical and investigative journalists still risk charges and detention under various legal provisions, as well as extralegal attacks in connection with their journalistic work.

The dominance of most media sectors by state-run outlets has decreased somewhat in recent years. A number of new print outlets have been established, and the High Authority for Audiovisual Communications (HACA), Côte d'Ivoire's broadcast regulator, has begun opening space for private television stations. In May 2016, it issued a call for tenders, and in December announced the approval of four new private television channels, and two companies to serve as multiplex operators.

The Ministry of Communication during has continued work on revising the 2004 Press Law, which criminalizes some press-related offenses and inadequately addresses digital outlets. In November 2016, the government presented to parliament a draft press law that prohibited the imprisonment and detention of journalists accused of committing press-related offenses, with some exceptions, such as for incitement. The draft law, which was still under consideration at year's end, would also reduce fines for such offenses, formally classify those who publish online or over mobile devices as journalists, and make it easier to establish a new media outlet. Meanwhile, authorities in 2016 continued work to raise awareness of a 2013 freedom of information law and the procedures it outlines, including by holding workshops for government workers and members of the media.

The CNP, the country's main print regulator, continued to issue suspensions against outlets in 2016, mainly for unprofessionalism or the publication of false information. The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), an advocacy group, called for the suspended journalists and outlets to follow the CNP's code of conduct and conduct their work professionally upon reporting news of the various suspensions. However, a number of the suspended outlets are considered supportive of former President Gbagbo, raising some concerns about politicization of the body.

Extralegal attacks against journalists and outlets continue to take place, though at a far lower rate than had occurred during the country's past political crisis. In March 2016, Fofana Baba-Idris, a prominent blogger and journalist known for his outspoken articles, began to receive death threats through text messages and blog comments; in April, his home was broken into and a threatening note was left behind. In May, Baudelaire Mieu, a freelance journalist who has contributed to outlets including Jeune Afrique and Bloomberg News, was the target of a home break-in; unidentified assailants, brandishing guns, stole his laptop, but left behind other valuables. And in July 2016, the offices of the private satirical and investigative publication L'Éléphant Déchaîné were burglarized. The perpetrators took files for three investigations regarding state officials, the coffee and cocoa industries, and a bank, respectively.

Separately, in May, editor Laurent Despas and journalist Donatien Kautcha of the news website Koaci were arrested and detained overnight after publishing allegations, based on an interview with Gbagbo's son, Michel Gbagbo, that Ivorian authorities were detaining political prisoners. Both Despas and Gbagbo were charged with spreading falsehoods, and the case against them remained open at year's end.
This country report has been abridged for *Freedom of the Press 2017*. For background information on press freedom in Côte d'Ivoire, see *Freedom of the Press 2016*.

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