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Freedom Of The Press - Madagascar (2011)

Status: Not Free
Legal Environment: 19
Political Environment: 30
Economic Environment: 15
Total Score: 64

After a coup swept the former mayor of Antananarivo, Andry Nirina Rajoelina, to the presidency in March 2009, the ensuing dismissal of the parliament, a virtual suspension of the constitution, and the end of any semblance of judicial independence ushered in a dangerous and violent period for journalists and the media that has continued through the end of 2010.

With the breakdown of democracy and constitutional governance since 2009, the laws protecting freedom of the press have been routinely ignored or selectively applied by the High Authority of the Transition (HAT), Rajoelina's interim government. The increased corruption of the judiciary, and lack of a parliament or any independent media regulatory bodies, has allowed the HAT to rule by decree without checks and balances. Attempts to strengthen constitutional and legal protections for journalists and freedom of the press have been put on the back burner pending resolution of the political crisis. The November 17 constitutional referendum, which was approved by a 74 percent vote despite a boycott by the three opposition parties, was silent on the media. Despite attempts by several members of the media to formally draft a code of ethics, no such code exists, and the barely functional Association of Journalists lacks independence from political influence.

Censorship, harassment, and intimidation throughout the media sector remained widespread in 2010. During the year, the Rajoelina government closed several media outlets, many of them radio stations, for political reasons. The closings were often accompanied by violence. Several journalists were assaulted, arrested, and imprisoned. On May 15, government soldiers violently broke up a live broadcast at radio Frequence Plus in the capital, Antananarivo. Opposition politicians participating in the broadcast were assaulted, three members of the editorial staff suffered serious injuries, and large-scale destruction of the equipment forced the station's closing. On May 20, government soldiers closed Radio Fahazavana, a church-owned station that supported ousted President Marc Ravalomanana, on a variety of charges including "non-respect for journalistic ethics resulting in a threat to state security and incitement of violence and rebellion." Ten employees of the station, six of whom are journalists, were arrested and imprisoned until September 8, when they were conditionally released to await trial. Also on September 8, opposition station Radio Mahafaly in Antsirabé was ordered to cease broadcasting with no reason given for the suspension. In September and early October, the HAT ordered the closure of approximately 80 broadcasters, most of them radio stations. After an unsuccessful coup attempt by a group of military officers on November 17, several TV stations, including Ma-TV and TV Plus—which had broadcast

statements by the leaders of the coup attempt—were threatened with suspension or closure if they were not more supportive of the transitional government. Government radio stations were not spared the violence. On August 27, Radio Soatalily, an affiliate of government-owned Radio National Malgache (RNM) in Toliary, was ransacked by opposition protesters, and on September 7 another RNM station, Radio Varatraza in Antsiranana, was damaged when an attempt was made to burn down its transmitter.

Perhaps the only bright spot on Madagascar's media landscape in 2010 was that no journalists were killed. In February 2009, prior to Ravalomanana's overthrow, government security forces had shot and killed Ando Ratovonirina of privately owned Radio et Television Analamanga (RTA) at an opposition demonstration in the capital. That marked the first killing of a reporter in the course of his work in Madagascar since 1992. Due to the polarized and uncertain political climate, many journalists exercise self-censorship.

In 2010, there were approximately 250 radio stations and 39 television stations, though the government retains a monopoly on nationwide broadcasting. Thirteen private daily newspapers and many more that appear less frequently were published throughout the country, but the number fluctuated due to several closures and reopenings. Widespread poverty and illiteracy severely limit the penetration of TV, print media, and the internet, making radio by far the most important medium in the country. Major political figures own several of the private media outlets. Ravalomanana, for instance, owns the Malagasy Broadcasting System, which operates television and radio stations, and Rajoelina owns VIVA TV. The state-owned media include Television Malagasy and Malagasy National Radio.

While there were no reports that the government restricted internet usage or monitored e-mail, allegations of technical sabotage of websites from both political camps surfaced during the year. Given the extremely chaotic, violent, and restrictive media environment within the country, access to information from abroad via the internet took on added importance. However, the polarization that plagued the traditional media was also evident in cyberspace, and only about 1.7 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2010. Prospects for rapid expansion of the internet sector from these low levels improved greatly with the inauguration on November 16, 2009, of the submarine cable LION (Lower Indian Ocean Network), a fiber-optic network connecting Madagascar, Reunion, and Mauritius. The project, financed by a consortium made up of Orange Madagascar, Mauritius Telecom, and France Telecom S.A., would make it possible for Madagascar to access broadband internet for the first time. Broadband connection, however, was still unavailable at year's end.