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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Madagascar

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After a coup swept Andry Nirina Rajoelina, the former mayor of the capital, Antananarivo, to power 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 the media that saw one journalist killed and more than 80 opposition media outlets closed through 2010. While 2011 did not see any further killings or closings, the press environment remained extremely volatile, with high levels of government censorship and intimidation of journalists and media outlets. An agreement on a "road map" to presidential and parliamentary elections was reached in September 2011, but an election date had yet to be set, and political instability continued throughout the year.

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 the 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 have been delayed pending resolution of the political crisis. 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. At the end of the year, the HAT's Communication Ministry established an ethics commission for the media.

Censorship, harassment, and intimidation throughout the media sector remained widespread in 2011. According to Madonline, the website of a nonprofit organization of independent journalists in Madagascar, 10 reporters remained behind bars at the end of 2011, and none of the radio and TV stations closed after the coup had reopened. In October, a judge postponed the trial of the staff of Radio Fahazavana. The station, which had supported ousted president Marc Ravalomanana, had been closed in May 2010 based on a variety of charges including "non-respect for journalistic ethics resulting in a threat to state security and incitement of violence and rebellion," and its staff was arrested. In December, TV Plus received an official warning letter from the government after openly criticizing the president for "inappropriate" holidays in Mauritius. Also that month, the government threatened the Free FM radio station with closure for its regular criticism of the HAT, and the station accused the government of retaliatory frequency interference. Several other media outlets either owned by or sympathetic to the opposition walked a tightrope between self-censorship and closure. Many television and radio stations have altered their formats, airing live call-in shows to avoid editorial responsibility for the content.

In 2011, there were approximately 250 radio stations and 39 television stations, but many of these remain closed after being shut down by the government after the 2009 coup. The government retains a monopoly on nationwide broadcasting, and radio and television licenses are often suspended

2012 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Not Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

63

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arbitrarily. These suspensions, as well as arrests of journalists, are commonly justified by “national security” concerns by the government. Thirteen private daily newspapers, and many more that appear less frequently, are published throughout the country, but the number also fluctuates due to several closures and reopenings. Widespread poverty and illiteracy severely limit the penetration of television, 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 owns the Malagasy Broadcasting System, which operates television and radio stations, and Rajoelina owns the Viva television and radio networks. 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, accusations 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. Because many internet servers are located outside of the country and beyond the reach of the regime, the internet is seen as one of the most reliable sources of information. Political groups and parties use the internet to share opinions and to criticize opposing parties. However, only about 2 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2011, and access to the internet was limited mainly to urban areas. Prospects for rapid expansion of internet access from these low levels improved greatly with the November 2009 inauguration of the Lower Indian Ocean Network (LION) submarine cable, 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., made it possible for Madagascar to access broadband internet for the first time.

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