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Madagascar

Country:

Madagascar

Year:

2015

Press Freedom Status:

PF

PFS Score:

59

Legal Environment:

19

Political Environment:

24

Economic Environment:

16

Status change explanation: Madagascar improved from Not Free to Partly Free due to a more favorable environment for the press after the restoration of democratic rule, including a decline in direct pressure and censorship from the highest levels of government, and a general lack of violence toward journalists in 2014.

In January 2014, former finance minister Hery Rajaonarimampianina assumed the presidency following concurrent presidential and parliamentary elections held in 2013. This transfer of power marked a major step toward resolving a protracted political crisis that began with a military coup in 2009. Following the coup, legislation protecting freedom of the press was routinely ignored or selectively applied by the High Authority of the Transition (HAT), the interim government led by Andry Rajoelina. Madagascar's press environment improved with the return to democratic rule in 2014, with the new administration demonstrating greater respect for media freedom. Nevertheless, official censorship and intimidation of journalists continued at reduced levels.

Legal Environment

The 2010 constitution, approved by popular referendum, provides for freedoms of expression and of the press, but stipulates that these may be limited “by the imperative of safeguarding the public order, the national dignity, and the security of the state.” In practice, these freedoms are subject to a number of restrictions. Defamation is a criminal offense. In July 2014, two journalists from the daily *Madagascar Matin*— publication manager Jean Luc Rahaga and editor in chief Didier Ramanoelina—were arrested on charges of “libel and press offenses” for the publication of a letter alleging the involvement of government officials in the trafficking of rosewood. The incident led to street protests, and President Rajaonarimampianina issued a statement condemning the arrests. The journalists were released shortly, and the charges were dropped. In August, Parliament adopted a cybercrime law that prescribes up to five years in prison as punishment for defaming state officials online. The law’s vague definition of defamation has led to fears that certain provisions can be used to limit the freedom of expression online.

In 2013, the Special Commission on Audiovisual Communication (CSCA), a body within the Ministry of Communication, ordered the closure of Kolo Radio and Television due to “licensing irregularities.” The move was widely suspected to be politically motivated, and the closure was shortly suspended pending appeal. In April 2014, a high court reversed the CSCA decision, finding that Kolo meets the legal and technical requirements to continue operations.

Madagascar does not have a freedom of information law. Despite attempts by several members of the media to formally draft a code of ethics, no such code exists. The Ministry of Communication established an ethics commission for the media in 2011, but it quickly collapsed. In some cases, media bodies administer their own ethics criteria in lieu of national standards. A number of leading journalists in 2012 launched an open-membership union for the protection of journalistic interests. It actively engaged with the regional Southern African Development Community and other international entities to address the mass closure broadcast outlets that occurred under the HAT.

Political Environment

The restoration of democratic rule in 2014 and related efforts to facilitate national reconciliation led to an improvement in government relations with the media in 2014, including a decline in censorship of content and political interference with outlets. Rajaonarimampianina, unlike Rajoelina, does not own any media outlets. Rajoelina’s transitional government had maintained a tight grip on nationwide broadcasting, and radio and television licenses were often suspended arbitrarily based on grounds of national security. Approximately 80 radio and television stations were closed under the HAT and have yet to be reopened. Censorship, harassment, and intimidation continued at a reduced degree in 2014 despite general improvements in the media environment. In October 2014, the government issued a warning that media outlets would be held responsible for threats to national security stemming from coverage of the return of former president Marc Ravalomanana from exile.

In general, state and privately owned media continue to display bias toward particular political figures, parties, or business interests. Ahead of the 2013 elections, the Ministry of Communication established a monitoring program for media coverage of the polls. The

media environment was highly polarized, with outlets often representing a political faction. Major political figures own several of the country's private media outlets.

Violence against journalists declined in 2014, with only one reported case—a photojournalist working for the newspaper *Midi* was assaulted by police officers in February after photographing their response to a bomb threat in Antananarivo. In the south of the country, widespread insecurity and violence continue to make reporting extremely difficult.

Economic Environment

More than 300 radio and television stations were operating in 2014. There are numerous private newspapers, including dailies and those published less regularly; the number fluctuates due to frequent suspensions. 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.

Only about 4 percent of the population used the internet in 2014, and access continued to be limited mainly to urban areas. There were no reports that the government restricted internet usage or monitored electronic communications. Despite the low penetration rate, the internet is seen as an important source of reliable information, as many servers are located outside the country and beyond the reach of the government. Political groups and parties use the internet widely to share opinions, engage in discussion, and criticize opponents.

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