Mauritania

**PRESS FREEDOM STATUS:** Partly Free

**LEGAL ENVIRONMENT:** 16 / 30 (↓1)

\(0=\text{BEST, 30=WORST}\)

**POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT:** 20 / 40

\(0=\text{BEST, 40=WORST}\)

**ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT:** 15 / 30

\(0=\text{BEST, 30=WORST}\)

**PRESS FREEDOM SCORE:** 51 / 100 (↓1)

\(0=\text{BEST, 100=WORST}\)

**QUICK FACTS**

**Population:** 3,641,288

**Freedom in the World Status:** Not Free

**Internet Penetration Rate:** 15.2%

**Overview**

Although Mauritania has made progress on media freedom in recent years, private outlets remain financially weak, restrictive legislation threatens free
expression, and journalists investigating official corruption and other sensitive topics are subject to harassment.

**Key Developments**

- The National Assembly passed a new cybercrime law in December 2015 that could lead to prosecutions and self-censorship among the country's increasingly important online media.

- The national media regulator suspended a radio talk show in September on the grounds that it endangered national unity and social cohesion.

**Legal Environment: 16 / 30 (↓1)**

Article 10 of the 1991 constitution guarantees freedom of opinion, thought, and expression. Legal and regulatory reforms enacted in 2006 eliminated the requirement for prepublication government approval for newspapers, established journalists’ legal right to protect sources, and created a media regulatory body, the High Authority for the Press and Audiovisual Sector (HAPA). In 2011, the parliament approved amendments to the 2006 Press Freedom Law that abolished prison sentences for slander and defamation, including for speech about heads of state.

However, laws that prescribe harsh penalties for religious offenses remain in force. Blogger and freelance journalist Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed Ould Mkhaitir was sentenced to death for apostasy in December 2014 over an article in which he allegedly criticized the prophet Muhammad and argued that local interpretations of Islam improperly justified Mauritania’s rigid caste system. The piece sparked widespread social outrage, including street protests,
condemnations by religious authorities, and death threats against Ould Mkhaitir. He remained in prison awaiting his execution in 2015.

In December 2015, the National Assembly passed a new cybercrime law that established prison sentences and heavy fines for disseminating certain types of politically sensitive content over the internet. Journalists alleged that the legislation would permit authorities to prosecute them for almost anything published online. The legislation also brings encryption technology under heavy state regulation and nullifies previous laws extending protections to journalists using digital technologies. Mauritania has no legislation guaranteeing access to information.

Though the Ministry of Communications has liberalized certain broadcasting regulations and licensed a number of private media outlets in recent years, some opposition members maintain that the allocation of licenses favors progovernment political, tribal, and ethno-racial interests.

In addition to its regulatory role, the HAPA is responsible for nominating the heads of public media outlets and the Mauritanian News Agency. The HAPA’s board members are only partly autonomous from the executive branch. Under 2012 legal amendments, three of the board’s six members, including its chair, are appointed by the president; two are named by the president of the National Assembly; and one is appointed by the president of the Senate. The authority warned journalists against criticizing the president or his family in August 2015, and in September it suspended the radio talk show *Sahara Talk* on the private station Sahara Media, declaring that the program threatened national unity and social cohesion.

The Mauritanian Journalists’ Union engages in regular, vocal advocacy for the rights of journalists, including for fair wages and protection from violence. The National Union of Electronic Sites in Mauritania, a syndicate of websites and digital publishers, focuses on the rights of journalists operating through digital
media. Although it has at times toed the government line on discouraging content that undermines values such as Islam or national unity, it also opposed the passage of the new cybercrime law.

**Political Environment: 20 / 40**

Though the media express a variety of views, most journalists practice a degree of self-censorship in their coverage of sensitive issues such as the military, corruption, Islam, and slavery—which is still practiced in Mauritania. Foreign reporters are prevented from openly covering subjects like slavery and must work clandestinely to avoid government monitoring or interference.

Journalists who do address sensitive topics or report on the country’s political elite can face harassment, sometimes in the form of arbitrary arrest. In February 2015, Ahmedou Ould Wedia of the media outlet *Essirage* was arrested after publishing documents related to alleged bank fraud. Also that month, police arrested and temporarily detained journalist Aziz Ould Souvi of the news site *Tawary* as he attempted to investigate a recent death at a hospital. In December, police repeatedly questioned Mehdi Ould Lemrabott of the online news site *Mushahid*, who had published an article about an alleged corruption scandal involving an elected official and a businessman tied to the ruling party. Ould Lemrabott had received threats in September after he refused to reveal his sources concerning an article on local political rivalries.

Extralegal violence and intimidation toward journalists has decreased somewhat over the past several years, but news reports and advocacy groups indicate that journalists regularly face aggression from civil authorities and security forces in the course of their reporting.
**Economic Environment: 15 / 30**

Mauritania experienced an unprecedented opening of the media sector in 2011. Despite a system of state subsidies for private outlets, however, financial constraints and capacity issues mean that independent media remain underdeveloped in practice. The government owns two daily newspapers, the French-language *Horizons* and the Arabic-language *Chaab*, which circulate alongside numerous independent print outlets. The government’s 51-year monopoly on broadcast media formally ended in 2011 when the HAPA announced the creation of new independent television and radio stations. Domestic media have continued to diversify, with five independent television outlets and five independent radio stations now in operation, though their finances remain quite fragile. Regulators temporarily shut down three private television stations—Dava TV, Chinguetti TV, and El-Mourabitoune TV—in the summer of 2015 due to their failure to pay debts. Mauritanians have access to international satellite television, and a number of international radio stations are rebroadcast locally. Radio Sawa, a U.S. government–funded, Arabic-language radio station, began operating in Mauritania in 2014.

The impact of online media has grown in recent years, and the government does not restrict internet access. Penetration surpassed 15 percent in 2015. Mobile-telephone subscriptions are within the reach of most Mauritanians; the country has about 90 mobile subscriptions for every 100 inhabitants.

The wages of public media workers remain a particular concern. While most state employees saw salary hikes of between 30 and 50 percent in 2014, the Mauritanian Journalists’ Union said media workers were excluded from the increase, and that their wages have stagnated for more than 10 years. Female journalists are particularly disadvantaged, being both underrepresented in the profession and underpaid compared with their male counterparts.