![Freedom House logo](75 Years Championing Democracy)

Published on *Freedom House* (https://freedomhouse.org)

Home > Somalia

Somalia

Country:
Somalia
Year:
2016
Press Freedom Status:
NF
PFS Score:
79
Legal Environment:
25
Political Environment:
34
Economic Environment:
20

Overview

Somalia is one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists, though conditions vary between semiautonomous Puntland and the rest of the country, as well as among different areas within the south-central region itself. Violence restricts journalistic access to large areas of the country, and retaliatory attacks against reporters are common. The government actively engages in censorship and prosecution of critical voices, while those who commit crimes against journalists enjoy impunity.

Key Developments

- Officials harassed the independent Shabelle Media Network on several occasions in 2015, including by fining the company's owner $10,000 for public incitement and raiding the offices of two of its radio stations.
- A controversial new media law passed in December requires reporters to have a university degree in journalism and pass a state test, includes heavy fines for libel, and empowers authorities to block websites as punishment for media offenses despite a provision explicitly prohibiting censorship.

- Daud Ali Omar, a producer for the progovernment Radio Baidoa, and Hindia Haji Mohamed, a reporter for the state-run outlets Radio Mogadishu and Somali National TV, were killed in retaliation for their work in April and December, respectively.

Legal Environment: 25 / 30

Somalia's 2012 provisional federal constitution provides for freedoms of speech and the press, but pervasive violence restricts reporting in practice. No law guarantees access to information, and new regulations provide for fines of up to $3,000 for libel offenses. Many cases are resolved outside the formal court system, either according to *xeer* (customary law) or in Sharia (Islamic law) courts. Restrictive laws are often used to punish critical media outlets in the formal judiciary system. A number of journalists associated with the independent Shabelle Media Network, which owns Radio Shabelle and Sky FM, have faced prosecution on spurious charges in recent years. In March 2015, a court fined the owner of Shabelle Media Network $10,000 for public incitement. Sky FM director Mohamud Mohamed Dahir and Radio Shabelle editor Ahmed Abdi Hassan were found guilty of publishing false news and fined $2,000 and $500, respectively. Also in March, Radio Shabelle journalist Mohamed Bashir Hashi was released on bail after spending seven months in pretrial detention on charges that included insurrection against the state and the attempted murder of a legislator. International watchdogs have criticized the case against him as politicized. According to local and international media reports, all three journalists had fled Somalia by year's end.

While the government aggressively prosecutes critical journalists, impunity remains the norm for those who commit crimes against the press. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Somalia is ranked number one in the Global Impunity Index, with more than 30 journalists' murders having gone unprosecuted since 2008. In a rare exception, the Somali government cooperated with Canadian authorities in investigating the 2008 abduction of a Canadian journalist, Australian photographer, and their Somali translator in Mogadishu; the suspected planner was arrested in June 2015 in Ottawa and charged with kidnapping.

The parliament passed a controversial new media law in December after an extended consultation period. Journalists' unions and media advocates have criticized the legislation for creating onerous restrictions, such as a requirement that all reporters have a university degree in journalism and pass a state test. The law compels journalists to disclose sources of information upon official request, establishes heavy fines for libel, and empowers authorities to block websites as punishment for media offenses despite a provision prohibiting censorship.

The legislation stipulates the creation of a new media regulatory commission composed of nine members—three from state outlets, three from private outlets, and three from civil society organizations. It also requires all media outlets to obtain a license from the government and pay an annual fee, formalizing an arbitrary registration scheme in place since 2013. Households will be required to pay a television license fee in order to receive content; the amount had not been determined by the end of 2015. Despite the sweeping scope of the legislation, the government's ability to implement it remains in doubt due to limited administrative capacity and weak state control of territory outside of Mogadishu.

Separately, the draft National Communications Act appeared to remain on hold, and its relationship to the new media law was unclear at year's end. International organizations, including Article 19, have called on the government to amend the draft in order to ensure compliance with international standards, particularly in regard to the independence of the telecommunications regulator proposed in the act.

Although the 2012 constitution of semiautonomous Puntland provides for press freedom, a number of laws impose restrictions on journalists. In 2014, the Puntland legislature passed a media law that empowered the region's information ministry to unilaterally issue or revoke the registrations of media outlets and the identification cards of journalists. The law remained the subject of controversy in 2015, with advocacy groups such as the Media Association of Puntland pressuring the government to review and amend it.

Political Environment: 34 / 40

Violence continued to undermine conditions for media in south-central Somalia, as the government and African Union (AU) troops battled the Shabaab, a militant Islamist group, and other local militias for control of areas outside Mogadishu. Media outlets have aligned themselves with political factions as a means of survival, making neutral or objective reporting a rarity. Self-censorship usually falls along partisan or clan-based lines. Concerns about safety also make journalists who gain access to militant leaders reluctant to conduct or edit critical interviews.

Arbitrary arrests and direct censorship remained common in 2015. In April, the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) stormed the offices of Radio Shabelle and Sky FM, forcing them to close and arresting at least 20 journalists. Most were quickly released, but Radio Shabelle director Mohamed Muse and editor Ahmed Abdi Hassan were held for an extended period. NISA found the station to be in violation of an informal ban on broadcasting statements by the Shabaab. Both Radio Shabelle and Sky FM had only returned to the air the previous month, having suspended broadcasts after NISA raids in August 2014. Separately, in December 2015, security forces temporarily seized the equipment of journalists attending a press conference related to the country's 2016 elections, deleting video and audio recordings.

Nonstate actors also interfere with the work of journalists. In August, in a region controlled by the progovernment Sufi group Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a, six journalists were detained for allegedly refusing to register with the local authorities. This follows previous tensions between the group and the media, including other arrests and short-term detentions of journalists for failure to follow local regulations.

Journalists in Puntland continue to face threats, attacks, and harassment from security forces and militias, who usually enjoy impunity for their actions. Despite hope among journalists that the head of the Puntland government, Abdiweli Mohamed Ali, would be more tolerant than his predecessor, reporting on political and security issues remains particularly difficult. In September 2015, the Puntland information ministry banned private radio stations from rebroadcasting programs aired by state-run Radio Mogadishu, claiming that the central government unduly influences the outlet's content.

Numerous journalists have been killed in recent years, either for their perceived political affiliations or in crossfire. In November, Mustaf Abdi Noor, a freelance journalist, was killed while covering an attack on a Mogadishu hotel by the Shabaab. Noor was investigating the detonation of a car bomb at the hotel when a second explosion killed him; it does not appear that he was targeted. According to CPJ, two journalists were murdered in 2015 for their work. Daud Ali Omar, a producer for the progovernment Radio Baidoa, was killed in his home alongside his wife in April. Local media reported that the Shabaab was suspected to be behind the attack. In December, Hindia Haji Mohamed, a journalist with the state-run outlets Radio Mogadishu and Somali National TV, was killed by a bomb placed in her car. The Shabaab claimed responsibility for the attack.

Economic Environment: 20 / 30

Despite the security situation, nearly two dozen radio stations continue to broadcast in south-central Somalia. The government supports Radio Mogadishu, which carries official news and information and provides some space for various groups and individuals to voice their opinions. A joint UN-AU radio station, Radio Bar Kulan, has sought to operate as a public-service broadcaster, though it tends to favor viewpoints that are sympathetic to the government and AU forces. In August 2015, local media reported that the director of the project, a British national, was under investigation following allegations of financial misconduct. Many Somalis also access news via foreign radio transmissions, including the Somali services of the British Broadcasting Corporation and Voice of America. There is one state-run television network, Somali National Television, which broadcasts from Mogadishu. A handful of private networks are based in the autonomous regions of the country but are viewed throughout Somalia. The print media sector is only starting to reemerge after being dormant for years.

The Somali diaspora in Europe, North America, and the Persian Gulf states has established a rich internet presence. There are several websites that offer news content in English and Somali, as well as television stations that broadcast over the internet. While some local journalists operate via web-based platforms, the Somali diaspora has greater economic resources, security, and access to technology, giving it great influence over the online landscape.

The internet is available in large cities in Somalia, and users enjoy a relatively fast and inexpensive connection, including through mobile devices. However, only about 1.8 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2015. Although there were no reports of government restrictions on the internet in 2015, the Shabaab has attempted to ban the medium in areas under its control by pressuring providers to terminate services.

The advertising sector is weak, and advertising revenue is often insufficient to sustain media enterprises. Some outlets consequently depend on financial support from wealthy owners or politicians, which compromises editorial independence. Journalists in all regions of Somalia receive low or even no pay and rely on trainings, bribery, or blackmail for additional income. Many media outlets also prefer to hire cheaper, less-skilled workers over more experienced journalists. Because there is an abundance of journalists, those who complain about low wages usually face threats of dismissal and replacement.

Note: The scores and narrative for Somalia do not reflect conditions for the media in the territory of Somaliland, which is covered in a separate report.

Source URL: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/somalia