Mauritania

Country: Mauritania
Year: 2015
Press Freedom Status: PF
PFS Score: 50
Legal Environment: 15
Political Environment: 20
Economic Environment: 15

Mauritania’s progress on media freedoms over the past several years became imperilled in 2014 as a restrictive new cybercrime bill moved forward, and a blogger was sentenced to death in December on apostasy charges. President Mohammed Ould Abdel Aziz, who had passed a number of positive media reforms during his first term in office, won reelection in June 2014 in polls boycotted by most opposition parties.

Legal Environment

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.

In January 2014, Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed Ould Mkhaitir, an engineer, was arrested over the publication of an allegedly blasphemous blog post in which he criticized the prophet Muhammad and critiqued local interpretations of Islam for allegedly providing religious justification for Mauritania’s rigid caste system. The piece sparked widespread
social outrage, including street protests, condemnations by religious authorities, and death threats against Ould Mkhaitir. After a trial, he was convicted of apostasy and sentenced to death in December. Ould Mkhaitir could avoid execution through a pardon or an appeal.

After being dropped in the second half of 2013, government proposals for a cybercrime and digital information regulatory regime reemerged in 2014. In April, the cabinet ratified a draft bill that, among other provisions, would establish jail time 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 would also bring encryption technology under heavy state regulation, and nullify previous laws extending protections to journalists using digital technologies. At the end of November, the government invited civil society groups to comment on the bill; however, the bill had not been passed at year's end. Mauritania has no legislation guaranteeing access to information.

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 appointed in consultation with media associations and journalist groups, a departure from the previous practice of presidential appointments. HAPA played an important role in the 2014 presidential election, establishing guidelines for and limits on campaign coverage and political advertising for state-run media outlets, and ensuring compliance with those regulations. Beginning in 2013, the Ministry of Communications liberalized certain broadcasting regulations and licensed a number of private media outlets, although some opposition members maintained that the allocation of permits favored progovernment political and tribal interests.

The Mauritanian Journalists’ Union engages in regular, vocal advocacy for the rights of journalists, including for fair wages and protection from violence. In 2014, it established two new affiliate groups: one for photojournalists and another for young people. 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 came out against the proposed cybercrime bill in April 2014.

**Political Environment**

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. Media outlets generally do not stray far from official reports, including in their coverage of the 2013 parliamentary and municipal elections, which opposition parties boycotted on grounds of fraud. However, local media did report on the large street protests staged by the opposition in the run-up to the 2014 presidential poll, which rocked the capital in early June, and regularly reported on the opposition’s disputes with the government.

Mauritanian journalists are subject to some harassment while covering sensitive issues or reporting on the country’s political elite. In March 2014, six journalists were detained by
security forces while covering a press conference by the extremist group Friends of the Prophet. Alleging the reporters were not authorized to cover the event, officers confiscated their equipment and deleted their recordings before releasing them a few hours later. In December, Abeh Ould Mohammad Lafdal, the manager of the newspaper Al-Layl, was arrested following a verbal confrontation with President Abdel Aziz at the Tadamon news agency headquarters. He was held without charge for several days before being released, but was arrested again for unclear reasons hours later; an unidentified source said to be close to Lafdal, in remarks to the British news website Al-Araby al-Jadeed, alleged that the second arrest came on orders from a high-ranking official in the presidential palace. Lafdal's legal status was unknown at year’s end. Foreign reporters are prevented from openly covering certain subjects, such as slavery, and therefore must operate clandestinely in such cases. Extralegal violence and intimidation toward journalists has decreased 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

Mauritania has experienced an unprecedented opening of the media sector since 2011, although 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 operations. Domestic media has continued to diversify, with two independent television outlets now in operation. Mauritanians have access to international satellite television; two internet-based television stations, Shinquiti and Murabitun, also operate. There are a handful of public and private radio stations, while 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 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.

The government does not restrict internet access, but penetration was just 11 percent in 2014. However, mobile-telephone subscriptions are within the reach of the majority of Mauritania’s people. The impact of online media has grown in recent years, but existing legislation does not address emergent internet-based journalism.

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