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Country:

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Year:

2016

Press Freedom Status:

Not Free

PFS Score:

71

Legal Environment:

21

Political Environment:

28

Economic Environment:

22

Overview

The press freedom situation saw modest improvements in 2015, as no journalists were killed during the second and ostensibly final year of interim president Catherine Samba-Panza's transitional government, which maintained a relatively hands-off approach toward the underdeveloped media sector. Nevertheless, persistent insecurity throughout the country made reporting difficult, and the recovery of the press from the disruption of the current crisis remained heavily dependent on international support.

Key Developments

- In January 2015, the Transitional High Council for Communications (HCCT) suspended the publication of 20 newspapers and an online radio station for failing to register with the government.

- In September, the Muslim community radio station La Voix de la Paix was attacked and severely damaged during a confrontation in Bangui between Muslim and Christian fighters.

Legal Environment: 21 / 30

The 2004 constitution of the Central African Republic (CAR) guarantees freedom of the press, and a press law that took effect in 2005 abolished imprisonment for many offenses, such as libel and slander. However, criminal penalties remain in place for some defamation charges, incitement of ethnic or religious hatred, and the publication or broadcast of false information that could “disturb the peace.” In 2014, two journalists were arrested on defamation charges for allegedly insulting President Samba-Panza in their respective newspapers. By August 2015, one had agreed to issue a public apology to resolve his case. No new cases were reported during the year.

The absence of a freedom of information law makes accessing official information challenging for journalists. The HCCT, which is tasked with granting licenses and promoting press freedom, is nominally independent but has a very low level of institutional capacity. In May 2015, HCCT President José-Richard Pouambi expressed a desire to pursue positive goals, such as equitable access to state media for various social and political groups, but also suggested a need for measures that would negatively impact press freedom, such as mandatory newspaper registration. The body’s weak position ultimately prevented it from pursuing any significant new programs during the year. However, in January, the HCCT suspended the publication of 20 newspapers and an online radio station for failing to register with the government. In February, it banned the radio or television broadcast of a popular song by Central African singer Losseba Ngoutiwa, on the grounds that the song was disrespectful to women.

There are several professional groups for journalists, including the Union of Central African Journalists (UJCA) and the Central African Media Observatory (OMCA), which are active despite their fairly low levels of capacity.

Political Environment: 28 / 40 (↑1)

The security situation remained tenuous in 2015, resulting in delays in the electoral process originally scheduled to begin in October and interfering with journalists’ work. The first round of elections finally took place in December, with reporters from numerous outlets collaborating to cover the event in a media-support project backed by the UN Development Program (UNDP). In contrast to 2014, the transitional government did not take action to censor media reports during the year.

Journalists were subject to arbitrary arrest and detention in 2015. In August, Maurice Wilfried Sebiro, editor of the newspaper *Centrafrique Libre*, reported being briefly detained

and having his camera confiscated after photographing the presidential motorcade. A journalist working for the Network of Human Rights Journalists (RJDH) was arrested in November at the Bangui airport during Pope Francis's departure from the country, for reasons never made clear. He was released hours later, after civil society leaders protested his detention.

Episodes of intercommunal violence interfered with newsgathering and presented significant challenges to journalists working in CAR. In September, the Muslim community radio station La Voix de la Paix was attacked during a confrontation in Bangui between Muslim and Christian fighters. The Worldwide Movement for Human Rights (FIDH) later reported that the station had been "completely ransacked and destroyed."

There were no reported attacks against individual journalists in 2015. Threats against journalists nevertheless remained common, with the transitional government and peacekeeping forces unable to ensure their security outside of Bangui. Radio ICDI, based in Boali, suspended its broadcasts in November after a local anti-Balaka leader threatened its director and editor in chief in response to the station's reporting on atrocities allegedly committed by his troops. The two men fled to the capital and their station remained inactive at the end of the year.

Economic Environment: 22 / 30

All newspapers, including six dailies published in French, are privately owned. Low literacy levels, high poverty rates, and the lack of a functioning postal service in rural areas limit the reach of print media, which are largely restricted to Bangui. The so-called daily newspapers in fact publish irregularly, and the most popular print only several hundred copies of each edition. There are no local printing presses, and newspapers are often produced using standard computer printers and photocopiers.

Radio is the most important medium for news consumption and is much more popular and professionally run than print media. The state owns Radio Centrafrique, the only station with national reach, although it no longer broadcasts 24 hours a day. Its coverage is mostly limited to government activities. Much more popular is the private Radio Ndeke Luka, which is broadcast mainly in Bangui; it carries high-quality news programming and is popular among both state officials and private citizens. Bangui is home to a number of private radio stations, many of which carry Christian-themed programming. Some stations have made efforts to employ a diverse staff, such as the joint Muslim-Christian station Voice of Ouaka, which launched in February 2015.

There are 18 community radio stations serving rural areas around the country, but many of them lost broadcasting and production equipment during the current crisis and remain heavily dependent on the support of international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Only one local commercial station exists, supported by a Swiss NGO, though many international outlets such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Radio France Internationale (RFI), and Voice of America (VOA) are available. There are only two television stations, one state-owned and one private, and their broadcasting capabilities

are limited. Much like state radio, the public television broadcaster serves mainly to publicize government activities.

There is virtually no private advertising market, and state enterprises that provide what little advertising revenue can be found do not support critical outlets. Many journalists are compelled by a lack of regular pay to cover certain stories, including those promoting politicians. Most journalists are poorly trained, although a journalism department was established at the University of Bangui in 2009.

Infrastructural constraints have also limited internet penetration, which stood at just under 5 percent in 2015. Some websites, such as that of the RJDH, provide strong coverage of local events, but remain inaccessible to the vast majority of the population.

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