Congo, Republic of (Brazzaville)

Country: Congo, Republic of (Brazzaville)
Year: 2016
Press Freedom Status: Partly Free
PFS Score: 59
Legal Environment: 17
Political Environment: 25
Economic Environment: 17

Overview

Despite legal protections, freedom of the press is restricted in practice. Media professionals are not easily able to obtain public information, and many journalists—particularly at state-run outlets—practice self-censorship. Authorities sometimes interfere with the ability of outlets to operate, including by revoking licenses and disrupting telecommunications services.

Key Developments

- Widespread communication outages, including the disruption of broadcast signals, were reported ahead of an October 2015 referendum on amending presidential term limits.
- Following widely covered police suppression of demonstrations against the proposed changes, masked assailants in police uniforms attempted to kidnap freelance journalist Christian Perrin in Pointe-Noire; he and his family subsequently reported threats from local authorities.
Legal Environment: 17 / 30

Freedom of the press is recognized by the Republic of Congo's 2002 constitution and its laws, but is restricted in practice. A 2001 law made the Republic of Congo one of the first African countries to decriminalize libel. However, certain types of speech, such as inciting violence or ethnic hatred, are criminalized and carry the potential for prison sentences as well as monetary penalties. Such charges are rarely brought against individual journalists. However, in October 2015, authorities arrested Ghys Fortuné Bemba Dombe, a journalist for *Brazza News*, for an article accusing the president of employing Burundian mercenaries against opponents of a proposed constitutional amendment on term limits.

Although the constitution guarantees access to information, there is no implementing legislation, nor is there a specific law mandating public access to official information. Government officials often delay releasing information.

Media outlets are required to register with the High Council on Freedom of Communication (CSLC), whose 11 members are chosen by representatives of Parliament, the Supreme Court, and the executive branch; the president selects the director. In practice, only a small percentage of print and broadcast outlets are formally registered, though the vast majority operate unhindered. The government retains the right to revoke the accreditation of journalists at government- and foreign-owned media outlets if their reporting reflects badly on the image of the government or the ruling party.

Political Environment: 25 / 40

The CSLC may suspend or ban media outlets that allegedly violate media regulations. Since the 2012 appointment of its new head, former minister of energy Philippe Mwouo, such orders have increased in number. In 2013, the CSLC suspended three independent weeklies for nine months each for defamation and banned three other privately owned newspapers—*La Griffe*, *Le Nouveau Regard*, and *La Vérité*—for an indefinite period for violations including defamation and manipulating public opinion. In 2014, the body issued a four-month suspension to the newspaper *Talassa* for refusing to answer a CSLC summons. *Talassa* had faced a similar suspension in 2013.

The potential for legal action and the revocation of credentials leads many journalists, particularly at state-run outlets, to practice self-censorship. Reporters occasionally face intimidation and threats, but physical attacks are unusual. In October 2015, following widely covered police suppression of demonstrations against a proposed amendment on presidential term limits, masked assailants in police uniforms attempted to kidnap freelance journalist Christian Perrin in Pointe-Noire. He and his family subsequently reported threats from local authorities. There were some incidents in 2014 as well. In September of that year, the Interior Ministry expelled two reporters from the country. Elie Smith of Cameroon, a reporter for progovernment broadcaster MNTV, was attacked in his home for his coverage of an opposition meeting. After pressing the police to more thoroughly investigate the incident, he was accused of seditious acts and working for foreign powers, and was deported. The lawyer that Smith hired to challenge his deportation dropped the case after facing intimidation. The second deportee, freelance journalist Sadio Kante Morel, born in Brazzaville to foreign parents, was accused of illegal
residence, drug consumption, and disturbing the peace. She was the first journalist to
cover the attack on Smith and reportedly angered authorities with her criticisms of the
investigation, which led to her expulsion to Mali.

In October 2015, there were widespread telecommunications outages ahead of planned
demonstrations opposing the constitutional amendment. Radio France Internationale and
the local Human Rights Radio Forum reported that their signals were disconnected. The
CSLC claimed that the stations were suspended for spreading false information.

**Economic Environment: 17 / 30**

There is one government-run newspaper, *La Nouvelle République*, which has a circulation
of about 5,000 and publishes irregularly. *Dépêches de Brazzaville*, the only professionally
produced private daily, is known to be close to the government. There are more than 100
private print publications, but their circulations are generally quite low and limited to major
urban areas. Most are supportive of the government, but a few can be critical of the
authorities up to a point, and on occasion publish letters from opposition leaders and
cover corruption allegations. Costs for print publications are high, particularly for paper
from abroad.

Most Congolese get their news from television and radio. There are some 95 radio
stations, and about two dozen television stations; of these, only the state-run Tele Congo
and Radio Congo have nationwide reach. Almost all broadcast outlets are privately
owned, though often by government officials and their relatives, and they usually lack
financial stability. The main private broadcast company, DRTV, was founded after the
government opened up the media market to more competition in 2001, and currently owns
a radio station and two television stations. Rebroadcasts from the British Broadcasting
Corporation, Radio France Internationale, and Voice of America are also available.

There are no controls on the internet and satellite television, but only about 8 percent of
the population had access to the internet in 2015. Consumption of internet-based news
and use of social media is increasing, particularly among youth and in urban areas.

**Source URL:** https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/congo-republic-brazzaville