Liberia

Country:
Liberia
Year:
2016
Press Freedom Status:
Partly Free
PFS Score:
58
Legal Environment:
16
Political Environment:
21
Economic Environment:
21

Overview

Although Liberia’s media environment is pluralistic, critical outlets often face hostility from the government in the form of intimidation, arbitrary arrests, and defamation suits. Conditions for the media improved slightly in 2015 as the country recovered from the previous year’s outbreak of the Ebola virus, which had prompted a state of emergency and related restrictions on journalists.

Key Developments

- In August, the Supreme Court ordered the government to reverse its 2014 closure of the National Chronicle newspaper, which the court found to be unlawful.
- Critical journalists continued to face harassment by law enforcement officials during the year, with alleged offenses including defamation, immigration or curfew violations, and bank theft.

Legal Environment: 16 / 30 (↑1)
Liberia’s constitution provides for freedoms of speech and the press, but these rights are often restricted in practice. In July 2012, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became the second African head of state to endorse the Declaration of Table Mountain, which calls on African governments to abolish criminal defamation laws. Although in January 2015 the president reiterated her desire to see the country’s criminal defamation laws repealed, no action has since been taken on a draft bill submitted in 2014, and such cases were still being brought to court in 2015, often with political undertones. Liberia’s libel laws also allow for large financial awards in civil suits, which can cause severe economic difficulties for journalists and media outlets, fostering self-censorship.

In July 2015, following a criminal complaint from the chief executive of a construction company who sought US$7 million in damages for an allegedly defamatory story, publisher Octavin Williams of the Nation Times was arrested and held for more than a week in pretrial detention. Three months earlier, the Nation Times had been fined by the Press Union of Liberia (PUL) for printing a “misleading headline” about Vice President Joseph Boakai. Another defamation suit was lodged against Williams by a vice president of the Liberian Football Association; the newspaper had claimed in June that the official was being protected from corruption charges by Fomba Sirleaf, the head of the National Security Agency (NSA) and stepson to President Sirleaf.

In 2010, Liberia enacted West Africa’s first freedom of information law. Journalists and the public have the right to access any public document, with exemptions for those related to national security. In 2013, a court in Monrovia heard the country’s first freedom of information case and ruled in favor of the plaintiff.

The courts played a notable role in safeguarding press freedom in Liberia during 2015. In August, the Supreme Court ordered the National Chronicle, a newspaper that had been closed by the government in August 2014, to be reopened. The closure followed complaints from national security officials about articles alleging the planned creation of an interim government that would unseat the president. The authorities had argued that the newspaper’s closure was necessary to preserve national unity during the state of emergency. However, the court ruled that, since the state of emergency had elapsed in November 2014, keeping the Chronicle closed was “a violation of the [journalists’] rights not supported by the laws.”

Also during the year, the PUL, an umbrella organization for Liberia’s media professionals and institutions, demonstrated its autonomy in advocating for members who were at loggerheads with the government.

Political Environment: 21 / 40 (↑1)

The media express a range of political views, which can lead to an adversarial relationship between the government and the more critical outlets. In August 2015, after some media outlets published articles about a U.S. government list of allegedly corrupt officials in Liberia and other African states, Information Minister Lewis Brown warned Liberian media that the government would hold them accountable for “unethical” reporting. Brown claimed that, in publishing these articles, members of the press intended to ruin the government’s reputation, which could jeopardize the post-Ebola recovery. In October, the
superintendent of Nimba County, Fong G. Zuagele, accused three radio stations of inciting mob violence in the city of Ganta the previous month and threatened to revoke their licenses. The stations denied playing a role in the violence—claiming instead that the mob attacked journalists—and asserted that Zuagele’s threat was a ploy to restrict press freedom.

Despite the persistence of such political pressure, there was no repetition of the restrictions associated with the previous year’s state of emergency, which had included bans on unapproved newsgathering related to the Ebola crisis. A separate Ebola curfew was lifted in February 2015.

Violence against the press has declined in recent years, but journalists still face threats and intimidation in the course of their work, especially from state security agents. In August, for example, Leila Gbati of Women Voices and Alloycious David of the News were whipped and beaten by police in Monrovia as they attempted to report on a teachers’ demonstration. Also that month, journalists Emmanuel Degleh and Joseph Sackie were assaulted by a police officer during a press conference in the city of Kakata.

Official harassment sometimes comes in the form of arrests on charges unrelated to a journalist’s work. In February 2015, after the attorney general stated that he would act against anyone inciting unlawful behavior, a popular radio host, Henry Costa, was briefly arrested for violating the curfew, and another host was investigated for possible immigration violations. While in detention, Costa was reportedly denied access to counsel, food, and sleeping blankets. He had previously been arrested in 2014, after President Sirleaf’s sons filed a complaint against him. In June 2015, the publisher of Women Voices, Helen Nah, and her fiancé were arrested for bank theft. Nah described her arrest as a “witch hunt” in retaliation for her paper’s reporting on police officials’ alleged misuse of Ebola-related funds.

**Economic Environment: 21 / 30**

The media sector includes both state-owned and private outlets. Although about a dozen newspapers publish with varying regularity, including the government-owned New Liberian, distribution is limited largely to the capital. Low literacy rates and the high price of newspapers and transportation make radio the primary source of information for most Liberians. Monrovia is home to over 15 independent radio stations, at least two of which broadcast nationwide. Community radio has expanded to more than 50 stations across the country, and television has grown to at least six stations. Almost 6 percent of Liberians used the internet in 2015; there are no official restrictions on internet access.

Most media outlets are not self-sustaining and rely heavily on government advertising and financial support from politicians or international donors. The government has been accused of withholding advertising from critical outlets. In May 2015, the newspaper In-Profile Daily announced that it would begin charging the government for publication of official press statements and content from the state news agency, arguing that it was a necessary response to the Information Ministry’s alleged efforts to dissuade advertisers from working with the paper, which had been critical of the government. The ministry filed a complaint with the PUL, which sided with In-Profile Daily, stating that government press
releases are not guaranteed publication, and that any disagreement with a media house’s editorial policy does not justify retaliation.

The PUL has lamented the low salaries of Liberian journalists. Lack of financial security has caused trained journalists to leave mainstream media for jobs in the public and nonprofit sectors, leading to a greater role for untrained, younger journalists. Reporters commonly accept payment from individuals covered in their stories, and the placement or nonplacement of a story in a paper or on a radio show can often be bought or influenced by outside interests.

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