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Country:

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Year:

2015

Press Freedom Status:

NF

PFS Score:

90

Legal Environment:

27

Political Environment:

36

Economic Environment:

27

The government of longtime president Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo maintained a tight grip on both domestic news media and foreign journalists in 2014.

Legal Environment

Although freedoms of expression and the press are legally guaranteed and acknowledged by Obiang in public declarations, these rights are ignored in practice. The government relies on its extensive powers under the 1992 Law on the Press, Publishing, and Audiovisual Media, which authorizes official prepublication censorship, to severely restrict journalistic activity. Libel and defamation are criminal acts, and journalists face prison time if convicted. As a result, self-censorship in both print and electronic media is pervasive.

There are no laws guaranteeing freedom of information. Only representatives of the state-owned media typically have access to official information, and they are subject to dismissal if their reporting runs afoul of state censors.

Local journalists and private publications are required to register with the government through an extremely complex and bureaucratic process. Two associations for journalists—the Press Association of Equatorial Guinea and the Association of

Professional Journalists—are registered in the country, but they are governed by members of the ruling party.

Political Environment

Almost all local coverage is orchestrated or tightly controlled by the government, and state media do not cover international news unless the president or another senior official travels abroad. Coverage of the Arab Spring, subsequent unrest in Mali, the ongoing conflict in Syria, and the 2014 ouster of longtime Burkina Faso president Blaise Compaoré have all been prohibited.

Opposition parties are generally denied access to state media. In the past few years, journalists have been allowed to voice vague or mild criticisms of government institutions, but the government has no tolerance for criticism of the president, his family, other high-ranking officials, or the security forces. For example, the media are unable to report on the multiple international criminal investigations into alleged money laundering by the president's son.

According to the U.S. State Department, the internet has become the primary medium for opposition views, particularly from the exile community. The government has apparently responded by blocking opposition websites in recent years. Online versions of foreign Spanish-language newspapers, such as *El País*, have also reportedly been blocked.

Journalists who cross the line into impermissible reporting typically suffer reprisals, including being blacklisted, losing their jobs, or having their programs canceled; at least two such dismissals were reported in 2014.

Few international journalists are granted access to the country. Those who are allowed in require special press accreditation that is approved on a case-by-case basis; inside the country, their movements are monitored and they face routine censorship, particularly on coverage of poverty and the oil sector. In January 2014, two reporters for the *Financial Times* who had government-issued press credentials were arrested and held for three hours. The laptops, digital recorders, and notebooks of the paper's Africa editor, Javier Blas, and one of its senior writers, Peter Chapman, were confiscated.

Economic Environment

Radio is the most influential medium in the country, and all domestic radio and television stations are owned by the government or members of the president's family. The state broadcaster, Radio-Television Equatorial Guinea (RTVGE), operates directly under the Ministry of Information, Press, and Radio. The only private television and radio broadcaster is Asonga, owned by the president's son. Applications to open other private radio stations have been pending for several years but remain unapproved.

Uncensored satellite television broadcasts from abroad are increasingly available to those who can afford the service. International radio stations, including Radio France

Internationale and the British Broadcasting Corporation, are also accessible. Less than 19 percent of the population used the internet in 2014.

The government operates at least two newspapers, while a handful are published irregularly by nominally independent figures or members of the small political opposition. *El Lector*, which claims to be an independent newspaper, was launched at the National University of Equatorial Guinea in 2012 and maintains a Facebook page. However, the paper's articles tend to praise the Obiang government.

The country has little of the infrastructure necessary for independent print media to operate and be disseminated widely, such as printing presses and newspaper retailers. The only publishing facility for print media is located at the Ministry of Information, which enables the government's prepublication censorship. Newspapers are generally unavailable in rural areas. In addition, the lack of a well-developed local private sector hinders the ability of media outlets to raise revenues through advertisements.

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