Press freedom in Rwanda remained stifled in 2015 as the state continued to assert control over the media. A culture of fear among journalists drives widespread self-censorship. The Rwanda Media Commission (RMC), a fledgling self-regulatory body that had made modest progress in advancing media independence, was hobbled in 2015 by the resignation of its chairman, who fled the country amid tensions between the commission and the Rwandan government.

Key Developments

- In May, RMC chairman Fred Muvunyi resigned his post and fled the country, saying he had received reports of threats against him after he resisted a government proposal to transfer some of the RMC’s functions to the government’s Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authority (RURA). The proposed shift came amid tension between the government and the RMC over the suspension of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Kinyarwanda-language Great Lakes radio service.
- Later in May, the RURA announced that it was indefinitely suspending the Great Lakes service, which had been temporarily suspended in October 2014.
• Cassien Ntamuhanga, the head of a Christian radio station, was sentenced in February to 25 years in prison on charges related to an alleged conspiracy against the government.
• As in previous years, several opposition blogs and independent news websites were intermittently inaccessible inside Rwanda during 2015.

Legal Environment: 23 / 30 (↓1)

The constitution’s section on media freedom—Article 38 in the latest version of the charter—stipulates that “freedom of press, of expression and of access to information are recognized and guaranteed by the State,” but it also contains broadly worded clauses that allow for restrictions, interference, and censorship. Statutes in the penal code forbid defamation of the head of state or other public officials, which can carry up to five years in prison. Meanwhile, public incitement to “divisionism” remains punishable by up to five years in prison and fines of up to 5 million Rwandan francs ($6,200). “Divisionism,” broadly defined as “a crime committed by any oral or written expression or any act of division that could generate conflicts among the population or cause disputes,” offers extensive leeway for the government to crack down on dissent.

A 2009 media law was amended in 2013 to grant journalists the “right to seek, receive, give and broadcast information and ideas through media” and to guarantee freedom for online communications. However, problematic clauses in the original law remained intact. The law authorizes the state, rather than an independent body, to determine operational rules for media outlets and to define journalists’ professional standards. It also grants the minister of information and communication technologies (ICTs) unlimited powers to set conditions for establishing media outlets and authorizing foreign audiovisual media companies to operate in Rwanda.

Also in 2013, President Paul Kagame approved amendments to the restrictive 2008 genocide ideology law, which had prohibited the propagation of ideas based on “ethnic, regional, racial, religious, language, or other divisive characteristics.” More definitive and easier to interpret, the amended law reduced prison sentences from 25 years to a maximum of 9 years, and requires proof of criminal intent behind an offending act.

Nevertheless, journalists remain vulnerable to harsh sentences on other charges. Cassien Ntamuhanga, head of the Christian radio station Amazing Grace, was arrested in April 2014 and convicted in February 2015 on charges including conspiracy against the government, complicity in a terrorist act, and conspiracy to murder. Ntamuhanga maintained his innocence throughout the trial and alleged that an initial confession had been made under duress. He was sentenced to 25 years in prison. One of his codefendants, popular singer Kizito Mihigo, pleaded guilty and received a prison sentence of 10 years. A second codefendant was sentenced to 30 years in prison, and a third was acquitted. The prosecution had sought life sentences against all four defendants.

The law on access to information enacted in 2013 set new standards for public access to information and protects whistle-blowers. Welcomed by international rights organizations, the law applies to public and some private bodies that work in the public interest, though
there are broad exemptions that restrict access to information on topics related to national security and trade.

The 2013 media law also established the RMC, a self-regulatory body staffed by journalists. For broadcast regulation, the RMC makes recommendations to the RURA, which issues or withdraws licenses. Under Muvunyi, its first chairman, the RMC had been known to push back against government infringements on press freedom; for example, the body had secured the prompt release of two journalists arrested in May 2014 for broadcasting material deemed offensive to President Kagame. According to Muvunyi, in 2015 he resisted a proposed government order to transfer some of the RMC’s responsibilities to the RURA, a move that came amid tension between the government and the RMC over the suspension of the BBC’s Kinyarwanda-language Great Lakes radio service. The service had been provisionally suspended in October 2014 after the BBC Two television network released a controversial documentary about Rwanda’s 1994 genocide; the program aired in Britain and was available online. The RURA was considering whether to make its 2014 suspension of the radio service indefinite. Muvunyi called the documentary “insulting,” but argued against the suspension of the Great Lakes service, noting that it had not been involved in making the film. After being alerted to cryptic conversations about plans to have him “removed,” Muvunyi resigned as RMC chairman and fled the country in May 2015. He later told the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) that a government minister had accused him of “working for foreign forces.”

On May 30, the RURA published its decision to indefinitely suspend the BBC’s Kinyarwanda service, even though, according to CPJ, the order giving the RURA the power to do so had not yet been approved. The RURA decision stated that the BBC “abused press freedom and free speech, violated its own editorial guidelines, transgressed journalistic standards, and violated Rwandan law, with particular reference to genocide denial and revisionism, inciting hatred, and divisionism among Rwandans.” The RMC continued to operate without Muvunyi, but the year’s developments cast serious doubt on its independence.

Journalists became increasingly concerned about government surveillance after 2012 amendments to the Law Relating to the Interception of Communications empowered the police, army, and intelligence services to monitor online and offline private communications in order to protect “public security.” The law also requires all communications service providers to have the technical capability to enable interception upon request.

Political Environment: 34 / 40

The Rwanda Broadcasting Agency (RBA), a public broadcaster established under a 2013 law, was meant to be more autonomous from the state than its predecessor, the Rwanda Bureau of Information and Broadcasting (ORINFOR). However, some observers have questioned its impartiality in practice; its current leader, Arthur Asiimwe, is known to have close ties to the government.
Although prepublication censorship is not an official policy, Rwanda’s restrictive laws and repressive political environment encourage self-censorship. Journalists struggle to cover sensitive topics such as ethnicity and the 1994 genocide. In 2015, a constitutional revision process culminated in a December referendum in which voters overwhelming approved changes allowing Kagame to run for three additional presidential terms; coverage of the issue was criticized as insufficiently robust. The semiofficial *New Times* newspaper reported uncritically on a parliamentary report finding that, “of millions of Rwandans consulted by lawmakers” on the elimination of existing presidential term limits, “only 10 were against the idea.”

Government censorship of internet content has increased in recent years, and all provisions of the 2013 media laws apply to online publications. In 2014 and 2015, several opposition blogs and independent online news outlets were intermittently inaccessible from inside Rwanda, including the news websites *Umuvugizi, Umusingi, and Inyenyeri News*, which had been blocked in the past. Three BBC websites were also blocked in reaction to the controversial documentary.

Many journalists have fled the country to avoid persecution and reprisals for their work. Muvunyi—who faced a wave of online hostility, including a campaign of harassment on Twitter, after he objected to the suspension of the BBC’s Great Lakes radio service—is just the latest of several prominent media figures who have gone into self-imposed exile in recent years, including Stanley Gatara, the editor of *Umusingi*, who left Rwanda with his family after his April 2014 arrest, and Eric Udahemuka of *Isimbi* newspaper, who left the same month following harassment and threats over articles that were critical of the government. Even in exile, Rwandan journalists are increasingly subject to extralegal intimidation, violence, and forced disappearances, resulting in a chilling effect that extends beyond the country’s borders. Charles Ingabire, editor of the Uganda-based online publication *Inyenyeri News* and an outspoken critic of the Kagame regime, fled Rwanda in 2007 due to threats and was shot dead in Uganda in November 2011. His murder remained unsolved at the end of 2015.

Foreign journalists working outside Rwanda have also reported harassment and threats related to critical coverage of the Rwandan government. In October 2015, journalists reported being denied entry to an event in Amsterdam attended by Kagame. One, a Dutch journalist who had been critical of Kagame, claimed that Rwandan security guards attacked her and confiscated her smartphone after she tried to take pictures, while a Belgian journalist claimed that guards threatened and photographed him. In 2014, four journalists with the Ugandan *Daily Monitor* newspaper received death threats after Rwandan state-owned media accused them of associating with the Rwanda National Congress (RNC), an opposition group in exile.

**Economic Environment: 22 / 30 (↑1)**

Progovernment newspapers and radio stations dominate the Rwandan media, which disseminate information in English, French, and Kinyarwanda. Although more than 50 print publications are registered with the government, fewer than 10 publish regularly. Six of the country’s 27 radio stations are government owned. The main government-run television station was joined by two private stations in 2012—the first private television
broadcasters to operate since 1994—and five privately owned television channels were on
the air as of 2015. State-owned media maintain the largest audience, and most private
outlets do not cover controversial topics, although privately owned radio stations
occasionally criticize government policies, as do Kinyarwanda-language newspapers.

Approximately 18 percent of the population used the internet in 2015, and the vast
majority of users accessed it via mobile devices. The government has made ICTs a
priority and invested heavily in their development, including the expansion of broadband
access. There are about 10 internet service providers (ISPs) and three mobile phone
operators. Rwanda had a mobile penetration rate of 70 percent in 2015.

Market entry for media outlets remains expensive, but the government has eliminated
taxes on imported media equipment and removed sales tax on domestic media materials
to decrease costs and spur future investment. Most newspapers are printed in Uganda,
where printing costs are much cheaper than services provided by the Rwanda Printing
and Publishing Company (RPPC), which was government owned until its privatization in
2014 and has frequently denied service to critical newspapers.

Media outlets face pressure to provide favorable coverage to large investors, and the
government withholds state advertising from outlets considered critical of the regime.
According to a May 2015 report from the RMC, state advertising is believed to go mostly
to the RBA and the semiofficial New Times newspaper.

Low salaries, especially in private media, encourage corruption; journalists often alter
coverage for bribes, and extortion is common. A survey conducted between January and
March 2014 found that nearly half of Rwandan journalists earn less than $293 a
month—barely enough to rent a house without basic amenities in Kigali, the capital.

Source URL: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/rwanda