

## FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

# Cameroon

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Press freedom in Cameroon in 2011 remained constrained by the use of both laws and extralegal detention to harass journalists. The “Liberty Laws” passed in 1990 include safeguards for independent print and audiovisual media, and the protection of sources is guaranteed by the Social Communication Law, though judges can compel journalists to reveal their sources in closed sessions. The 1996 constitution guarantees the freedoms of expression and the press, though libel and defamation remain criminalized. The burden of proof rests with the defendant in libel cases, and a guilty verdict can carry prison terms and heavy fines. Laws against libel and the publication of obscene materials were used against journalists several times in 2011. In March, editor Jean-Marie Tchatchouang of the weekly *Paroles* was convicted of defamation related to the publication of letters that alleged mismanagement and abuse by the chief executive of the main bus company in Douala. Tchatchouang received a six-month suspended prison sentence, an indefinite ban on his newspaper, and a fine of 185,200 CFA francs (\$390), in addition to 1 million CFA francs (\$2,100) in damages. Also that month, Raphaël Nkamtchuen of *La Boussole* was charged with alleged unauthorized communication with a detainee following an interview with a jailed former finance minister, and with possession of a confidential administrative document. The document, which was reportedly leaked from the office of a top presidential adviser, informed the vice prime minister for justice that the president had approved the arrest of top government officials on corruption charges. Nkamtchuen was held for six days by the military police and then released pending trial, but he went into hiding after receiving threats via telephone.

Radio and television stations must be licensed, and both the application process and annual fees can be burdensome. Print media licensing ended in 1990, but new publications must submit a declaration to authorities and have it approved in order to begin publishing. No new broadcast licenses were issued in 2011, though the government tolerated numerous stations operating without licenses. Rural nonprofit radio stations are exempt from licensing fees but barred from discussing politics. There is no law granting citizens access to government information, and the government does not generally make documents or statistics available to the public or the media. Representatives from privately owned media are not accredited with the president or the prime minister, and do not accompany the president on official trips.

Although much of the independent press reports critically about the government, the threat of prosecution leads many journalists, particularly within the broadcast media, to self-censor. Radio call-in shows and television debate programs in particular carry strong criticisms of the government and individual officials, but they operate under the threat of repercussions for exceeding the limits of “administrative tolerance,” as public officials are empowered to shut down a publication or broadcaster and arrest citizens for comments judged to be threats to public order. The media environment demonstrates a widespread lack of professionalism and ethical standards. Sensationalist and careless reporting, bias, and fabrication of facts are common among journalists, and there is no independent body to regulate the media. Numerous journalist

## 2012 SCORES

### PRESS STATUS

# Not Free

### PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

# 68

### LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

# 21

### POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

# 26

### ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

# 21

associations exist, but they are often redundant and disorganized.

Several attacks on journalists were reported in 2011, including a January attack on Rodrigue Tongue of *Le Messenger* by a police commissioner, and a September assault on Ulrich Fabien Ateba Bivole of *Le Jour* after he investigated the suspicious detention of civilians by armed men who were later identified as police officers. Journalists repeatedly faced extralegal abuse for investigating corruption—and the government's failure to address it—or other sensitive topics. Lamissia Adoularc of *Le Jour* was placed in administrative detention for five days in March after inquiring about the arrests of two employees of a state-run company. He was held on the grounds that he needed protection, though the authorities did not explain the nature of the supposed threat. Many instances of extralegal abuse involved official attempts to uncover journalists' sources despite legal safeguards. In September, François Fogno Fotso of the private bimonthly *Génération Libre* was interrogated for four days and pressured to identify his sources for a 2010 article alleging corruption by a tax official.

Cameroon has 25 regularly published newspapers, both private and state owned, as well as about 400 others that publish sporadically due to a lack of consistent funding. A single private newspaper distribution company has a near-monopoly in the industry, which has kept prices high and circulation limited largely to urban areas. The state-owned CRTV operates both radio and television outlets, and dozens of private community stations have more limited reach. CRTV is widely considered to be biased in favor of the government in its news and current affairs reporting, and the owners of mainstream private media have also been reported to influence content. The first private broadcast licenses were granted in 2007. Radio is the most important medium for most of the population, with about 375 privately owned stations, 75 percent of which are in large urban areas. There are 19 independent television stations, and television has a high level of influence in cities and towns. More remote parts of the country can go weeks or months without a television or radio signal due to malfunctioning and outdated infrastructure. Foreign broadcasters are permitted to operate within Cameroon and are widely accessible to those who can afford the necessary equipment. However, such stations are required to partner with a national station in order to broadcast. The government is the largest advertiser, and it has been accused of using this financial heft to influence content. Official funding to support private media outlets is also disbursed selectively. Corruption is pervasive, due in large part to low wages for journalists.

Internet usage was limited to 5 percent of the population in 2011. Users continue to endure slow connections and high fees at internet cafés, though the government is investing in a new fiber-optic network that will enhance speed and quality. Cameroon is burdened with some of the highest bandwidth charges in West and Central Africa despite its access to the SAT3/WASC submarine cable, which links it to Europe. New media are experiencing rapid growth in the country, due in part to the increasing number of people who access the internet from their mobile phones. There are generally no official restrictions on access to the internet, though the government is reportedly planning to filter electronic content and restrict access to certain sites in the future. The government allegedly blocked the microblogging service Twitter on a local mobile operator's network in March 2011 in an apparent reaction to the popular uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East, in which online social networks played an integral role. The Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications officially denied having initiated the blockage, although some government officials said intelligence services had ordered the move. The suspension of service lasted only 10 days.

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