

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

Central African Republic

Central African Republic | Freedom of the Press 2012 |

The 2005 constitution provides for freedom of the press, though authorities have continued to use intimidation, suspension of outlets, and legal harassment to limit reporting, particularly on sensitive topics such as official corruption and rebel activity. A 2004 press law that went into effect in 2005 abolished imprisonment for many press offenses, such as libel and slander, but criminal penalties remain for some defamation charges, incitement of ethnic or religious hatred, and the publication or broadcast of false information that could “disturb the peace.” According to IREX, a 2009 court order sought to decriminalize a number of these offenses. However, in mid-2011, independent newspaper editors Faustin Bambou and Emmanuel Cyrus Sandy were detained on charges of “inciting hatred” against the government after they published allegations of embezzlement against the country’s defense minister. Those charges were eventually dropped, but the two men were fined 300,000 CFA francs (\$590) on a lesser charge of libeling the minister. The Central African Media Observatory has decried the continued arrest of journalists for press offenses despite the 2009 court order.

In the absence of a legal framework, access to official information remains challenging for journalists. The High Council for Communications, tasked with granting licenses and promoting press freedom, is nominally independent, but in practice it seems to be controlled by the government. Most journalists are not paid regularly for their work and are poorly trained, although a journalism department was established at the University of Bangui in 2009.

Journalists continue to face harassment and threats from the authorities, and some, particularly those who work for state-owned media outlets, practice self-censorship to avoid reprisals. Complaints filed against authorities regarding press freedom violations are often ignored. However, several newspapers routinely criticized the president, the government’s economic policies, and corruption in 2011 without legal consequences. Many also provided a certain amount of diverse political coverage in preparation for presidential and parliamentary elections in January 2011, in which incumbent president François Bozizé won a new term with 66 percent of the vote. Journalists cannot always operate safely outside the capital due to increased activity by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), a Ugandan rebel group. The LRA, which does not have popular support, is primarily active in the southeast, near the borders of Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Several private newspapers offer competing views, including five dailies published in French. However, even papers that provide political coverage have limited influence due to low literacy levels, high poverty rates, and the lack of a functioning postal service to deliver periodicals outside the capital. Radio continues to be the most important medium for the dissemination of information. The state owns Radio Centrafrique and a television broadcaster, and both outlets reflect predominantly progovernment views. Due to technical deterioration, the reach and broadcast capacity of even state-owned outlets have decreased dramatically. While the government monopolizes domestic television, there are privately owned alternatives to Radio Centrafrique,

2012 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Not Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

62

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

20

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

23

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

19

including Radio Ndeke Luka (funded by the United Nations), international broadcasters such as Radio France Internationale and Voice of America, and a number of community radio stations. Financial problems and the lack of an advertising market plague many newspapers, and some journalists are motivated by poverty to accept bribes to cover certain stories.

Internet access is unrestricted, and there are no reports that the government monitors e-mail. However, only 2.2 percent of the population was able to access the internet in 2011.

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