

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

Eritrea

Eritrea | [Freedom of the Press 2012](#) |

The media environment in Eritrea continued to be among the worst in the world in 2011, as it remains one of the few countries lacking any form of privately owned media. The once-vibrant private print press ceased to operate in 2001, after a ban imposed by the government of President Isaias Afwerki and the subsequent imprisonment of key editors and journalists. Since then, the crackdown has extended to state-employed journalists.

The constitution guarantees freedom of speech and of the press, and Isaias continues to claim that in his country, “no one is prevented from freedom of speech.” In an interview with the Swedish broadcaster TV4 in June 2009, the president dismissed private outlets as being driven by personal interests, and indicated that real freedom for the Eritrean people could only be provided by the state-owned media. In an interview for *Al-Watan* newspaper in October 2010, the president expressed similar sentiments. Despite the absence of any private media, the 1996 Press Proclamation Law continues to apply in principle, mandating that all newspapers and journalists be licensed. It also stipulates that publications must be submitted for government approval prior to release, and prohibits reprinting articles from banned publications.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 28 journalists were imprisoned in Eritrea as of December 2011, the second-most in the world after Iran and the most in Africa. Eight had been in prison since September 2001, and almost all are being held incommunicado. In February and March 2011, five journalists working for the government radio and television station, Dimtsi Hafash, were arrested and imprisoned, although the government has yet to disclose the charges being brought against them. There is little information on the condition of those imprisoned—such as Dawit Isaac, a Swedish-Eritrean journalist and founder of the now-closed newspaper *Setit*—though unconfirmed reports indicate that several have died in detention. According to Eyob Bahta Habtemariam, an ex-guard at the notorious Eiraeiro prison camp, Isaac is still being held in solitary confinement and is in very poor physical and mental health. In September 2011, the European Union passed a resolution condemning its detention of independent journalists and calling Issac’s release.

Most independent or critical journalists have fled the country due to intimidation and arbitrary imprisonment, and those that remain engage in self-censorship. Foreign journalists are not able to freely enter the country and are generally not welcome unless they agree to report favorably about the regime. There have been occasional reports from journalists operating undercover, and Afwerki has conducted interviews with foreign broadcasters such as Swedish TV4 and the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera. However, it remained almost impossible to report from within the country in 2011.

The three newspapers, two television stations, and three radio stations that operate in the country remained under state control. Individuals are allowed to purchase satellite dishes and subscribe to international media, though the importation of foreign publications without prior approval is not permitted. There are several Eritrean-affiliated stations that are attempting to reach listeners in Eritrea, including Radio Erena, which broadcasts via satellite and

2012 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Not Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

94

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

30

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

40

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

24

over the radio from Paris, as well as opposition-aligned stations broadcasting from Ethiopia. In 2011, Eritrean diaspora journalists running websites in neighboring Sudan came under increasing pressure. In October 2011, Jamal Osman Hamad, who runs an opposition website from Sudan, adoulis.com, and is known for his criticism of Isaias, was arrested less than a week after an official visit to Sudan by the Eritrean president. In December, security forces in Khartoum released Hamad after eight weeks in jail and no charges were ever brought against him.

The government requires all internet service providers to use government-controlled internet infrastructure. Many websites managed by Eritreans overseas are blocked, as is the video-sharing website YouTube. Authorities are believed to monitor e-mail communications, although internet use is limited, with just 6.2 percent of the population able to access the medium in 2011.

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