

## FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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# Gabon

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

The constitution guarantees freedom of expression and of the press, but authorities continued to employ legal harassment, threats, and financial pressure to curb critical reporting in 2011. While conditions improved slightly in 2010 under President Ali Ben Bongo Ondimba, who succeeded his father in 2009, signs of backsliding emerged in 2011 with a near-blackout in the official media on the prodemocracy demonstrations sweeping across North Africa and the Middle East, and increased harassment of private media. Libel can be treated as either a civil or a criminal offense, and the government is permitted to criminalize civil suits and initiate criminal cases in response to alleged libel of government officials. Publications can also be legally suspended for libel and other offenses. There is no freedom of information law, and access to official information remains difficult.

In 2011, the government continued to use its main regulatory body, the National Communications Council (CNC), to curtail critical journalism. With all nine members of the CNC appointed by Bongo and the presidents of the two chambers of parliament (both from Bongo's Gabonese Democratic Party), the body is potentially subject to considerable political interference. In January, the CNC suspended TV+, the station of opposition leader André Mba Obame, for three months for airing a mock swearing-in ceremony of Obame as president, to protest Bongo's contested 2009 election. In June, the council suspended a private weekly, *Echos du Nord*, for a month for reporting on an opposition candidate's allegations that Bongo had used a false birth certificate to file for his candidacy in the 2009 election. In October, five private newspapers—*Ezombolo*, *La Griffie*, *La Voix du Peuple*, *Le Scribouillard*, and *La Une*—received suspensions of between two and three months for lack of professional ethics and repeated calls for ethnic division and insurrection. There were no reports of physical attacks on journalists during the year.

The two government-affiliated newspapers, *L'Union* and *Gabon Matin*, are the only dailies in the country. Twenty-three private weeklies and monthlies print sporadically due to financial constraints and government-ordered closures. Many of those outlets occasionally voice criticism of the government and ruling party, but self-censorship persists, especially when it comes to the president. Foreign publications are readily available. Gabon has seven private radio stations and four private television stations. The government owns two radio stations and two television stations that broadcast nationwide. Satellite television is also available to those who can afford it, and foreign radio broadcasts are widely accessible. Government officials and other powerful figures use financial pressure to control the press, and ownership of media outlets is opaque.

Only 8 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2011. Until this year access to the sole fiber optic submarine cable was monopolized by Gabon Telecom, and broadband internet penetration was limited by high costs and lack of availability outside the capital. The arrival of a second cable in 2011, part of the Africa Coast to Europe (ACE) project, increased the prospects of lower prices, wider connectivity, and increasing internet use. While there were

## 2012 SCORES

### PRESS STATUS

# Not Free

### PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

# 70

### LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

# 24

### POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

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### ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

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no reports that the government restricted internet access or monitored e-mail, Bongo has reportedly attempted to use legal means to close down the website of a Gabonese opposition blogger, Daniel Mengara, who lives in the United States.

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