

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

Mauritania

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Mauritania's media environment continued to open up in 2011, despite a history of dictatorship and the 2008 ouster of the first democratically elected president by an army general, Mohammed Ould Abdel Aziz. Abdel Aziz subsequently contested and won elections held in 2009. Since then, his administration has passed a number of reforms to improve media freedom in the country.

Article 10 of Mauritania's 1991 constitution guarantees freedom of opinion, of thought, and of expression. Legal and regulatory reforms enacted in 2006 eliminated prepublication government approval for newspapers, established journalists' legal right to protect sources, and created the High Authority for the Press and Audiovisual Sector (HAPA), whose board members are appointed by the president without representation from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and journalists. In addition to its regulatory role, HAPA is responsible for nominating the heads of public media outlets and the Mauritanian News Agency. In October 2011, the legislative branch approved amendments to the 2006 Press Freedom Law that abolished prison sentences for slander and defamation, including of heads of state, though fines can still be imposed for these offenses. Some critics believe that the country's media laws continue to leave room for the abuse of press freedom. Mauritania has no legislation guaranteeing access to information.

Though the media express a variety of views, journalists practice a degree of self-censorship in their coverage of issues such as the military, foreign diplomatic missions, corruption, and Sharia (Islamic law). There were reports in 2011 that the police detained and questioned journalists for their coverage of sensitive topics, including protests and slavery. Throughout the year, opposition activities and positions were presented in government-owned media, which appeared to provide generally balanced coverage.

Both local and foreign journalists faced government interference in 2011. In August, a crew from Africa 7, a Senegal-based private television station, was detained while in Mauritania to interview an opposition leader and an antislavery activist. The journalists were interrogated for nearly seven hours, and their equipment, passports, and press cards were confiscated. Most of the items were later returned. Reporter Cheikh Ould Nouah with the website Al-Hurriya was arrested and beaten while covering clashes between police and protesters in September. Another journalist, Djibril Diallo, was also reportedly detained by the police for his coverage of the protests. In December, Abdelhafiz al-Baqali of the Moroccan Press Agency was expelled from the country; the reasons for the move were not disclosed.

The print sector features both state-run and private outlets. The government owns two daily newspapers, *Horizons* (in French) and *Chaab* (in Arabic), and dozens of independent print outlets are active. HAPA provides subsidies to several independent newspapers, and most papers have access to the state's printing press. Mauritania has two public television stations, two public radio channels, and two private, internet-only television stations. A public station that began broadcasting in 2008 devotes airtime to the country's minority languages—Pular, Soninke, and Wolof. In November 2011, HAPA announced that two

2012 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Partly Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

52

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

17

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

18

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

17

new independent television stations and five independent radio stations would be allowed to begin broadcasting, ending the government's 51-year monopoly on domestic broadcast media. Some opposition members maintained that the allocation of permits favored progovernment interests. Radio France Internationale rebroadcasts locally, and Mauritians have access to international satellite television.

Internet access is not generally restricted by the government, but penetration remained at 4.5 percent in 2011. Mobile telephone subscriptions are within the reach of more than 66 percent of the population. The impact of online media has grown in recent years. However, existing legislation does not address the emergence of online journalism. In June 2011, the website of local newspaper *El-Badil al-Thalith* was blocked for publishing articles that criticized Arab leaders after the web hosting company—Emirates Technology and Design, based in the United Arab Emirates—succumbed to pressure from Emirati authorities to shut the site down.

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