

## FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

# Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea | [Freedom of the Press 2012](#) |

While news media in Papua New Guinea (PNG) remain among the most vibrant in the South Pacific, they faced setbacks in 2011, with allegations of corruption tainting the independent Media Council of Papua New Guinea (MCPNG) and a “constitutional coup” in December that effectively left the country with two prime ministers and two administrations.

Under Section 46 of the constitution, freedoms of speech, press, and information are guaranteed. Journalists can be sued for defamation in civil cases, but defamation is not a criminal offense. In November 2011, the Malaysian timber company Rimbunan Hijau, which operates the single largest logging operator in PNG and owns the country’s top-selling daily newspaper, filed a major defamation suit against its press rival, the *Post-Courier*, over its coverage of an official investigation into the company’s logging interests in the Pomio District of East New Britain Province. The *Post-Courier* had reported several stories of police, allegedly sent by Rimbunan Hijau, assaulting landowners who were unhappy with logging operations in the area. Threats of defamation suits were also leveled at reporters covering the sale of the former prime minister’s official jet by the chief executive officer of the state-owned Air Niugini airline, Wasantha Kumarasiri.

PNG does not yet have an access to information law. The MCPNG serves as a buffer against government pressure by lobbying for media freedom, managing a complaints process, and undertaking media research. The council also has a well-developed code of ethics, which member journalists follow. However, the council’s executive director, Nimo Kama, was suspended in June 2011 after an independent audit of Australian government funding to the organization found evidence of fraud.

Threats and harassment against journalists and attempts to interfere with their work occur occasionally, particularly in reprisal for investigative reporting on corruption issues. In June 2011, the government banned a reporter with the popular radio station FM 100 from seeking information on the controversial District Services Improvements Grants and told her that her e-mail messages would be ignored. However, FM 100 said in a statement that it would not back down from investigative reporting. A Nau FM reporter was also reportedly threatened and intimidated in an e-mail message from a staff member at the MCPNG while investigating the council’s administrative problems.

In August 2011, the majority of Parliament members rescinded their confidence in Prime Minister Michael Somare while he was out of the country receiving medical treatment, and voted in former cabinet minister Peter O’Neill to replace him. O’Neill remained in office until December, when the Supreme Court ruled that his election had been unconstitutional and that Somare should be reinstated. However, O’Neill arranged to be reelected by Parliament in a one-sided vote and declared himself the legitimate prime minister. Both administrations refused to back down and conducted media relations as well as the business of government. Although there were no direct threats or reports of harassment against the media in connection with the crisis, relations between politicians and the press became increasingly strained toward the end

## 2012 SCORES

### PRESS STATUS

**Free**

### PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

**27**

### LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

**6**

### POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

**11**

### ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

**10**

of the year.

Both daily newspapers are foreign owned. The *Post-Courier* is owned by an Australian subsidiary of the U.S.-based News Corporation, while the *National*, which has a larger circulation than its older rival, is owned by Rimbunan Hijau. Broadcast media consist of the main public broadcaster, the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), as well as several major commercial radio networks, such as Nau FM and FM 100, and the main television station, EMTV. A number of the private outlets are owned by Fijian companies. Radio is an important source of news due to the country's isolated settlements and low literacy rates. According to a media monitoring website, radio news services in PNG are seen as leading the fight against endemic corruption, whereas newspapers are alleged to have been compromised by corporate interests.

The government does not restrict access to the internet, but lack of infrastructure limited internet penetration in the country to 2 percent of the population in 2011.

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