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Freedom Of The Press - Benin (2011)

Status: Partly Free
Legal Environment: 11
Political Environment: 12
Economic Environment: 10
Total Score: 33

Benin has traditionally been ranked among the best-performing African countries for press freedom, with freedom of speech protected by the constitution and normally respected by the government. However, a number of worrying trends have persisted since the 2006 election of the current president, Thomas Boni Yayi, who has used the country's 1997 Press Law criminalizing libel more liberally than his predecessor. For example, in 2010 a political activist named Andoche Amegnise, who created a newspaper titled *Anyone but Boni Yayi in 2011*, was briefly imprisoned for defaming the head of state. Access to information is not yet guaranteed by law.

The government's media regulatory body, the High Authority for Audio-Visual Media and Communications (HAAC), also used its position on at least two occasions in 2010 to warn journalists of the consequences of what it considered to be unfair coverage. While most of these warnings did not result in regulatory sanctions, the HAAC did suspend the broadcast of Radio France Internationale for 14 hours in August to prevent the dissemination of a program on a financial corruption scandal in which the president was accused of being involved.

While Benin has not typically been known as a country where journalists are attacked for their work, there were a record number of such incidents in 2009, including one in which a missile was launched at a reporter's car. However, there was a decrease in the number of reported attacks in 2010, with the most serious incident involving a legislator harassing a cameraman for filming him while eating groundnuts.

Print media outlets are predominantly private, while the broadcast sector has a mixture of state-run and private radio and television stations. Radio remains the primary source of news and information, and a number of local stations broadcast alongside the state-run station, which has national reach. However, the ability of public broadcaster ORTB to remain independent of political pressure is weak. Benin's numerous well-established print media outlets have a history of providing aggressive reporting and robust scrutiny of both government and opposition leaders. However, the media market became especially saturated in 2006 by the large number of politicized publications that emerged in the month preceding that year's highly contentious presidential election. These newspapers, many of which have persisted in one form or another, are little more than propaganda for political parties or particular politicians, and frequently receive direct funding from them, often as their primary source of funding. This situation once again became particularly problematic in advance of the 2011 presidential election, as presidential hopefuls scrambled to influence the information voters consumed. Many media outlets have become clear and vocal

advocates of one candidate or another, leading to the further polarization of content and the corrosion of impartial reporting. While the proliferation of such news outlets has certainly contributed to a greater diversity of content, the inability of most of them to garner a consistent profit outside of political contributions further limits accuracy and fairness in reporting by making poorly paid reporters susceptible to, and frequently dependent on, bribes. Subsidies and advertising contracts are both reportedly used to influence media content, according to the Africa Media Barometer report.

While internet access is still available primarily through slow dial-up internet cafés, it remains unhindered by government censorship. Internet access in the country is also increasing, albeit more slowly than many of its neighbors. At a penetration of 3.13 percent, the internet cannot yet be considered a primary way for citizens of Benin to access information.