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Freedom Of The Press - Guinea (2011)

Status: Partly Free
Legal Environment: 17
Political Environment: 25
Economic Environment: 17
Total Score: 59

Status change explanation: Guinea improved from Not Free to Partly Free due to policies enacted by a new transitional government at the beginning of the year, including a new constitution providing protection for press freedom, as well as two new media laws passed in June. Additionally, harassment of journalists and political censorship decreased.

The year was an eventful one for Guinea, opening with General Sékouba Konaté's assumption of power as transitional president following an assassination attempt on former junta leader Captain Moussa Dadis Camara, and closing with the completion of a long-awaited presidential election that brought Alpha Condé, a long-time opposition activist in exile, to power. The two-round election, held in June and November and considered Guinea's first free and fair vote since the country became independent in 1958, brought an end to two years of military rule and, many hope, to a half-century of autocracy. Condé's inauguration in December was internationally heralded as a successful democratic transition. However, Condé's ability to implement an ambitious reform agenda is uncertain, and interethnic relations remained tense in the wake of violence before and after the vote. Legislative elections are expected but have not been scheduled; in the interim, a nonelected but pluralistic transitional council operates as a quasi-legislative body.

The transitional government promulgated a new constitution by decree in March 2010 that guarantees press freedom, and in June it passed two new media laws that were viewed as a significant improvement by international press freedom groups. The laws were drafted by a transitional commission led by journalists, in consultation with media executives, educators, and international experts. The first removed prison penalties for press offenses and narrowed the previously vague definition of defamation. The second called for the creation of a media regulatory agency with five of 11 members selected by media organizations—as opposed to being appointed by the president, as in the past. However, libel against the head of state, slander, and false reporting remain offenses under the new law and can be subject to high fines, and the implementation of the new provisions on the media regulatory agency remained uncertain at year's end. There was still no legislation guaranteeing freedom of information.

Although journalists enjoyed a greater degree of freedom than in 2009, when the military unleashed a violent crackdown on opposition supporters and the local press, members of the media operated in a politically polarized and occasionally dangerous environment. Several journalists were temporarily detained or otherwise harassed by

members of the security forces while carrying out ordinary reporting activities. In July 2010, radio journalist Etienne Mansaré was stabbed in the back by unknown assailants, whom Mansaré's colleagues suspected were sent by the military. In mid-November, violence erupted between supporters of Condé and his unsuccessful presidential rival, Cellou Dalein Diallo, largely along ethnic lines, in the aftermath of the announcement of provisional election results. During the height of the violence, which lasted several days before a state of emergency was imposed, local news organizations were paralyzed and most journalists in Conakry, the capital, were unable to operate freely for fear of being targeted by party activists or members of the security forces. The media group that operates Sabari FM radio and the *Le Diplomate* newspaper suspended its operations for several days after Diallo supporters threatened to attack its offices, according to Reporters Without Borders. Independent journalists operating outside the capital were also subject to pressure from regional authorities, some of whom had retained the military positions Camara had appointed them to. Some journalists practice self-censorship, although a greater range of political coverage and diversity of opinion has emerged following the political transition.

The new media laws passed in June guarantee the freedom to open a newspaper. A number of private papers, mostly weekly editions, are published in Conakry, though their distribution in the interior is irregular. The only daily newspaper is state-owned and avoids criticism of the government. Advertising revenue is insufficient to cover the costs of operating a newspaper, but since 1996 the government has provided increasing subsidies for both print and online media, regardless of their political allegiances. Low pay for journalists can lead to ethical compromises, such as accepting bribes to kill unflattering stories.

In a country with high illiteracy rates, radio is by far the most influential medium. Radiodiffusion-Télévision Guinéenne, the state-run broadcaster, operates radio and television stations with programming in French, English, and a number of vernacular languages. At least 19 private radio stations operated in Conakry, along with one each in the cities of Kankan and Kamsar. There were also at least 12 rural and community radio stations in other parts of the country. Some local newspapers and broadcast outlets are thought to be controlled by political or business interests. Many citizens listened regularly to foreign radio programs on FM and shortwave radio. Unlike in previous years, no radio stations were suspended by the authorities in 2010, though some voluntarily halted their activities at times due to political unrest. The government did not restrict access to or distribution of foreign television programming via satellite or cable; however, few citizens could afford these services.

There generally were no government restrictions on access to the internet or reports that the government monitored internet activities, and the internet was a major platform for voicing antigovernment criticism, with the most popular sites managed by diaspora members outside of the country. Access to the internet has expanded through the growing number of privately run internet cafes in the capital and a few large towns, but only 0.96 percent of the population had regular access.