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Freedom Of The Press - Guyana (2011)

Status: Free
Legal Environment: 7
Political Environment: 13
Economic Environment: 10
Total Score: 30

The constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, and media are generally allowed to operate without interference. However, neither long-promised legislation to facilitate the distribution of private radio licenses nor a freedom of information bill have been introduced. Opposition parties charge that the repeated deferral of these pieces of legislation reflects the government's unwillingness to open up the media to wider ownership or allow greater diversity of viewpoints. The ruling People's Progressive Party has responded that it is determined to bring in the legislation, and that delays were due to a long drafting process. The so-called Broadcasting Bill is seen as key to the issuance of additional television and radio licenses, thereby breaking the existing state monopoly on radio. Journalists complain about difficulties in accessing official information. The proposed Freedom of Information Act is expected to make it a crime for the government to withhold information about state contracts and similar matters, but it had not been formally introduced by year's end. There is no criminal defamation in Guyana, but public officials utilize civil libel suits to stifle criticism. In July 2010, President Bharrat Jagdeo sued journalist Frederick Kissoon, as well as the editor in chief and publishers of *Kaieteur News*, for libel related to an article criticizing him, and successfully obtained an injunction against the newspaper from printing similar content. The libel case was pending at the year's end.

Although the government employs various tactics such as libel suits and advertising boycotts to stifle criticism, there are still robust critical voices within the media. Nevertheless, due to the president's sensitivity to criticism, some journalists have experienced difficulty in obtaining access to government events and press conferences. There are occasional cases of attacks and harassments against journalists and media outlets, but none were reported in 2010.

The government owns and controls the country's only two radio stations, run by the National Communications Network, under whose operation the government-run television station also falls. There are also 23 television stations, most of which are in private hands. Including the government-owned daily, the *Chronicle*, Guyana has seven national newspapers and six other periodicals, all of which are allowed to operate freely. The distribution of state advertising has for some time been a source of major controversy. Beginning in late 2006, the Government Information Agency suddenly withdrew state advertisements from the *Stabroek News*, and kept the ban in place until April 2008, when it resumed advertising without explanation. However, the majority of paid advertising appears in progovernment newspapers, including the newly-launched *Guyana Times*, which is owned by a friend of President Jagdeo. The *Kaieteur News*, which is

regarded as favoring the opposition, has since opted to place government advertisements free of cost, and it is believed that this loss of revenue accounts for the December 2010 decision to charge for access to the paper's website. Use of the internet is unrestricted by the government, and approximately 30 percent of the population accessed this medium in 2010.