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Freedom Of The Press - Lesotho (2011)

Status: Partly Free
Legal Environment: 14
Political Environment: 19
Economic Environment: 15
Total Score: 48

The government generally respects freedoms of speech and the press. Although press freedom is not directly mentioned, the constitution guarantees the freedom of expression and informational exchange. However, multiple laws, including the Sedition Proclamation (No. 44 of 1938) and the Internal Security (General) Act of 1984 prohibit criticism of the government, provide penalties for seditious libel, and endanger reporters' ability to protect the confidentiality of their sources. In recent years, extremely high fines have been handed down by the courts in libel cases against publications and radio stations known for criticizing the government, forcing some to the verge of closure. While there were fewer defamation suits against journalists in 2010, the lingering threat of such cases led to a high level of self-censorship. The 1967 Official Secrets Act and the 2005 Public Service Act prohibit civil servants from disclosing information, limiting the transparency of government institutions and making it difficult for journalists to conduct investigations. In recent years, the government has improved its disclosure practices, but access to information remains impeded, and the process for requesting it is unclear.

After 13 years of discussions between the government and media professionals, a package of media reforms came close to passing in 2010, but in September the cabinet decided to refer the proposed policies back to the Ministry of Communications rather than send them to Parliament for approval. The reforms would depoliticize government-owned media outlets, eliminate "national security" statutes that allow government censorship, and move many slander and libel cases from the courts to an arbitration system.

There were no reports of attacks against journalists during 2010, but the deputy chairperson of the Lesotho chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA-Lesotho) reported receiving a death threat. Moreover, in October, the leader of the country's main opposition party, Tom Thabane, threatened a reporter who asked him about a criminal case involving several of his relatives. The politician later apologized when contacted by MISA-Lesotho.

Several independent newspapers, none of them dailies, operate freely and routinely criticize the government, while state-owned print and broadcast media mostly reflect the views of the ruling party. Although Lesotho has a printing press, many local newspapers are printed in South Africa and transported into the country to avoid the high cost of printing domestically. Because of high distribution costs and low literacy rates, especially in rural areas, radio is the most popular news medium. There are eight private and two state-run radio stations, and many South African and other foreign broadcasts reach Lesotho. The country's only

television station is state run. Media development is constrained by inadequate funding and resources. The private media are increasingly turning to private advertising to generate income, but many outlets, both print and broadcast, continue to rely heavily on government advertising, which allows the government to tacitly reward those that provide more favorable coverage. The government did not restrict access to the internet in 2010, but due to a lack of infrastructure and high costs, the internet was accessed by just 3.9 percent of the population during the year.