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Freedom Of The Press - Liberia (2011)

Status: Partly Free
Legal Environment: 16
Political Environment: 22
Economic Environment: 21
Total Score: 59

Status change explanation: Liberia improved from Not Free to Partly Free to reflect the passage of West Africa's first freedom of information law and a decrease in physical attacks on journalists.

The 1986 constitution guarantees citizens the right of free expression but makes them "fully responsible for the abuse thereof," a clause that has often led to complications in the application of the law. In 2010, Liberia enacted West Africa's first freedom of information law. After a lengthy period of public consultation, the law was passed unanimously by both houses of the Legislature in July and September, and signed by President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf soon thereafter. Journalists had already been able to access government information with relative ease in Liberia, but the new measure marked the first time the right was enshrined in law. Both journalists and the general public now have the right to access any public document, with exemptions for those related to national security.

Libel is still a criminal offense in Liberia, though only two new cases appeared in court during 2010. In February, the former agriculture minister filed a US\$2 million defamation suit against the newspaper *FrontPage Africa* over accusations linking him to a rubber-industry corruption scandal. The court had not yet heard the case at the end of the year. A series of libel cases stemming from the same scandal had been filed in 2009, primarily by Johnson-Sirleaf and her administration. Separately, in November 2010, the administration filed a US\$5 million libel suit against the *New Broom* newspaper, which had accused the president of accepting bribes. Fines sought and imposed in civil cases are often astronomical, leading to severe financial difficulties for journalists and their outlets, and encouraging self-censorship in the media. In February 2010, a court ordered the *New Democrat* newspaper to pay US\$900,000 in damages to the Consolidated Group in a civil defamation case. While the Press Union of Liberia (PUL) rated the *New Democrat* as the best newspaper in the country early in 2010, in August the union condemned the paper for unprofessional behavior after it published a nude photograph of supermodel Naomi Campbell during the trial of former president Charles Taylor, at which she testified.

Despite a notable number of death threats, the number of direct attacks against the press decreased in 2010. In 2009, there had been more attacks against the media than in other years since Johnson-Sirleaf's election in 2005, including police-led assaults and unlawful detentions. The incidents reported in 2010 were mostly directed at the *New Democrat*, including the harassment of a staff photographer who was covering the libel trial of his colleagues, and the repeated hacking of the paper's website, where the perpetrators

posted threats. In April, the mayor of Monrovia ordered police to detain a reporter from the private radio station Love FM, but he was promptly released after the PUL complained to the Ministry of Information. Separately, a number of incidents suggested government intolerance of dissenting opinions. Most egregiously, four news editors with the state-run Liberia Broadcasting System were demoted to senior reporters after they proposed covering an opposition press conference.

The media sector includes both state-owned and private outlets. Although a dozen newspapers publish regularly, distribution is limited to the capital and literacy rates remain low, meaning most Liberians rely on radio broadcasts for news. There were 15 independent radio stations in Monrovia and 24 community radio stations outside the capital, as well as three television stations. There were no cases in 2010 of the government or other parties attempting to influence editorial content through the withholding of advertising. However, reporters commonly accept payment from individuals covered in their stories, and the placement of a story in a paper or radio show can often be bought and influenced by outside interests. Most media outlets are not self-sustaining and rely heavily on financial support from politicians or international donors. According to the Liberia Media Center, most newspapers are owned and operated by journalists, who are rarely trained in managing a business. Journalism training is also limited, with the Center for Media Studies and Peace-Building providing one of the only venues for training in journalism ethics.

Access to foreign broadcasts and the internet is not restricted by the government, though internet usage is limited to approximately 0.07 percent of the population due to cost, literacy, and infrastructural barriers.