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Freedom Of The Press - Swaziland (2011)

Status: Not Free
Legal Environment: 24
Political Environment: 27
Economic Environment: 25
Total Score: 76

Swaziland's absolute monarchy continued to exert strict control over the media in 2010. King Mswati III has the power to suspend the constitutional rights to freedom of expression and the press at his discretion, and these rights are severely restricted in practice, especially with respect to speech on political issues or the royal family. Of six media bills proposed along with a new constitution in 2007—including a Public Broadcasting Corporation Bill, a general Broadcasting Bill, and an Information and Privacy Bill—none have been enacted by year's end, while only the press-regulating Media Commission Bill has been opened to parliamentary debate. According to the African Media Barometer, there are approximately 30 laws that restrict media freedom in Swaziland, including a number of harsh defamation laws and a Suppression of Terrorism Act that the government has threatened to apply to critical journalists. Positively, in recent years the courts have dismissed a number of defamation penalties and overturned attempts to limit media coverage of political or culturally sensitive issues. Swaziland does not have a freedom of information law, and access to government information is difficult.

In 2009, two new publications were introduced but were quickly threatened with closure for failing to register with the government, a procedure that requires the purchase of a \$100 bond. There is no independent regulator of the Swazi broadcasting sector, and licenses for both radio and television are controlled by the respective state broadcasting authorities. Four radio license applications approved in 2008 were disqualified by the Swaziland Radio Regulator in 2009 for failing to meet all 12 of the regulator's evaluation criteria.

The government routinely warns against negative news coverage, and journalists are subject to harassment and assault by both state and nonstate actors. As a result, the Swazi media is marked by a high level of both official and self-censorship on political and royal matters. In January, the government banned the privately owned *Times of Swaziland* from running a column by Mario Masuku, leader of the banned opposition People's United Democratic Movement (PUDEMO) party; Masuku was the third *Times* columnist forced from its pages by government pressure in recent years. Also in January, Manqoba Nxumalo, journalist for *Times of Swaziland*, was attacked by churchgoers while covering a church service. In July, a prince closely aligned with Mswati urged journalists to "bury" stories that painted the country in an unfavorable light and stated that journalists who write critical comments about the country should "die." In September, police confiscated the camera of Nxumalo while he was covering a meeting of the Swaziland Democracy Forum in Manzini and briefly detained him. The following month, Swazi prime minister Barnabas Sibusso Dlamini issued a statement through the state-owned *Swazi Observer*

announcing his intention to require columnists to seek state permission before criticizing the government. The prime minister also accused critical journalists of being paid by foreigners to tarnish the country's image.

The country's two newspapers—the independent *Times of Swaziland* and the state-run *Swazi Observer*—are consumed almost exclusively in urban areas. Despite restrictions on political reporting, both newspapers do criticize government corruption and inefficiency. The Swaziland Television Authority dominates the airwaves and generally favors the government in its coverage. There is one government-owned radio station (controlled by Swaziland Posts and Telecommunications) and one independent radio station, Voice of the Church, which focuses on religious programming. Advertisers, including the government, regularly dissuade negative coverage by employing financial pressure, a major force in Swaziland's relatively small economy. Due to low pay and insufficient journalist training, the quality of reporting is at times affected. Many journalists have left the industry to work for the government or in the private sector. However, despite the low pay, journalists and media houses are not prone to being bribed; there have been cases of public rejections of corruption and bribery by journalists. Swazis with sufficient funds can freely purchase and use satellite dishes to receive signals from both independent South African and international news media. The government does not restrict internet-based media, but few Swazis can afford access; only 8 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2010.