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## FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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# Djibouti

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The media environment in Djibouti is among the more restrictive in Africa, featuring government dominance of print and broadcast media, very low levels of internet access, severe limitations on free speech, and frequent harassment of journalists. Djibouti's laws and constitution provide for freedoms of speech and the press, but in practice the government imposes serious curbs on independent media. Journalism is limited in part by prohibitions on libel and distributing false information. The 1992 Freedom of Communication Law prescribes prison sentences for media offenses and imposes age and nationality requirements on anyone establishing a private news outlet. Djibouti does not have a law guaranteeing access to public information. The National Communication Commission, charged with issuing private radio and television broadcasting licenses, accepted its first application in 2012, though it remained pending at year's end.

The official media, which account for almost all of the country's outlets, do not criticize the government and practice widespread self-censorship. Journalists

generally avoid covering sensitive issues, including human rights, the army, the rebel Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy (FRUD), and relations with Ethiopia. The U.S. military presence in Djibouti creates additional pressures for self-censorship, as journalists are encouraged to refrain from reporting on soldiers' activities. Although there are no reports that the government limits access to the internet, social media are closely monitored for plans of demonstrations or critical views of the government. The Association for Respect of Human Rights in Djibouti and the opposition radio station and news website *La Voix de Djibouti* claim that their sites—the main sources for independent views in the country—are regularly blocked. In August 2012, authorities blocked access to five Somali news websites that had posted confidential documents about the transfer of money between Djibouti's intelligence services and officials in Somaliland, a separatist Somalian territory bordering Djibouti.

Journalists are subject to detention without charge, intimidation, and violence, further contributing to self-censorship. Prodemocracy demonstrations in February 2011 brought a crackdown on the media, including a near-total news blackout on the Arab Spring in state-controlled outlets. In addition, opposition media faced severe restrictions, arrests, and closures, which continued into 2012. In February 2012, Farah Abadid Hildid, a contributor to *La Voix de Djibouti*, was abducted and detained by the police for 24 hours, during which he allegedly suffered physical and psychological torture. In August, another reporter for *La Voix de Djibouti*, Houssein Ahmed Farah, was arrested on allegations that he had been distributing membership cards for a banned opposition party, though he was known for his critical reporting against the government. He spent more than three months in jail and was repeatedly denied bail before his release in November. No charges were lodged against Farah, who had also been arrested in 2004 and 2011.

The domestic media sector is very limited. Because of high poverty levels, radio is the most popular news medium. The government owns the principal newspaper, *La Nation*, as well as Radio-Television Djibouti, which operates the national radio and television stations. Community radio, which has gained great popularity across Africa, is nonexistent, and Djibouti is one of the few countries on the continent without any independent or privately owned newspapers. Djiboutian law technically permits all registered political parties to publish a newspaper. Only one newsletter run by an opposition party, the National Democratic Party (PND), still publishes regularly, although other opposition groups and civil society activists are able to distribute written materials that are critical of the government. Printing

facilities for mass media are government owned, making it difficult to print criticism of the government for wide circulation.

There are no private radio or television stations in the country, though foreign radio broadcasts are available from the British Broadcasting Corporation, Voice of America, and Radio France Internationale, offering alternative sources of information to the public. La Voix de Djibouti started broadcasting in 2010 as a clandestine independent radio station operating from abroad. Its website cannot be accessed within the country, though Reporters Without Borders has created a mirror site to bypass this censorship. Approximately 8 percent of the population was able to access the internet in 2012. The only internet service provider is owned by the government.

## 2013 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

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