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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Seychelles

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The media environment in Seychelles over the past decade has been characterized by government monopolization of radio and television, draconian libel laws that have been used liberally against opposition newspapers, occasional attacks against and harassment of media workers, and extensive self-censorship. The constitution provides for freedom of speech, but also restricts this right by protecting the reputation, rights, and privacy of citizens as well as the “interest of defense, public safety, public order, public morality, or public health.” It grants the minister of information the power to prohibit the broadcast of any material deemed contradictory to “national interest.” Since the court of appeals in 2007 overturned a libel conviction against the opposition weekly *Regar*, which had forced it to close temporarily, the filing of libel charges, as well as libel convictions, has diminished. Nevertheless, civil libel suits can still be used against journalists. In October 2012, the editor of opposition newspaper *Le Nouveau Seychelles Weekly*, Ralph Volcere, was found guilty of contempt of court under section 114 (1) of the penal code for an article challenging the neutrality of a sitting judge. Volcere was required to either publish an apology or pay a fine of 10,000 rupees (\$730). Volcere planned

to appeal the case.

The state has a *de facto* monopoly over the widely consumed broadcast media (both radio and television), and private broadcasters have been slow to develop because of restrictive licensing fees of more than 800,000 rupees (\$60,000) per year. Following one opposition party's efforts to raise enough money for a radio license, the National Assembly in 2006 passed an amendment to the Broadcasting and Telecommunications Act prohibiting politically affiliated groups from obtaining a license. Two licenses for independent radio stations were granted in 2012. In 2009, a report by two independent consultants recommended the formation of a media council, media association, and joint consultation committee, as well as the amendment of the libel laws. In late 2009, the Seychelles Media Association, a grouping of media professionals, was reconstituted after a 10-year hiatus. In 2010, the National Assembly approved the Seychelles Media Commission Act 2010, setting up an independent media arbitration body; however, questions have been raised about its neutrality.

A new Seychelles Broadcasting Corporation Act was passed in 2011, replacing legislation from 1992. The act was intended to make the Seychelles Broadcasting Corporation (SBC), which runs the nation's only television station and two radio stations, more independent. However, the period surrounding the campaign for the May 2011 presidential election highlighted the continued bias of the SBC in favor of the ruling Parti Lepep and its candidate, President James Michel, who won reelection. SBC media coverage is still overwhelmingly dominated by the government, giving opposition parties only limited access.

There have been reports of the government monitoring e-mail, chat rooms, and blogs, and opposition activists alleged that access to their party websites have been blocked by authorities. Individuals are commonly detained, arrested, and eventually released for critical comments about government officials posted on social-networking websites. In September, police arrested and detained blogger Michael Sabadin after he posted on Facebook a picture of a soldier who had been beaten by security personal hired on police contract; Sabadin was later released without charge.

Incidents involving attacks or harassment of journalists are uncommon. However, in July 2012 police confiscated a camera from the editor of the critical weekly *Le Seychellois Hebdo* while he was covering an antinarcotics operation, and deleted the photos he had taken. In November 2012, police restricted journalists from

interviewing demonstrators taking part in a construction strike.

The three daily newspapers, including the state-owned *Seychelles Nation*, rarely publish stories critical of the government. The weekly *Le Seychellois Hebdo*, which began publishing in 2011, has taken a more critical stance toward the government. Three other weekly newspapers—*Regar*, the *People*, and *Le Nouveau Seychelles Weekly*—are affiliated with political parties. Along with operating the government-owned television and radio stations, the SBC also relays foreign stations. In 2012, Seychelles was connected to the Eastern Africa Submarine Cable System, providing the country with higher bandwidth. About 47 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2012. Telecommunications companies must submit subscriber information to the government, though the law was not enforced in 2012.

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