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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Swaziland

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Swaziland's absolute monarchy continued to exert strict control over the media in 2012. King Mswati III has the power to suspend the constitutional rights to freedom of expression and freedom of 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 was enacted by the end of 2012, and only the press-regulating Media Commission Bill was opened to parliamentary debate. According to the African Media Barometer, there are approximately 30 laws that restrict media freedom in Swaziland, including harsh defamation laws and a Suppression of Terrorism Act that the government has threatened to apply to critical journalists. There is no law specifically banning criticism of the monarchy, though authorities warn that such criticism could be considered seditious or treasonous, and in March 2012 the government proposed a law that would ban criticism of the king on social-media sites. In recent years, however, the courts have dismissed a number of defamation cases and overturned

attempts to limit media coverage of politically or culturally sensitive issues. A case of contempt of court brought against the *Nation* magazine in 2009 for an article that was critical of the judiciary remained unresolved at the end of 2012.

Swaziland does not have a freedom of information law, and accessing government information is difficult. On a positive note, the Swaziland Media Complaints Commission, a self-regulatory body of journalists and other media workers, was officially registered in 2011 following a 14-year effort by local media organizations.

Swazi media content is marked by a high level of both official censorship and self-censorship on political and royal matters, often encouraged by hostile rhetoric and threats from senior government and royal officials. The authorities have restricted media coverage of recent prodemocracy protests and public-sector strikes, among other controversial stories. In January 2012, newspaper editors were told by the minister of information, communication, and technology to publish only positive reports of a visit by the president of Equatorial Guinea and to suppress international media stories on corruption and repression in that country; this directive was generally observed. Also in January, Musa Ndlangamandla, the chief editor of the private but royally owned *Swazi Observer*, was fired after publishing interviews with opposition leaders and writing about corruption among prominent politicians. Police later searched his office and took away his computer, prompting him to flee to South Africa in February. In March, a senator proposed an investigation to identify and prosecute the author of an anonymous *Times of Swaziland* editorial, published in 2011, that was critical of the parliament. In July, two senior editors—Alec Lushaba and Thulani Thwala—and the chief financial officer at the *Swazi Observer* were suspended for reporting negatively on the king. The editors remained suspended at year's end.

Journalists are subject to harassment and assault by both state and nonstate actors, though such incidents have declined in recent years. In April 2012, two South African reporters from eTV were detained at a roadblock in Mbabane for lacking accreditation to cover ongoing protest marches.

The country's two newspapers—the independent *Times of Swaziland* and the *Swazi Observer*—are read almost exclusively in urban areas. Despite restrictions on political reporting, both papers do criticize government corruption and inefficiency. The Swaziland Television Authority dominates the airwaves and generally favors the government in its coverage. Most Swazis get their news from

the radio, and there is one government-owned radio station and one independent station, Voice of the Church, which focuses on religious programming. State broadcasters are prohibited from reporting on the activities of labor unions—which led antigovernment protests in 2012—and private citizens cannot express opinions on these outlets without prior approval of their comments. No new broadcast licenses were granted in 2012. Swazis with sufficient funds can freely purchase and use satellite dishes to receive signals from independent South African and international news media. In April 2011, the government banned state radio from airing the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) program *Focus on Africa* after it carried criticism of the government. The government does not restrict internet-based media, though there were reports of the government monitoring e-mail, social-media sites, and chat rooms. Few Swazis can afford access to the internet; only 21 percent of the population used the medium in 2012.

Advertisers, including the government, regularly deter negative coverage by employing financial pressure, and their influence is significant in Swaziland's small economy. Low pay and insufficient training at times affect the quality of reporting. Many journalists have left the industry to work for the government or elsewhere in the private sector. However, journalists and media houses are not considered prone to corruption.

2013 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Not Free

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