

# Tonga

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## Freedom of the Press

Tonga's media landscape has matured in recent years, with the constitutional kingdom's government strengthening press freedoms. Since parliamentary elections held in the wake of democratic reforms in 2010, the news media has consolidated its freedoms and is looking ahead to elections set for November 2014.

The constitution guarantees freedom of speech and of the press. Journalists found guilty of criminal libel and defamation are usually punished with fines. In June 2013, the prime minister, Lord Tu'ivakanō, and six cabinet ministers won a lawsuit against the weekly *Kele'a*, alleging defamation in a letter to the editor. The October 2012 letter alleged that some parliamentarians enjoyed impunity and was critical of a government payout of US\$19 million. Editor Mateni Tapueluelu and his wife, publisher Laucala Tapueluelu, were each fined US\$69,000. The author of the letter was ordered by the court to pay more than US\$34,000 in damages. In September, the publisher and editor were held in contempt of court in connection with their decision to print an editorial criticizing the earlier ruling, and were each ordered to pay a fine of \$1,385 or serve one month in prison. *Kele'a* issued an apology to the court for the editorial following the ruling.

Tonga does not have a freedom of information (FOI) law, but in April 2013 it held national consultations on future FOI legislation. Media outlets have access to debates in the unicameral Legislative Assembly, and the body regularly publishes the minutes of those debates online. Other laws, such as the 2003 Newspaper Act and Media Operators Act, regulate licensing for newspapers and broadcasters and place restrictions on the importation and sale of foreign media.

Tonga's first independent newspaper, *Taimi 'o Tonga*, has strengthened its position as the kingdom's leading newspaper. It is published in Tonga twice weekly by the owner, free press champion Kalafi Moala, who also heads the Taimi Media Network website. It is still published weekly in Auckland, New Zealand, for distribution to the growing Tongan diaspora in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. The independent monthly magazine and news website *Matangi Tonga*, owned by Vava'u Press, is an important media provider and independent book publisher. Other significant publications include the tabloids *Talaki* and *Ika*, and *Kele'a*. The state-owned Tongan Broadcasting Commission operates both the free-to-air station Television Tonga and Radio Tonga, which has a programming collaboration with Australia's public broadcaster ABC. Two pay television stations, the Christian-oriented Oceania Broadcasting Network, and at least five commercial radio stations also broadcast. Online news media has become increasingly important, facilitated by a new high-speed cable system that became accessible in August 2013. The government does not restrict access to the internet, which was used by 35 percent of the population in 2013.

## 2014 Scores

### Press Status

Free

### Press Freedom Score

**(0 = best, 100 = worst)**

29

**Legal Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

10

**Political Environment**

**(0 = best, 40 = worst)**

9

**Economic Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

10