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Freedom of the Press 2011 - Eritrea

Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 30

Political Environment: 40

Economic Environment: 24

Total Score: 94

The media environment in Eritrea continued to be among the worst in the world, as it remains one of the few countries that lacks any form of privately owned media. The once-vibrant private print press ceased to operate in 2001, after a ban imposed by the government of President Isaias Afwerki and the subsequent imprisonment of key editors and journalists. Since then, the crackdown has extended to state-employed journalists, many of whom have fled the country due to intimidation and arbitrary imprisonment.

The constitution guarantees freedom of speech and of the press, and Afwerki continues to claim that in his country "no one is prevented from freedom of speech." In an interview with the Swedish broadcaster TV4 in June 2009, the president dismissed private outlets as being driven by personal interests and indicated that real freedom for the Eritrean people could only be provided by the state-owned media. In an interview for *Al Watan* newspaper in October 2010, the president expressed similar sentiments. Despite the absence of any private media, the 1996 Press Proclamation Law continues to apply in principle, mandating that all newspapers and journalists be licensed. It also stipulates that publications must be submitted for government approval prior to release, and prohibits reprinting articles from banned publications.

The country continued to have the worst record in Africa for the detention of journalists, and despite its significantly smaller population, is almost tied with China in terms of global figures. The Committee to Protect Journalists estimates that at least 19 journalists remained in jail in 2010, almost all of whom are being held incommunicado. There is little information on the condition of those imprisoned – such as Swedish-Eritrean journalist and founder of the now closed newspaper *Setit*, Dawit Isaac – though unconfirmed reports indicate that several have died in detention. According to Eyob Bahta Habtemariam, an ex-guard at the notorious Eiraeiro prison camp, Isaac is still being held in solitary confinement and is in very poor physical and mental health. Many more journalists were arrested in 2010, including the well-known journalist and official Said Abdulhai in March. Foreign journalists are not able to freely enter the country and are generally not welcome unless they agree to report favorably about the regime. There have been occasional reports from journalists operating undercover, and *Afwerki* has conducted interviews with foreign broadcasters such as Swedish TV4 and the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera. However, it remained almost impossible to report from within the country in 2010.

The three newspapers, two television stations, and three radio stations that operate in the country remained under state control. Individuals are allowed to purchase satellite dishes and subscribe to international media, though the importation of foreign publications without prior approval is not permitted. There are several Eritrean-affiliated stations that are attempting to reach listeners in Eritrea including Radio Erena, which broadcasts via satellite and over the radio from Paris, as well as opposition-aligned stations broadcasting from Ethiopia. The government requires all internet-service providers to use government-controlled internet infrastructure. Many websites managed by Eritreans overseas are blocked, as is the video-sharing website YouTube. Authorities are believed to monitor e-mail communications, although internet use is extremely limited, with just 5.4 percent of the population able to access the medium in 2010.