

Freedom of the Press 2016 - Mali

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Press Freedom Status: Partly Free

Legal Environment: 8 / 30 (0 = best, 30 = worst)

Political Environment: 19 / 40 (0 = best, 40 = worst)

Economic Environment: 10 / 30 (0 = best, 30 = worst)

Press Freedom Score: 37 / 100 (0 = best, 100 = worst)

Quick Facts

Population: 16,749,000

Freedom in the World Status: Partly Free

Internet Penetration Rate: 10.3%

Overview

The media environment in Bamako and the rest of the south is relatively open, with sporadic reports of censorship and self-censorship. However, Mali's ongoing conflict in the north and attacks by Islamist militants undermines the security situation, making reporting in some areas of the country a dangerous task for domestic and foreign journalists alike.

Key Developments

- Mali's media landscape remained relatively open in 2015, allowing new media businesses to expand and journalists generally free to continue their work.
- A number of foreign correspondents with international news agencies were sent death threats via e-mail from a group claiming to be close to Islamist insurgents.

Legal Environment: 8 / 30

Freedom of speech is guaranteed under Article 4 of the 1992 constitution, but no legislation guarantees the confidentiality of journalists' sources. A press law passed in 2000 imposes fines and prison sentences for defamation. It also criminalizes offenses such as undermining state security, demoralizing the armed forces, offending the head of state, sedition, and consorting with the enemy. However, journalists are rarely prosecuted. While Malian authorities have not signed the Table Mountain Declaration – a formal commitment to decriminalize defamation and insult laws across

Africa – the Association of Private Press Editors of Mali (ASSEP) announced in November 2014 that it was reviewing potential reforms to the 2000 press law, including the decriminalization of press offenses.

Mali does not have a comprehensive freedom of information regime, although numerous laws do provide for public access to some official documents and information, which the government generally complies with. However, such laws are replete with extensive and vague exceptions, and journalists have faced obstacles when attempting to obtain information about the military in particular.

In May 2015, the National Assembly approved the establishment of a new regulatory body, the High Authority for Communications (HAC), replacing the previous High Communications Council. The HAC is composed of nine members, with three each chosen by the president, the National Assembly, and private press groups. It officially began work in December, and is responsible for the issuance of broadcast licenses, the enforcement of press regulations, and the promotion of media ethics. Mali's other regulatory body, the Committee for Equal Access to the State Media, is tasked with ensuring that political parties receive equal access to state media and will continue to operate. The Maison de la Presse, an umbrella organization for press unions, provides journalists with work facilities, training centers, and support for the protection of their legal rights. The National Union of Journalist Reporters complements the work of the Maison de la Presse with an emphasis on labor rights for media workers.

Political Environment: 19 / 40

The media are pluralistic overall, but some private outlets display partisan bias in their reporting, and the state broadcaster – the Malian Office of Radio and Television Broadcasting (ORTM) – tends to carry progovernment programming. Continuing instability in the north, as well as the November 2015 terrorist attack on the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako, continues to place pressure on journalists to engage in self-censorship when reporting on sensitive topics such as security issues and the performance of the military against jihadist groups. There was some balanced and critical reporting on the signing of a peace deal in June 2015 with the mainly Tuareg separatist rebel groups, but poor newspaper circulation and low levels of internet use often means these reports only reach a limited audience in the north.

In March 2015, Minister of Culture N'Diaye Ramatoulaye and Karim Keïta, a member of parliament and son of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, requested that the news magazine *Le Reporter* refrain from printing articles that were critical of the two men in the magazine's upcoming edition. When the publication refused, authorities blocked the issue from being printed.

Although there were fewer physical attacks on journalists than in previous years, northern Mali continued to be a dangerous area in 2015, with many reporters unwilling to travel there without military or U.N. escorts. In August, a militant group operating in northern Mali known as Guardians of Jihad sent menacing e-mails to a number of reporters for foreign outlets covering West Africa, threatening to kill any whose work it found to be contrary to Islam. In September, police arrested three men suspected of being behind the threats, and uncovered a large cache of weapons in the home where the men were found.

Ongoing insecurity and unrest also hindered French and Malian investigations into the November 2013 kidnapping and murder of French journalists Ghislaine Dupont and Claude Verlon. However, in a clandestine operation in May 2015, French special forces killed a militant associated with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb who was believed to have been behind the journalists' deaths.

Economic Environment: 10 / 30

Mali has long hosted a diverse media environment, with more than 300 radio stations operating across the country, as well as roughly 50 newspapers that publish on a regular basis, including the state-owned *L'Essor*. Print circulation, however, is limited. Radio is by far the most popular medium. Most radio stations are community based and receive funding from international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to operate. Some serve larger markets, such as the popular Studio Tamani in Bamako, which reaches more than 80,000 listeners. Foreign news services, including the British Broadcasting Corporation and Radio France Internationale, are broadcast on FM radio in Bamako and some other areas. The state broadcaster ORTM is the only domestic television station with national reach, and it is under the tight control of the executive branch; the president appoints its general manager based on the recommendation of the minister of communication.

Just over 10 percent of Malians were able to access the internet in 2015. Online media is very popular with the educated elite and Malians living abroad. Users increasingly consume their content via internet-enabled mobile phones. But connectivity is extremely slow and unreliable, and there is only one private internet service provider currently licensed, resulting in high costs and poor service. Mobile phone usage is ubiquitous, with an estimated 149 subscriptions for every 100 residents. However, only three mobile operators are currently licensed, and concessions granted to them preclude the issuance of new licenses to competitors until 2016.

Insufficient funding and access to equipment and electricity continue to prevent many media outlets in Mali from operating at full capacity, particularly in the north. Regular blackouts in Timbuktu and Gao, for example, force many radio stations to limit broadcasts to evenings, when power is available. Poor working conditions, including low or nonexistent salaries, often lead journalists into unethical practices. Bribery is rampant, and financial pressure from media owners and advertisers force many outlets to skirt critical coverage or provide favorable reports on their backers. To address these concerns, government subsidies for private outlets were restored in 2015 after several years of cuts, with promises to increase allocations further in the coming year.