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Freedom of the Press 2012 - Sierra Leone

2012 Scores

Press Status: Partly Free

Press Freedom Score: 49

Legal Environment: 14

Political Environment: 19

Economic Environment: 16

Sierra Leone's constitution guarantees freedom of speech and of the press, and in a sign of increasing political maturity by President Ernest Bai Koroma, respect for press freedom and tolerance of opposition criticism appear to be gaining a foothold. However, despite improvements in the general climate for press freedom, the Public Order Act of 1965 still allows for prison terms of three to seven years for criminal libel and up to one year for the separate crime of publishing false news. Criminal libel charges apply in some cases even when the defendant can prove the published information was true, and defendants charged with publication of false news must prove that they took reasonable measures to verify the information's accuracy. The constitutionality of the act was challenged in 2009 by the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), but the Supreme Court upheld it; nevertheless, SLAJ continued to lobby against criminal libel during the year.

Discussions on a Right to Access Information Bill to guarantee freedom of information in Sierra Leone have been ongoing for several years. In 2009, Koroma and other

government figures pledged their support for a draft bill. In June 2010, after slightly weakening the draft, Sierra Leone's cabinet passed the bill, and in November the parliament gave it a first reading and referred it to a committee. However, the passage of the bill appeared to have stalled in 2011.

The media in Sierra Leone are regulated by the Independent Media Commission (IMC), whose members are appointed by the president "acting on the advice of SLAJ and subject to the approval of parliament," according to the Independent Media Commission (Amendment) Act of 2006. The IMC provides an alternative to pressing charges under the Public Order Act; aggrieved parties can register complaints with the IMC, which affords them a hearing. If the IMC agrees that a complaint of libel, defamation, or falsehood is valid, it can request that the offending media outlet publish a retraction and an apology, or can levy a fine on the outlet. The IMC can also summon editors at its own discretion. The IMC generally demonstrated independence from government interference in 2011. However, in April, the IMC fined the newspaper *Awareness Times* one million leones (\$222) for publishing articles describing the president's underwear, an incident that the IMC determined violated the media code of practice. The fine came after government officials threatened to prosecute the newspaper under the libel law. Two politically affiliated radio stations were shut down in 2009 and remained closed through 2011; a petition to reopen one of the stations was denied by the High Court. In October 2011, authorities blocked the sale and distribution of an issue of the *Global Times* that included an article critical of a ruling party politician, allegedly because of concerns that the article would be a threat to the peace in the politician's district.

A positive development in 2011 has been Koroma's refusal to let ruling party supporters crack down on the press and stifle opposition criticism. Instead, many journalists have joined the ranks of the government as public affairs officers, a trend that is designed to improve press-government relations. Journalists are generally not subject to attacks or intimidation, and media outlets are usually safe from overt government interference or attempts to influence content. Although there were cases of both in 2011, there were not as many as in previous years. In February, the SLJA initiated legal action against an opposition presidential aspirant who allegedly organized attacks on two journalists in December 2010 for critical articles published in the *Awareness Times*. Investigative journalist Ibrahim Kalokoh with the private daily *For Di People* was reportedly threatened with death by two Port Authority staff after the publication of his reports about alleged corruption by the general manager of the Port Authority in July. In the most dramatic case of the year, reporter Ibrahim Foday of the *Exclusive* was stabbed to death in June while covering a land dispute between two communities. Prior to the attack – the first journalist fatality since 2005 – Foday had written a series of articles

that one party to the dispute felt were biased against them. Three suspects were arrested in connection with his death.

In 2011, there were 74 newspapers, 64 radio stations, and five television stations registered with the IMC, and it registered eight additional newspapers during the year; however, not all outlets operate regularly. Most newspapers are independent, though some are associated with political parties, and the print press routinely criticized both the government and opposition parties. All Sierra Leonean newspapers are written in English, a language only about a third of Sierra Leoneans speak. Many radio and television programs are also in English, although some are in local languages. A low literacy rate coupled with the high cost of newspapers and televisions make radio the most important and widely available medium for obtaining information. In June, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service and UN Radio were merged to create a public-service broadcaster, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation. The number of community radio stations has proliferated in recent years. Many community radio stations are not sustainable due to their dependence on foreign grants for operations and the difficulty of overcoming high operational costs such as providing electricity, especially in rural areas. Due to Sierra Leone's poverty, advertising rates are among the lowest in the world and the business management and operational structures of media outlets are not always efficient. Few news sources can afford to station reporters outside the capital, Freetown, and printing presses and other materials are scarce and unreliable. Journalists' pay, in general, is very low, and many work without pay, leading them to take second jobs that can cause conflicts of interest. Reporting is often politicized and inaccurate because of poor training, a lack of resources, and poor ethical standards among journalists. Business interests often attempt to influence the editorial content of newspapers. International media operate freely; though foreign media outlets are required to register with the government, the government did not deny permission in 2011.

The government does not restrict internet access, though less than 1 percent of the population used the medium during the year, according to Internet World Stats.