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Freedom of the Press 2012 - Benin

2012 Scores

Press Status: Partly Free

Press Freedom Score: 34

Legal Environment: 11

Political Environment: 12

Economic Environment: 11

Benin has traditionally been ranked among the best-performing African countries for press freedom, with freedom of speech protected by the constitution and largely respected by the government. However, a number of disturbing trends have persisted since the 2006 election of the current president, Thomas Boni Yayi, who has used the country's 1997 Press Law criminalizing libel more liberally than his predecessor. This trend was particularly seen in the behavior of the government's media regulatory body, the High Authority for Audio-Visual Media and Communications (HAAC), which reprimanded a larger number of media outlets in 2011 for libel and "unethical reporting" in advance of the March 2011 presidential election. Most of these resulted in warnings, but a worrying number were temporarily shuttered as a result, both in March and later again in December. However, it is unclear if this increase was due to a government strategy to silence opposition media outlets or if it was the result of a genuine effort to combat the lack of professionalism within the Beninese media. What is more overtly problematic is the government's suspension of Radio France Internationale (RFI) broadcasts for the second year in a row. The 2010 suspension disrupted RFI's coverage of a Ponzi scheme scandal allegedly involving Yayi, while 2011's occurred just as RFI was about to begin airing a popular call-in show on the disputed March presidential election shortly after it was announced that Yayi had been reelected.

While Benin has not typically been known as a country where journalists are attacked for their work, there were a record number of such incidents in 2009 and 2010. The number of reports of attacks against journalists further increased in 2011, including incidents in which a reporter and a photographer with private media outlets were both beaten by police while covering opposition protests following Yayi's 2011 reelection. The police responsible for the attack received a warning from the HAAC, but were not otherwise punished.

Print media outlets are predominantly private, while the broadcast sector has a mixture of state-run and private radio and television stations. The many radio stations remain the primary source of news and information, though the state-run station, which lacks independence in its coverage, is the only one with national reach. Opposition political parties claim to have very little or no access to the state-run media. Benin's numerous

well-established print outlets have a history of providing aggressive reporting and robust scrutiny of both government and opposition leaders. However, the media market became especially saturated in 2006 by the large number of politicized publications that emerged in the month preceding that year's highly contentious presidential election. These newspapers, many of which have persisted in one form or another, are little more than propaganda for political parties or particular politicians, and frequently receive direct funding from them, often as their primary source of funding. This situation once again became particularly problematic in advance of the 2011 presidential election, as presidential hopefuls scrambled to influence the information voters consumed. The lack of transparency in the system of media ownership is an area of concern. Furthermore, most outlets are fully reliant on the interests of their financial backers, as many are unable to garner any kind of profit from subscriptions or advertising. As a result, many of the journalists are susceptible to bribes from politicians, and according to the Africa Media Barometer, subsidies and advertising contracts from the government are both used to influence media content.

At a penetration rate of 3.5 percent in 2011, the internet cannot yet be considered a primary way for citizens of Benin to access information. The internet is primarily available via slow dial-up internet cafés. The government does not restrict access or censor content.

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