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Côte d'Ivoire

Country:

Côte d'Ivoire

Year:

2016

Press Freedom Status:

Partly Free

PFS Score:

51

Legal Environment:

14

Political Environment:

19

Economic Environment:

18

Overview

Positive trends in Côte d'Ivoire's media environment continued in 2015. There were few reports of journalists having difficulty covering the October presidential election, marking a departure from the violent repression of the media that has characterized past election years. However, there were some tensions over opposition figures' access to the state broadcaster. Additionally, a number of media outlets and journalists were suspended during the year on ethics violations, including in response to election-related articles.

Key Developments

- Journalists were generally able cover the October 2015 presidential election without interference.
- Ahead of the election, the National Press Council (CNP) issued three-edition suspensions against the newspapers *Le Temps*, *Le Quotidien d'Abidjan*, and *Le Nouveau Courrier* for calling on voters to boycott the poll. Another newspaper, *Le Patriote* received a three-edition suspension for reporting election results ahead of the election council.
- An editor from the *Aujourd'hui* daily was detained for six days in July in connection with an article accusing President Alassane Ouattara of embezzling development aid.
- Several new private radio stations were granted licenses.

Legal Environment: 14 / 30

Freedoms of speech and of the press are protected in the constitution and the country's laws, though there are prohibitions on speech that incites violence, ethnic hatred, or rebellion. In 2014, the Ministry of Communication began public consultations on revising the 2004 press law, with the aim of "further liberating and professionalizing" the media and online media in particular; however, no revisions had been adopted at the end of 2015. Press offenses cannot result in prison sentences, but defamation carries a fine of up to 15 million CFA francs (\$25,600), and libel against the head of state or other state institutions is punishable by fines of up to 20 million CFA francs (\$34,100).

In July 2015, two editors of *Aujourd'hui*, a daily that supports former president Laurent Gbagbo, were brought in for questioning by the gendarmerie's investigative department concerning an article published a week prior in which President Alassane Ouattara was accused of embezzling development aid. The gendarmes arrested one of the editors, Joseph Gnanhoua Titi, for insulting the head of state and illegally imprisoned him despite the country's decriminalization of libel and despite the fact that the CNP is the only body that can penalize journalists. He was released after six days on the order of an investigative judge examining the case, who dismissed all charges.

A new law on freedom of information was passed in 2013. In 2014, the government announced that it would form a new Commission on Access to Information to monitor the law's effectiveness and implementation, and the Council of Ministers appointed members of the commission. An existing government web portal allows the public to freely access some official information, with regular updates of communiqués from council meetings and other documents.

Under former president Gbagbo, media regulatory bodies such as the CNP were frequently used to control critical journalism, and this pattern persisted during President Ouattara's first two years in office, with Gbagbo-aligned outlets as the targets. In the following years, the CNP's activities appeared less politically motivated, but the body has been strict in suspending journalists and publications for perceived violations of professional ethics, and in 2015 this appeared to extend to journalists who threatened the success of the presidential election. In October, the CNP suspended three pro-Gbagbo newspapers—*Le Temps*, *Le Quotidien d'Abidjan*, and *Le Nouveau Courrier*—for three editions each after they called for a boycott of the election. The CNP also suspended *Le Patriote* for three editions for announcing the election results before the election body. Separately, CNP suspended *l'Inter* for three editions, and one of its journalists for a month, in connection with an article on a boycott by members of the indigenous Bétés group of a visit by Ouattara to Gbagbo's home region of Goh; the body deemed the piece "dangerous for social cohesion." And in February, the CNP issued a fine of 1 million CFA francs (\$1,700) against the publisher of *Notre Voie* after the paper published a story claiming there were tensions among various factions of the army. The article's author was also suspended for a month.

The CNP's broadcast counterpart, the High Authority for Audiovisual Communications (HACA), did not issue any such suspensions during the year, partly because there are very few private outlets in the broadcast sector.

In 2012, Ivoirian journalists, in collaboration with the Media Foundation for West Africa, adopted a new code of ethics that met international standards. Entry into the

profession of journalism is open and does not require a particular degree or background. The current press law does not account for online journalists, who may not apply for press cards.

Political Environment: 19 / 40 (↑1)

Print media are relatively polarized, with most outlets taking editorial lines that support one of the country's political factions. The government continued to articulate a desire to ensure that state media are accessible to all political parties, and though many such outlets still seemed to favor the Ouattara administration, they covered opposition political events more regularly and with less bias than in the past. As there were still no private television stations in Côte d'Ivoire in 2015, the state broadcaster, Radiodiffusion Télévision Ivoirienne (RTI), played a central role in election coverage, leading to close scrutiny and at times vocal critique of its content. In September, key opposition politicians led a demonstration in Abidjan against RTI, accusing it of biased coverage and unfairly limiting its coverage of opposition candidates. The protest was allowed to take place peacefully.

Severe restrictions on access to independent news sources that were imposed during the 2010–11 postelection crisis and the civil war were largely lifted in 2012, and have not been reinstituted. International media, including Radio France Internationale (RFI) and the UN radio station Onuci FM—both of which were banned under Gbagbo—have operated freely since Ouattara took office. Members of the local press have also observed an easing of restrictions on their ability to cover the news, and the government did not block websites or constrain internet access in 2015. Access to news and information in the north, where warlords control some of the districts, remains more difficult, though there are signs of improvement. Abidjan-based outlets are expanding their networks of reporters in the north. In July 2015, nearly 250 journalists covered President Ouattara's visit to the northern district of Woroba. However, officials occasionally obstruct news coverage. In April 2015, members of the presidential guard denied two accredited journalists access to an event, claiming that they were not permitted entry without an invitation letter; the guards reportedly rough-handled the journalists while shooing them away.

Physical attacks against journalists were a serious problem in Côte d'Ivoire in the past, particularly under the Gbagbo regime, but only one major incident was reported in 2015—a notable achievement in an election year. In November, Koffi Kuassi Norbert, a journalist with the independent daily *Soir Info*, was called into the office of the deputy mayor in Dabou for questioning about an article that described the town as politically unstable. While he was being questioned, a large group of youths attacked his home and a business he operated.

Economic Environment: 18 / 30 (↑1)

The media sector in Côte d'Ivoire is vibrant and growing, though the state still controls the largest radio stations, including the only one with national reach, as well as *Fraternité Matin*, the largest-circulation daily newspaper; a news agency; and the national television broadcaster, RTI. This dominance of most medium proved to be a contentious issue during the election.

In 2012, the government opened up the television and radio industries to private broadcasters after more than two decades of promises to liberalize the airwaves. Under the 2004 media law, the few authorized private radio stations had been limited to entertainment and cultural programming, and no private television stations were permitted. In February 2015, three private radio operators—Trace Côte d'Ivoire, Afrique Developement Internationale Côte d'Ivoire, and Media Holding Côte d'Ivoire—were granted licenses; their parent companies are based in the French Caribbean, France, and Morocco respectively. The development will increase the number of private radio stations in Côte d'Ivoire from two to five.

The government has been proactive in pursuing the digital switchover for broadcasting. In June 2015, it successfully pilot tested the digital frequencies in Abidjan. The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) has set a 2020 deadline for Côte d'Ivoire's digital switchover; at the year's end the country was ahead of schedule, having completed construction of 29 of the 35 digital transmitters needed to cover the country. In August, the government announced that free-to-air digital television would include 9 to 10 free channels and that paid subscriptions would include 30 to 40, apparently making space for the emergence of private television stations in the country.

The independent press in Abidjan has equal access to modern printing facilities, and a variety of news producers are able to reach the public through popular satellite services and the country's many print vendors.

About 21 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2015, and urban, literate Ivoirians are increasingly turning to online sources for news and information. Online news sites, like Abidjan.net, are beginning to rival print news in terms of both professionalism and breadth of coverage. The government is keen to develop regulations to govern online press but has yet to do so.

As the private media market continues to expand, lack of funding has become a more urgent problem, with a larger number of outlets competing for limited advertising revenues. The government does not explicitly give financial aid to any private media outlets, but backdoor financing from political actors is not uncommon. Journalists are poorly trained, and salaries are low, leaving many media practitioners vulnerable to corruption.

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