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Freedom of the Press 2012 - Congo, Republic of (Brazzaville)

2012 Scores

Press Status: Partly Free

Press Freedom Score: 55

Legal Environment: 16

Political Environment: 22

Economic Environment: 17

There was little change in the press freedom environment in the Republic of Congo in 2011. The constitution and the law recognize freedom of the press, but certain types of speech, such as incitement of violence or ethnic hatred, are criminalized and carry monetary penalties. The law provides for revoking the accreditations of journalists at government and foreign-owned media outlets if their reporting reflects adversely on the government's image, although there have been no reports of such revocations in recent years. Since May 2010, when the High Council on Freedom of Communication issued new censorship orders, several newspapers and broadcasters have run afoul of the regulatory body. The weeklies *Le Trottoir* and *Le Choc* as well as Forum TV and Radio received suspensions for critical commentary of the government in 2010. In December 2011, two private weeklies, *L'Amicale* and *La Voix du Peuple*, were shut down for six and three months respectively for allegedly inciting hatred and ethnic division. *L'Amicale's* suspension resulted from its reporting on the large number of President Denis Sassou-Nguesso's Mbochi ethnic group in powerful government positions; *La Voix du Peuple* was accused of defaming a nephew of the president and "incitement to tribal hatred" for an exposé on nepotism and abuses by some members of the Mbochi ethnic group in the government.

The government under Sassou-Nguesso has a long history of human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary imprisonment, abuse of detainees, official impunity, and restrictions on freedom of the press and freedom of association. In 2009, journalist and activist Bruno Jacquet Ossébi died of injuries sustained in a house fire that killed his companion and her two children. Ossébi had recently reported on corruption in the management of Congo's oil wealth. The Brazzaville fire service identified the cause as a short circuit, although in a subsequent interview with the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the commander of the Brazzaville fire rescue center admitted that the finding was not based on a forensic investigation. The fire coincided with a similar fire at the house of exiled dissident Benjamin Toundammani in France. Toundammani and Ossébi had been planning to join an international lawsuit against Sassou-Nguesso. Ossébi's death was ruled an accident, and no further developments in the case have subsequently come to light. Reports of harassment of journalists continue to surface. In 2010, Jean-Claude Mbongolo, director of the satirical weekly *La Rue Meurt*, received threats over his

coverage of the Movement for Democracy and Integral Development (MDCCI), a party allied with the ruling Congolese Labor Party (PCT).

Most Congolese get their news from television and radio. There are 39 television stations in Congo, of which 15 are privately owned. State-run Télé-Congo generally expresses the government's views, and a number of private channels are owned by government officials and their relatives. However, there have been reports that some of the other private channels have been more critical of the government in recent years. Of the country's 23 radio stations, 4 are owned by the government. Congo's first community radio station, Radio Biso na Biso, commenced operations in 2009, serving predominantly rural communities in the Congo Basin in 12 indigenous languages. Print media are more independent and critical, occasionally publishing letters from opposition leaders, but are heavily concentrated in Brazzaville and do not reach far into rural parts of the country.

The internet and satellite TV are unrestricted but not widely used, with only 5.6 percent of population having access to the internet in 2011. Prospects for increased internet penetration improved in 2011 with the introduction of broadband in Brazzaville as part of the submarine fiber optic West Africa Cable System (WACS) project. In August 2011, a France-based prodemocracy blogger critical of the government, Eric Patrick Mampouya, was detained, questioned, and had his passport confiscated on his arrival in Brazzaville; he was released after 10 hours with a warning to adhere strictly to the law.

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