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Freedom of the Press 2013 - Burundi

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2013 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score: 72

Legal Environment: 23

Political Environment: 28

Economic Environment: 21

There was no easing of the existing clampdown on the media in Burundi during 2012, as journalists who reported critically on President Pierre Nkurunziza's government were generally treated as part of the political opposition and harassed by the security forces and ruling party functionaries. Meanwhile, judicial authorities continued to face criticism for serving the ruling party's interests, to the detriment of independent media and civil society.

The constitution guarantees freedom of speech and of the press, but the country's laws impose criminal penalties on journalists for defamation, discrediting the state, insulting the head of state, and "threatening state security." The 1997 Press Law forbids dissemination of "information inciting civil disobedience or serving as propaganda for enemies of the Burundian nation during a time of war." The 2003 Media Law allows harsh fines and prison terms of up to five years for the dissemination of information that insults the president or is defamatory toward other individuals. In June 2012, journalist Hassan Ruvakuki, a correspondent for Bonesha FM and Radio France Internationale, was sentenced to life in prison for "participating in acts of terrorism," amid claims that the government had pressured the court to convict. He had been arrested in November 2011 over an interview he conducted with the alleged leader of a rebel group that carried out deadly attacks near the Burundi-Tanzania border. An appeal was pending at year's end.

During 2012, the government introduced a bill to decriminalize media offenses, but journalists said it would also compel them to reveal their sources in cases deemed to threaten state security or public order. Another provision requires journalists to broadcast or publish only "balanced information from sources that have been rigorously verified." Offenses would not be punishable by imprisonment, but heavy fines are prescribed for certain violations, which could place a serious financial burden on media organizations. The bill had yet to be passed at the end of 2012.

The National Communications Council (CNC), a state agency that oversees the enforcement of media laws, in June 2012 suspended Radio Rema for airing allegedly libelous criticism of civil

society figures. Also in June, the CNC referred the case of Radio Publique Africaine to the public prosecutor after the independent station allegedly accused the president of corruption. Neither case was resolved during the year.

Journalists continued to face harassment and attacks during 2012, and the threatening climate fostered a high degree of self-censorship. In June, Eloge Niyonzima, a reporter for Radio Publique Africaine, was attacked overnight by members of the ruling party's youth wing, which reportedly had been carrying out nightly patrols. The government had accused the station of having links with the opposition.

Independent media worked together to demonstrate against state harassment in 2012. Four independent radio stations in June asked the public to honk their car horns simultaneously at a designated time to protest the harassment of journalists. During another campaign in August, six private and two public radio stations produced a shared broadcast denouncing the press bill under consideration by a parliamentary committee.

The government dominates Burundi's media industry. It runs Radio Télévision Nationale du Burundi (RTNB), the sole television and radio stations with national reach, and *Le Renouveau*, the only newspaper that publishes regularly. There are approximately 20 privately owned radio stations, as well as telecommunications and internet service providers. The law prohibits political parties, labor unions, or foreign nongovernmental organizations from owning media outlets in the country. Internet penetration remains very low, at 1.2 percent, due to the high cost of service. However, the number of mobile-telephone subscribers increased by 17 percent in 2012, to 2.24 million of the nation's 8 million people, according to the telecommunications regulator. Online publishing remains minimal, mainly due to low literacy rates and poor internet access. There are no government restrictions on internet access or content.

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