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Freedom of the Press 2013 - Sierra Leone

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2013 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 respect for press freedom and tolerance of opposition criticism appear to be gaining a foothold under President Ernest Bai Koroma. However, despite improvements in the general climate, the Public Order Act of 1965 still assigns 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 to be true, and defendants charged with publication of false news must prove that they took reasonable measures to verify the information's accuracy. The Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) challenged the constitutionality of the act in 2009, but the Supreme Court upheld it. SLAJ has nevertheless continued to lobby against criminal libel.

Discussions on a freedom of information bill have been ongoing for several years. In 2009, Koroma and other government figures pledged their support for draft legislation. In June 2010, after slightly weakening the draft, the cabinet approved the bill, and by October 2011 it had gone through several parliamentary and committee readings. However, progress on the measure has since stalled.

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 commission, which grants 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 it can levy a fine on the outlet. The IMC can also summon editors at its own discretion. The body has generally demonstrated independence from the government. In September 2012, the IMC imposed one-month suspensions and fines of 2 million leones (\$460) each against three privately owned newspapers – the *Independent Observer*, the

Senator, and *Awareness Times* – for violating the media code of practice. However, the *Senator* and the *Awareness Times* refused to comply with the ruling.

Koroma has generally refused to let ruling party supporters crack down on the press and stifle opposition criticism. However, journalists are occasionally subject to attacks or intimidation. In January 2012, police assaulted and briefly detained Allieu Sesay of Radio Democracy while he was covering the arrest of an opposition politician. In March, cameraman Jerry Cole of the public-service Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) was attacked by opposition supporters while recording an interview with leading opposition figures. Also that month, the community radio station Radio Wanjei, in the southern town of Pujehun, was temporarily forced off the air by a local politician who stormed the station and seized equipment because he felt the staff had treated him unprofessionally. In July, the independent community radio station Radio Gbath was similarly attacked by a local politician and his supporters in retaliation for the station's alleged disrespect of the politician. In addition to physical violence toward the moderators, equipment was stolen and vandalized. In August, soldiers in uniform attacked reporter Poindexter Sama and graphic designer Alie Turay of the daily *Awoko Newspaper* outside their offices in Freetown after the journalists photographed the soldiers traveling to a protest rally. The soldiers assaulted the journalists and confiscated their mobile telephones and memory sticks. At the end of 2012, the murder trial for eight suspects in the brutal 2011 killing of journalist Ibrahim Foday of the daily *Exclusive* was still ongoing. The crime was the first murder of a journalist in Sierra Leone since 2005.

Sierra Leone has 58 newspapers, about 40 radio stations, and 13 television stations. Most newspapers are independent, though some are associated with political parties, and the print media routinely criticize both the government and opposition parties. All Sierra Leonean newspapers are printed in English, a language spoken by only about a third of the population. 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. Poverty and illiteracy are also factors behind the low internet penetration rate, which stood at just over 1 percent in 2012, though the government imposes no restrictions on access. The SLBC operates a television service and a radio network. Television and radio programming is available in both English and local languages. The number of community radio stations has proliferated in recent years, but many are not sustainable due to their dependence on foreign grants and the difficulty of meeting high operational expenses, including for electricity, especially in rural areas. International media operate freely, though foreign outlets are required to register with the government.

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 providers can afford to station reporters outside the capital, and printing presses and other materials are scarce and unreliable. Journalists' pay is generally very low, and many work without pay, taking second jobs that can cause conflicts of interest. Economic insecurity leaves journalists more vulnerable to editorial pressure from owners, advertisers, and other businesses.

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