

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	268
Land:	Eritrea
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	Freedom of the Press 2016 – Eritrea
Udgivet:	1. december 2016
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	30. maj 2017



Freedom of the Press 2016 - Eritrea

Publisher [Freedom House](#)

Publication Date 1 December 2016

Cite as Freedom House, *Freedom of the Press 2016 - Eritrea*, 1 December 2016, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/586f71a651.html> [accessed 27 April 2017]

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Press Freedom Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 30 / 30 (0 = best, 30 = worst)

Political Environment: 40 / 40 (0 = best, 40 = worst)

Economic Environment: 24 / 30 (0 = best, 30 = worst)

Press Freedom Score: 94 / 100 (0 = best, 100 = worst)

Quick Facts

Population: 5,200,000

Freedom in the World Status: Not Free

Internet Penetration Rate: 1.0%

Overview

Eritrea continued to rank among the most repressive media environments in the world in 2015 under the harsh authoritarian regime of President Isaias Afwerki. It has lacked any form of privately owned media since 2001, when the government banned the once-vibrant private press. Key editors and journalists were imprisoned, and the crackdown later extended to state-employed journalists.

Key Developments

- Six journalists were released from prison in January. They had been detained since 2009.
- Despite the releases, 17 journalists were imprisoned in Eritrea as of December 1, 2015, the most in sub-Saharan Africa, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Legal Environment: 30 / 30

The Eritrean constitution guarantees freedoms of speech and of the press, but these rights are ignored in practice. The 1996 Press Proclamation Law mandates that all newspapers and journalists be licensed. It also stipulates that publications must be submitted for government approval prior to release, and prohibits reprinting articles from banned publications. In 2013, there was an attempted mutiny when 100-200 junior army officers struggled to take over the Ministry of Information, locally known as "Forto." They forced the station's director to read a statement over the government channel EriTV calling for the implementation of the constitution – which allows for multiparty competition – and the release of political prisoners and those who had been arrested attempting to leave the country. While the attempted coup was quickly put down, it demonstrated the fragility of the state and the degree of discontent with the secretive regime.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 17 journalists were imprisoned in Eritrea as of December 1, 2015, one of the largest numbers in the world and the most in sub-Saharan Africa. This number remains stubbornly high despite the January 2015 release of six journalists who had worked for government-controlled Radio Bana. The journalists had been held without charge since February 2009, when they were

arrested during a raid on their station. During the raid, about 50 journalists and other staff were taken to the Doboito detention center.

The most recent jailings came in 2011, when four journalists working for the government radio and television station, Dimtsi Hafash, were arrested and imprisoned; the government has yet to disclose the charges against them. Nine journalists have been in prison since 2001, and almost all are being held incommunicado. There is little information on the condition of those imprisoned, though unconfirmed reports indicate that several jailed journalists are in very poor health or may have died in detention.

The year 2014 saw thwarted attempts on the part of lawyers to press Swedish courts to investigate crimes against humanity, torture, and abduction in the well-known case of Swedish-Eritrean journalist Dawit Isaak, who was imprisoned without charge in 2001. The case was closed when the Swedish prosecutor claimed that it would not be worthwhile to pursue because the Eritrean authorities were unlikely to cooperate. While there have been reports that Isaak died in detention in 2011, this could not be confirmed, and he was reported to be alive in 2015. However, the government has refused to disclose his whereabouts or the status of his health.

Political Environment: 40 / 40

Most independent or critical journalists have left the country due to intimidation and arbitrary imprisonment, and those who remain engage in self-censorship. However, in 2013 a dissident group began circulating an underground newspaper, *Echoes of Forto*, in Asmara, written by a team based inside and outside the country. The dissidents described the paper as a pilot project, but said they hoped to expand it. Radio Erena – run by Eritrean dissidents and Reporters Without Borders from Paris – was launched in 2009 and reportedly can be accessed via satellite, on the internet, and through a "call-to-listen" platform.

Although Eritrea has one of the lowest internet penetration rates in the world, at around 1 percent, the government makes an effort to block many websites managed by Eritrean exiles. Authorities are believed to monitor e-mail communications, and some users suspect that government informants track users' activity in internet cafés.

Foreign journalists are not able to freely enter the country and are generally not welcome unless they agree to report favorably about the regime. There have been occasional reports from journalists operating undercover, and Isaias has granted interviews to foreign broadcasters such as Sweden's TV4 and the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera. However, in 2013 the Eritrean government blocked Al-Jazeera for 11 days and issued a decree forbidding the provision of access to the station. The station was reportedly censored due to its coverage of demonstrations outside diplomatic missions in cities such as London, Rome, and Stockholm by Eritreans in the diaspora who were supporting the 2013 mutiny.

Ali Abdu, the minister of information and a close confidant of Isaias, fled into exile in late 2012 while on a trip to Germany, and in early 2013 began to speak out about the brutal tactics used against journalists. Media professionals who seek refuge abroad, especially in Sudan, have come under continued pressure, as have their families. For example, after Ali Abdu fled, his father, teenage daughter, and brother were reportedly arrested.

The European Union (EU) continues to provide development assistance to the Eritrean government through the European Development Fund, despite criticism and calls for this to be contingent on releasing imprisoned journalists and greater support for freedom of expression. In March 2015, Isaias's political adviser, Yemane Ghebreab, reportedly assured EU representatives that democratic reforms would be forthcoming in the next five years, a claim that has been made previously without progress.

Economic Environment: 24 / 30

The government controls all media in the country, including a newspaper published in three languages, a television station, and three radio stations. A permit is required to print a publication or to distribute a foreign publication. However, individuals are allowed to purchase satellite dishes and subscribe to international media. Several radio stations run by Eritreans abroad are attempting to reach listeners in Eritrea, including Radio Erena. In addition, there are opposition-aligned stations broadcasting from Ethiopia.

Access to internet technology is extremely limited, as Eritrea has one of the lowest rates of internet access – just over 1 percent – and mobile phone use – around 7 percent – in the world due to high costs and government restrictions. In 2011, the government reversed plans to offer mobile internet. The government requires all internet service providers to use state-controlled internet infrastructure, and almost all connections remain dial-up and extremely slow.

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