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2015 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score (0 = best, 100 = worst): 74

Legal Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 24

Political Environment (0 = best, 40 = worst): 29

Economic Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 21

Conditions for the press in Burundi remained restrictive in 2014, due in part to a repressive new media law promulgated in 2013. Independent and critical journalists faced attacks throughout the year, including from the youth wing of the ruling party. The general political climate was increasingly tense as the country prepared for elections set for mid-2015, in which President Pierre Nkurunziza was expected to seek a constitutionally prohibited third term.

Legal Environment

The constitution guarantees freedoms of speech and of the press, but these rights are not respected in practice and are undermined by the penal code and the country's laws. The 2013 media law, which amended a 2003 version, was a serious setback for press freedom. It prescribes punishments including high fines, suspensions of media outlets, and the withdrawal of press cards for several broadly worded offenses, such as publishing or broadcasting stories that undermine national unity and public order, or that are related to issues such as national defense, security, public safety, unauthorized demonstrations, and the economy. The law also limited the protection of journalistic sources, required journalists to meet certain educational and professional standards, and increased the enforcement powers of the National Communication Council (CNC), the media regulator, which is widely considered to be controlled by Nkurunziza. In January 2014, the Constitutional Court – ruling on a challenge brought by the Burundian Union of Journalists – reduced some of the high fines provided for in the law, but left the bulk of the legislation intact. In September, the union, with the support of the London-based Media Legal Defence Initiative, challenged the law in the East African Court of Justice; that process was ongoing at year's end.

Media outlets and journalists continued to face arrests and legal harassment in 2014, and the threatening climate fostered a high degree of self-censorship. In April 2014, charges were brought against several reporters after a confidential UN cable alleging the distribution of arms to the youth wing of the ruling National Council for the Defense of Democracy-Forces for the Defense

of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) party – known as the Imbonerakure – was leaked to the international media. Eloge Niyonzima and Alexis Nkeshimana, correspondents for the popular independent stations Radio Publique Africaine (RPA) and Radio Bonesha in Bubanza Province, respectively, were charged with undermining state security for reporting on the population's fears about the alleged arms distribution. The two were forced to reveal their sources, and a verdict was expected in early 2015. In May, Alexis Nimubona of RPA was charged with defamation after implicating certain provincial officials in the arms distribution. Other reporters were summoned by prosecutors in connection with the story, including Amisi Karihungu and Alexis Nibasumba of Radio Bonesha. Nibasumba had gone into hiding for more than a week, fearing his potential arrest, and resurfaced only when he received assurances that he would not face criminal charges. Eloge Niyonzima was again arrested in late December on accusations of complicity in the beating of a member of the Imbonerakure. He was provisionally released after several days but remained under investigation.

The lack of a freedom of information law in Burundi facilitates the arbitrary application of media laws, as the government frequently targets journalists for crimes related to vaguely explained state interests. Furthermore, ambiguous legal language is interpreted by a judiciary that lacks independence from political forces.

In March 2014, Nkurunziza appointed several new members to the CNC. The 15-member body is composed primarily of government representatives or journalists from the state broadcaster, reinforcing perceptions that it lacks independence from the executive. Throughout 2014, the CNC continued to issue suspensions, bans, and other sanctions against media outlets and journalists. In May, an RPA broadcast was suspended for airing allegations regarding the existence of training camps for the ruling party's youth militia in the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo. Pierre Claver Mbonimpa, a prominent Burundian civil society leader, had leveled the accusation and was arrested in May for endangering state security. He fell seriously ill while incarcerated and was provisionally released on medical grounds in September, though the charges were still pending. In the wake of Mbonimpa's arrest, RPA broadcast a jingle with lyrics from a popular song calling for an end to injustice, apparently to protest the detention; the CNC ordered the station not to air it again. Other radio stations began to play protest music in the following days, leading the CNC to issue a ban on another popular song until the conclusion of Mbonimpa's case.

In November, the CNC filed legal complaints on behalf of the CNDD-FDD and the government against Bob Rugurika, RPA's director, and Gilbert Niyonkuru, an RPA reporter, demanding that they reveal their sources for a story on the activities of a rebel group in the Rukoko nature reserve in Bubanza Province.

Political Environment

The state-owned Radio Télévision Nationale du Burundi (RTNB) is widely perceived as progovernment. Self-censorship is reportedly widespread, especially within the state media and at outlets with close connections to the administration. Despite attempts by the government to restrict independent media, the popularity of stations such as RPA, Radio Isanganiro, Radio Bonesha, and Radio Télé Renaissance allows for the airing of some diverse viewpoints. However, journalists who criticize the government are often accused of being supporters of the opposition. In March 2014, Ildephonse Habarurema, the permanent secretary of the National Security Council, accused some media outlets of broadcasting "subversive messages" and criticized RPA for covering a police raid on the headquarters of the opposition Movement for Solidarity and Democracy.

Although there were fewer incidents than in 2013, physical attacks and harassment directed against independent and critical journalists continued in 2014. The staff of RPA and other independent radio stations are particularly common targets for such intimidation.

Economic Environment

Radio is the primary source of information for the majority of the population. The government maintains a strong hold on Burundi's media industry through the RTNB. The state television station commands the country's largest audience, and the state radio station places second after RPA. The government operates *Le Renouveau*, the only daily newspaper. Private weekly and monthly print publications also circulate. The pressruns of most newspapers remain small, and readership is limited. Similarly, most private broadcast outlets have a limited range. There are approximately 20 privately owned radio stations, though the law prohibits political parties, labor unions, and foreign nongovernmental organizations from owning media outlets in the country. The British Broadcasting Corporation, Radio France Internationale, and Voice of America are available on FM radio in the capital.

The number of mobile-telephone subscribers has increased substantially in recent years, reaching nearly 3 million in 2014. Six mobile networks now operate in Burundi. However, internet penetration remains very low, at 1.3 percent as of 2013, due to the high cost of service, and access remains largely confined to urban areas. Low literacy rates have also restrained the market for online news sources. In early 2014 the country's first fiber-optic broadband network was introduced, and it is expected to lower prices for consumers where infrastructure already allows for internet access.

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