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Freedom of the Press 2015 - Sierra Leone

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2015 Scores

Press Status: Partly Free

Press Freedom Score (0 = best, 100 = worst): 50

Legal Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 15

Political Environment (0 = best, 40 = worst): 19

Economic Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 16

A state of emergency, declared in July 2014 following the outbreak of the Ebola virus in Sierra Leone, gave the president wide executive powers without judicial oversight. These powers – including the unfettered ability to issue arrest and detention orders – significantly restricted the exercise of civil liberties, and were used to target journalists for their criticism of the government.

Legal Environment

Sierra Leone's constitution guarantees freedoms of speech and the press, although these rights are occasionally restricted in practice. In 2014, powers granted to the president under the state of emergency imposed in the wake of the Ebola crisis led to the widespread use of arrest and detention orders against journalists who were critical of the government. No judicial oversight was required for the exercise of these presidential powers, which severely limited the freedom of expression at large.

Under the colonial-era Public Order Act of 1965, criminal libel is punishable by prison terms of three to seven years, while the separate crime of publishing false news is punishable by up to one year in prison. In 2014, several journalists and media outlets were targeted based on allegations of defamation. In January, an editor and managing director from the company Premier Media were arrested following a complaint by the information minister, who accused them of defaming the government; equipment from the company's office was confiscated during a related search by security forces. In February, a producer for the Culture Radio station was arrested in connection to on-air comments made by a program participant; the arrest was reportedly encouraged by the vice president. In 2013, the Public Order Act was invoked against two journalists with the daily *Independent Observer* newspaper in connection to an article that referred to President Ernest Bai Koroma as a rat and a dictator. The journalists were arrested and charged with 26 counts of seditious libel against the president, and held for more than two weeks before being released on

bail. Several other media outlets were raided in connection with the investigation. In March 2014, the *Independent Observer* journalists plead guilty to one charge of conspiracy to defame the president in exchange for the dropping of all remaining charges.

In 2013, Parliament passed the Right to Access Information Act. Media rights advocates lauded the legislation – which includes penalties for government agencies that fail to comply with its provisions – as an essential instrument in ensuring greater government transparency and accountability.

Media in Sierra Leone are regulated by the Independent Media Commission (IMC), whose members are appointed by the president acting on the advice of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) and subject to the approval of Parliament, according to the Independent Media Commission (Amendment) Act of 2006. The IMC provides an alternative to litigation 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 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. The IMC can also summon editors at its own discretion. The body has generally demonstrated independence from the government.

Political Environment

The government frequently interferes with the work of journalists and media outlets in an attempt to censor content. Under the state of emergency declared in 2014, the government adopted measures that curtailed coverage of the Ebola crisis, deterred critical reporting, and limited freedom of movement and access to information. In November, a popular radio journalist from the independent Citizen FM was arrested and accused of incitement after criticizing the government's response to the epidemic on his daily radio program. He was detained for 11 days and released without charge.

Two journalists were known to have died from the Ebola virus in 2014. In June, Eastern Radio journalist Mohamed Mwalim Sherif died following interviews with a Muslim cleric who had cared for an Ebola patient. In September, Victor Kassim, a journalist with the station Radio Maria, died along with his wife and child.

Economic Environment

Sierra Leone has more than 20 regularly published newspapers, approximately 40 radio stations – more than half of which are community stations – and 2 active terrestrial television stations; satellite television is also available to those who can afford it. 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 accessed medium for obtaining information. Poverty, a lack of regular electricity, and illiteracy are also factors behind the low internet penetration rate, which stood at just 2 percent in 2014, though the government imposes no restrictions on access. The state-owned Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (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, such as the cost of electricity; such problems are particularly pronounced in rural areas. International media operate freely, though foreign outlets are required to register with the government.

Widespread poverty is an obstacle to the financial sustainability of media outlets. Advertising rates are among the lowest in the world, and the management and operational structures of outlets are not always efficient or profitable. Few news providers can afford to station reporters outside the capital, and printing presses and other equipment are scarce and unreliable. Journalists are often untrained and poorly paid; 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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