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Freedom of the Press 2014 - Central African Republic

In March 2013, members of the Séléka rebel coalition captured the capital, Bangui, and ousted President François Bozizé. After Michel Djotodia, the Séléka leader, was installed as president that month, the security situation deteriorated and human rights abuses increased. Later in the year, violence between Séléka and Christian “anti-balaka” self-defense militias made the situation even more dangerous. Despite the presence of peacekeeping forces from France and neighboring African countries, insecurity persisted throughout 2013, with more than 1,000 people killed and an estimated 1 million displaced by year’s end. As a result, press freedom declined markedly, with media outlets and journalists often caught between warring parties or forced to self-censor to avoid retaliation.

The 2005 constitution of the Central African Republic (CAR) provides for freedom of the press, and a press law that went into effect in 2005 abolished imprisonment for many offenses, such as libel and slander. However, criminal penalties remained for some defamation charges, incitement of ethnic or religious hatred, and the publication or broadcast of false information that could “disturb the peace.” Moreover, the general tendency to circumvent or ignore legal protections for the press worsened in 2013, despite Djotodia’s promise in a May 3 World Press Freedom Day speech that “no journalists [would] be imprisoned for speaking out” and that the new government would respect freedom of expression. In August, the prosecutor general of the transitional government summoned Davy Kpenouwen, the managing editor of the daily *Le Pays*, and threatened to arrest him over the paper’s coverage of Séléka’s alleged connections with Badica, a local diamond-trading house.

The Extraordinary Committee for the Defense of Democratic Achievements (CEDAD), a new secret police force headed by former Séléka general Mahamat Nouradine Adam, was created in September. It was granted wide-ranging powers to ensure domestic stability, which included the monitoring of media outlets and personnel. In September and October, the editors of three Bangui-based dailies were extrajudicially detained and interrogated for publishing stories that were critical of CEDAD’s activities. Two of the three papers subsequently issued retractions, and Nouradine warned media outlets that journalists accused of publishing “mendacious allegations” against the state would be jailed.

The absence of a freedom of information law makes accessing official information in the CAR challenging for journalists. The High Council for Communications (HCC), tasked with granting licenses and promoting press freedom, is nominally independent but came further under

government control in 2013. By mid-December, the HCC appeared to be more or less defunct, as Djotodia had not made any appointments to its board.

Censorship and politically motivated broadcasting became more common in 2013. As a Séléka takeover looked likely in early in the year, state-owned Radio Centrafrique began broadcasting anti-Séléka hate propaganda in support of the Bozizé regime. In the aftermath of the takeover, Christophe Gazam Betty, the communications minister, banned media outlets from talking about Séléka's actions, making it explicit that state-owned media were required to be loyal to the Djotodia administration. As the violence in the country became increasingly marked by religious divisions toward the end of the year, with anti-balaka groups targeting the predominantly Muslim former Séléka rebels, many stations grew more radicalized in their coverage of the conflict. Self-censorship was rife, with some outlets, such as the newspaper *Le Citoyen*, deciding to reprint material from Radio France Internationale (RFI) rather than risk angering authorities by creating original reports. More extreme forms of censorship also occurred. With the deployment of French troops in early December, the country experienced a total news blackout for several days, as broadcasts were halted and the presses fell silent. An escalation in the violence in late December brought a second, partial blackout, as virtually all newspapers in the capital ceased publication on December 20. Most print media had not resumed operations by year's end, and a general curfew forced radio stations to end broadcasts by 6:00 p.m.

Journalists and media outlets were more likely to face physical attacks in 2013 than in previous years, targeted by both state and nonstate actors. As Séléka forces began their march on the capital in January, many media outlets in their path, particularly those outside Bangui, were raided or forced by threat of violence to stop covering the rebel group's activities. These included Radio Be Oko in Bambari and Radio Kaga in Kaga Bandoro. As the rebels reached the capital in March, they attacked other outlets, including the independent Radio Ndeke Luka—jointly funded by the United Nations and Switzerland's Fondation Hirondelle. Despite being housed in the UN Development Programme (UNDP) compound, the station was robbed of four motorcycles and another vehicle, as well as two computers. Séléka rebels also raided the offices of the privately owned daily *Le Confident* in March, forcing its editor into hiding. In June, Gazam Betty, the communications minister, showed up unexpectedly at the paper's offices with an entourage of armed men and ransacked its files. In August, the managing editor of *Dernières Minutes*, Geoffroy Dotte, was taken blindfolded to an unknown location and interrogated for two hours after he was accused of supporting an anti-Séléka protester; he was later released. Other journalists reported receiving threats via telephone.

Private newspapers, including five dailies published in French, once offered generally competing views on politics; after the Séléka takeover, however, the diversity of the CAR's media landscape became decidedly more muted. The influence of print media has long been limited by low literacy levels, high poverty rates, and the lack of a functioning postal service to deliver periodicals outside the capital. Radio continues to be the most important medium for the dissemination of information. The state owns Radio Centrafrique and a television broadcaster, both of which have traditionally reflected predominantly progovernment views. However, alternatives—including Radio Ndeke Luka, international broadcasters such as RFI and Voice of America, and a number of community radio stations—are available. Due to technical deterioration, the reach and broadcast capacity of even state-owned outlets have decreased dramatically in recent years. Infrastructural constraints have also limited internet penetration; only 3.5 percent of the population was able to access the

internet in 2013. Access is otherwise unrestricted, and there were no reports that the government monitored e-mail during the year.

Financial problems and the lack of an organized advertising market plague many newspapers, and some journalists are motivated by poverty to accept bribes to cover certain stories, as many are not paid regularly for their work. Most journalists are poorly trained, although a journalism department was established at the University of Bangui in 2009.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Not Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

77

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

24

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

32

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

21

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