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Freedom of the Press 2011 - Senegal

Status: Partly Free

Legal Environment: 20

Political Environment: 20

Economic Environment: 14

Total Score: 54

Senegal's laws provide for press freedoms, but the government of President Abdoulaye Wade continued to limit these freedoms in practice. The government has occasionally employed provisions of the 1977 penal code – including Article 80, which criminalizes vaguely defined threats to national security – to harass, prosecute, fine, and incarcerate critical journalists. Article 8 of the 2001 constitution ostensibly protects freedom of expression and of the press. However, defamation, libel, and insult are criminal offenses, and such charges are frequently brought against journalists in order to block or punish critical reporting or commentary. In August 2010, Abdourahmane Diallo, editor of the daily *Express News*, was sentenced in absentia to six months in jail for defaming Wade's chief of staff, Pape Samba Mboup. A warrant was issued for the journalist's arrest, but he had not been detained by year's end. In November, Abdou Latif Coulibaly, one of Senegal's most prominent and critical journalists, and two journalists who work with him on his weekly newspaper, *La Gazette*, were fined 20 million CFA francs (roughly \$40,000) and given one-month suspended jail sentences in a libel case stemming from reports of alleged kickbacks in the allocation of a mobile phone license. Reporters Without Borders stated that the proceedings against Coulibaly raised concerns over judicial impartiality and represented an attempt to intimidate the local press corps. The threat of legal action, accompanied by aggressive official rhetoric against the press, has reportedly led to a rising level of self-censorship among some journalists.

Still, many media outlets continue to publish and broadcast strident antigovernment views and reports. Following a seminar in December 2009, parliament and government officials agreed to form a committee to review a draft law on Access to Information in January, but little progress was made and there was still no law providing for freedom of information by year's end.

Journalists face harassment and assaults while covering the news, much of which comes from the authorities. In July 2010, Najib Sagna, a reporter with the privately owned newspaper *Walf Grand Place*, was reportedly attacked by four assailants – including a relative of Madam Coumba Gaye, deputy minister of justice and human rights – in connection with a gossip article alleging that Gaye had had a son with another cabinet minister. In October, police "manhandled" a group of journalists and confiscated some of their equipment as they were attempting to cover a demonstration in the city of Pikine, according to the Media Foundation for West Africa. In June, plainclothes police reportedly raided the printing house of the Dakar-based daily newspaper *Le Populaire*, confiscating printing materials in an attempt to prevent the publication of a petition demanding a probe into the alleged disappearance of funds paid to the government by a privately owned telecommunications group. The newspaper subsequently resumed publication. Separately, in November, one of four policemen charged with assaulting two sports journalists in 2008 was found guilty and given a one-month suspended sentence; this was viewed as a relatively positive development by media advocates.

Many private, independent print publications and three government-affiliated newspapers continue to publish regularly in the capital, though their distribution in rural areas is irregular at best. Radio is the most important source of news due to high illiteracy rates, and a number of community, private, and public radio stations operate across the country, with more than 80 radio frequencies allocated to date. Critics allege that Wade's associates in politics, business, and the religious community receive preferential treatment in the allocation of frequencies and enforcement of broadcasting fees. The four private television channels that now operate carry mostly entertainment programming. The only national television station, state-owned Radio Television Senegal (RTS), generally favors the government in its news coverage. The executive staff members of RTS are all directly or indirectly selected by the president. The government has also been accused of selectively granting or withholding state subsidies to influence media outlets. Foreign satellite television and radio stations, including Radio France Internationale and the British Broadcasting Corporation, are available and unrestricted. Internet access is also unrestricted, and approximately 16 percent of the population accessed the medium in 2010.