

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	43
Land:	Sydsudan
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	Freedom of the press 2012
Udgivet:	27. november 2012
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	11. december 2012

Freedom of the Press 2012 - South Sudan	
Publisher	Freedom House
Country	South Sudan
Publication Date	27 November 2012
Cite as	Freedom House, <i>Freedom of the Press 2012 - South Sudan</i> , 27 November 2012, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/50b732fbc.html [accessed 6 December 2012]
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Freedom of the Press 2012 - South Sudan

2012 Scores

Press Status: Partly Free

Press Freedom Score: 59

Legal Environment: 16

Political Environment: 26

Economic Environment: 17

After a 22-year civil war, southern Sudan became autonomous in 2005 and achieved independence as the Republic of South Sudan on July 9, 2011. A nascent government familiar with warfare but unaccustomed to democratic rule curtailed press freedom across the country both prior to and after independence.

The new constitution, one of the most progressive in Africa and ratified upon independence, guarantees press freedom and ensures that all levels of government uphold this principle. Three progressive media bills were introduced in 2007 but had not been enacted by the end of 2011, leaving journalists without comprehensive legal protections and the media sector without a regulatory framework. The bills were designed to set up easy access to information, a public broadcaster, and an independent press ombudsman. While Information Minister Barnaba Marial Benjamin claimed that the delay in the bills' passage was due to a glut of legislation in the parliament, local journalists voiced suspicions that individuals within the government opposed their adoption. Nevertheless, legal measures were rarely used against the press, except in a February case in which a bank filed criminal defamation charges against the independent weekly *Juba Post* after it reported claims that the institution was facing

bankruptcy. The editor and a reporter for the paper were detained, but the case had not gone to court by the end of the year.

Unlike in the North, it is relatively easy to acquire accreditation and licenses to work as a journalist in South Sudan, although some obstruction was reported for those seeking accreditation to cover the July 2011 independence day proceedings. Access to interviews and official information largely depends on the personal connections of journalists. Although there is no official censorship, journalists have no effective legal protection from harassment by state officials, and many self-censor to avoid repercussions from their reporting.

Security officials and individuals within the government rely on extrajudicial means to silence the private media, and journalists and media houses were regularly subjected to intimidation and physical attacks by security agents both before and after independence. Nhial Bol, editor in chief of the *Citizen* daily, was arrested in January 2011 and detained without charge following an article on the dispute between a government minister and a Chinese oil company. In March, freelance journalist Isaac Vuni was arbitrarily arrested by Juba police and released more than a month later. In May, security agents detained reporter Mohamed Arkou Ali for over three weeks for taking photographs without a permit, accusing him of espionage. He was reportedly subjected to torture while in custody. In November, Ngor Agut Garang, editor in chief of the daily *Destiny*, was arrested following an October column that criticized the marriage of President Salva Kiir's daughter. Several days later, Dengdit Ayok, the author of the article, was arrested and suspended from working as a journalist, and publication of *Destiny* was also suspended. Both men were released several weeks later without charge, but reported mistreatment while in custody, and Ayok received a death threat via e-mail following his release. Reporters regularly encountered difficulties while covering news stories, including confiscations of equipment and restrictions on their movements by police and security forces.

As disputes between northern and southern Sudan intensified around independence, journalists were often caught in the middle. In May, soldiers from northern Sudan detained *Juba Post* and online *Sudan Tribune* correspondent Ngor Arol Garang during a military offensive over the disputed Abyei area in Unity State. Separately, the newly formed government of South Sudan was quick to warn editors of private media houses to stop reporting on internal security problems involving dissident rebel groups.

Print media in South Sudan are burdened with small staffs and budgets, little advertising revenue, and a national illiteracy rate of 80 percent. Newspapers are largely concentrated in urban areas because of the high cost of transportation and a lack of

reliable infrastructure. Newsprint is very expensive, and because the country has only one printing press, a majority of the printing is done in Uganda or Sudan. A number of private dailies and weeklies publish regularly, though the majority are owned by individuals within the ruling SPLM. There is a general lack of diversity of viewpoints, as reporters are either employed by progovernment media owners or fear reprisals from state authorities. Papers are favored for their allegiance to the ruling party in terms of advertising revenue. Confiscation of press runs is rare in South Sudan. However, security agents seized 2,500 copies of an April edition of the *Juba Post* after the paper quoted a spokesman for dissident forces as saying that they would launch an attack on the capital, Juba. Government-owned Southern Sudan Television is the sole television station operating in the country. Journalists working at the station complain of self-censorship and lack of professional integrity among their superiors. Radio remains the main source of news for most citizens, with 11 private radio stations and a state-owned station whose range reaches all 10 states.

There are no reliable statistics regarding internet use in South Sudan in 2011. Penetration is low, but access is not restricted by the government. The lack of official restrictions on online news has allowed several professional, critical websites to emerge, including *Sudan Tribune*, Sudan Votes, and Gurtong.