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Freedom of the Press 2014 - Côte d'Ivoire

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2014 Scores

Press Status: Partly Free

Press Freedom Score: (0 = best, 100 = worst) 55

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

Political Environment: (0 = best, 40 = worst) 21

Economic Environment: (0 = best, 30 = worst) 19

Status change explanation: Côte d'Ivoire's status improved from Not Free to Partly Free due to continued openings in the legal and political environment under the government of Alassane Ouattara. These included a decrease in the use of restrictive press laws, a reduction in official censorship, the gradual establishment of more private outlets, and fewer incidents of harassment and attacks on both foreign and local journalists.

The media environment in Côte d'Ivoire continued to improve in 2013, as the country consolidated many of the gains achieved since President Alassane Ouattara took office following the disputed November 2010 presidential election and the ensuing months of violence and unrest. More diverse news content has become available to citizens, and journalists have much greater freedom to cover important events. While the rate of attacks on media practitioners was far lower in 2013 than at the height of the political conflict in 2011, a number of incidents, including threats and an abduction, showed that serious problems remained.

Freedoms of speech and of the press are protected in the constitution and the country's laws, though there are prohibitions on speech that incites violence, ethnic hatred, or rebellion. Imprisonment as a punishment for press offenses, including defamation, was abolished in 2004, but defamation carries a fine of up to 15 million CFA francs (\$30,000), and libel of the head of state or other state institutions is punishable by fines of up to 20 million CFA francs (\$40,000). No libel or defamation cases were filed against journalists during 2013.

A draft freedom of information law was under discussion for most of the year, and was passed by the national assembly right at year's end. An existing government web portal allows the public to freely access some official information online, with regular updates of communiqués from council meetings and other documents. The government nevertheless remains protective of sensitive information. In June 2013, police questioned two journalists from the investigative weekly *L'Eléphant déchaîné* for six hours over leaks of "sensitive information regarding the security of

the Côte d'Ivoire," after the paper published an article about unpaid debts to companies hired to rebuild military infrastructure after the 2011 conflict.

Under former president Laurent Gbagbo, media regulatory bodies such as the National Press Council (CNP) were frequently used to control critical journalism, and this pattern persisted during Ouattara's first two years in office. While the CNP continued to issue suspensions to media outlets in 2013, however, its decisions appeared to be less politically motivated than in the past. In June, the CNP conducted an investigation into the operations of more than 60 media outlets to assess their adherence to a collective agreement negotiated in 2012 between journalists' unions and media owners. The review concluded that only nine companies were in conformance with the agreement; twenty-six others were given a warning, and 34 were suspended until they brought their operations into compliance. The suspended outlets came from across the political spectrum, bolstering the case that the investigation was objective and not focused on punishing pro-Gbagbo outlets. After regularizing their business operations, a number of outlets -- including *Nouveau Réveil*, *Notre Voie*, and the opposition daily *Le Quotidien d'Abidjan* -- were able to have the suspensions lifted. Other temporary suspensions against media outlets or individual journalists were handed down throughout the year for offenses ranging from plagiarism to "immorality." Although the affected outlets were allowed to publish their online editions while their print versions were suspended, the spate of penalties nevertheless raised concerns among press freedom groups, including the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA). The CNP's broadcast counterpart, the High Authority for Audiovisual Communications (HACA), did not issue any such suspensions during the year, partly because there are fewer private outlets in the broadcast sector.

In 2012, Ivoirian journalists, in collaboration with MFWA, adopted a new code of ethics that met international professional standards. Entry into journalism is open and does not require a particular degree or background. In October 2013, the commission responsible for administering press cards, under the auspices of the HACA and the CNP, distributed nearly 800 cards, rejecting fewer than 50 applications.

The severe restrictions on access to independent news sources that were imposed during the postelection crisis were largely lifted in 2012. International media -- including Radio France Internationale (RFI) and the UN radio station Onuci FM, both of which were banned by Gbagbo -- have operated freely since Ouattara took office. Members of the local press have also observed an easing of restrictions on their ability to cover the news. There were no blocks on websites or government constraints on access to the internet in 2013. However, while conditions improved in the south, particularly in Abidjan, access to news and information in the north, where some districts are largely controlled by local warlords, remained very limited. In an attempt to break the virtual news blackout, Abidjan-based outlets are working to expand their networks of reporters in the north.

No journalists in Côte d'Ivoire were imprisoned at year's end. In January 2013, two bloggers were arrested for "interfering with disaster relief" when they began a blog to help victims of a New Year's Eve stampede in Abidjan that killed more than 60 people. A social media campaign on their behalf caught the attention of international outlets including Al-Jazeera and RFI, and the two were released after four days. In May, Ousmane Sy Savané, the chief executive of the popular Cyclone Media Group, was released after more than a year in pretrial detention, but he still faced charges of endangering state security. Cyclone is the parent company of many newspapers that supported Gbagbo, including *Le Temps*.

In a departure from the widespread and sometimes deadly violence against journalists in 2011, there have been significantly fewer attacks on the press since the end of the conflict. In November 2013, Deusmonde Tade, a journalist with the progovernment *Le Nouveau Réveil*, was kidnapped by unidentified assailants, beaten, and released the next morning on the outskirts of Abidjan. He had earlier received death threats in relation to an article about a former warlord in the pro-

Ouattara camp who had risen to become a commander in the Ivoirian army. No suspects had been arrested by year's end.

The media sector in Côte d'Ivoire is vibrant and growing, though it suffers from a lack of professionalism and limited logistical capacity. Journalists are poorly trained, and salaries are low, leaving many media practitioners vulnerable to corruption. Most media outlets take editorial lines that support one of the country's political factions. In 2012, the government opened up the television and radio industries to private broadcasters after more than two decades of promises to liberalize the airwaves. Under the previous 2004 law, the few private radio stations were limited to entertainment and cultural programming, and no private television stations were permitted. While private broadcast outlets are now legally allowed to cover political events, no new television outlets had opened by the end of 2013. This may be a result of the particularly high fees -- about \$2 million for a commercial television station. However, private radio stations gradually began to report more on public affairs. The state still controls the largest radio stations, including the only one with national reach, as well as *Fraternité Matin*, the largest-circulation daily newspaper; a news agency; and the national television broadcaster, Radiodiffusion Télévision Ivoirienne (RTI). The government expressed its desire to ensure that state media were accessible to all political parties in 2013, and while many outlets still seemed to favor the Ouattara administration, they covered opposition political events more regularly and more independently than in the past.

As the private media market continues to expand, funding has become a more urgent problem, with a larger number of outlets competing for limited advertising revenues. The government does not explicitly give financial aid to any private media outlets, but backdoor financing from political actors is not uncommon. Independent outlets that provide investigative reporting sometimes have difficulty securing advertising from the government or private businesses. The independent press in Abidjan has equal access to modern printing facilities, and a variety of news producers are able to reach the public through popular satellite services and the country's many print vendors.

Approximately 3 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2013, and Ivoirians are increasingly turning to online sources for news and information. There are a number of robust web portals, most notably Abidjan.net, an aggregator of domestic and international news. Blogs and social media are also proliferating.

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