



Freedom of the Press 2016 - Cameroon

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Press Freedom Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 22 / 30 (0 = best, 30 = worst)

Political Environment: 22 / 40 (↑1) (0 = best, 40 = worst)

Economic Environment: 21 / 30 (0 = best, 30 = worst)

Press Freedom Score: 65 / 100 (↑1) (0 = best, 100 = worst)

Quick Facts

Population: 23,739,000

Freedom in the World Status: Not Free

Internet Penetration Rate: 11.0%

Overview

The media environment in Cameroon is constrained by a restrictive legal regime. Journalists reporting on sensitive subjects risk police questioning, lawsuits, and extrajudicial detention. As violence has increased in the Far North Province due to the terrorist activities of Boko Haram, the government has focused its scrutiny on journalists covering that region.

Key Developments

- A Nigerian journalist arrested in July 2015 was held for several months without charge or access to a lawyer, reportedly on suspicion of having links to Boko Haram, which he had covered in his work. He remained in detention at year's end.
- In September, a newspaper publisher was arrested for photographing the police breakup of a workshop on democracy. His trial was postponed several times during the year.
- No serious physical attacks on members of the press were reported in 2015.

Legal Environment: 22 / 30

Although the preamble to Cameroon's 1996 constitution guarantees freedom of expression and freedom of the press, these rights are not uniformly respected in practice. Defamation remains both a civil and a criminal offense, drawing fines and up to six months in prison. The burden of proof is on the defendant in defamation cases, truth is not a defense, and the penal code grants

public figures additional "special protections." The 1990 Law on Social Communication ended prepublication censorship, but Article 17 of the 1996 amended law gives officials the power to ban newspapers that are deemed a threat to public order.

In 2014, President Paul Biya promulgated a new antiterrorism law that could sharply limit press freedom. Journalists convicted of "defending terrorism," either in print or on the air, can face up to 20 years in prison and a fine of 25 to 50 million CFA francs (\$42,000 to \$84,000). Moreover, defendants can be tried in military courts.

The 2010 Cybersecurity and Cybercriminality Law and an electronic communications law include measures that allow the immediate identification of internet users, while failing to include sufficient protections against abuse of power and invasion of privacy, both of which can affect journalists and their sources.

While there is no specific law on freedom of information, the 1990 Law on Social Communication does confirm the "right to know." However, the government does not make documents or statistics freely available to the public or the media in practice.

Several journalists were arrested or punished for their work under existing laws during 2015, with at least two facing allegations of collaborating with Boko Haram. Ahmed Abba, a Nigerian journalist for Radio France Internationale (RFI), was arrested in July in Maroua, located in the Far North Region. He was transferred to Yaoundé, where he was held for several months without charge or access to a lawyer, reportedly on suspicion of having links to Boko Haram, which he had covered in his work. He was granted access to his lawyer in October, and his trial opened in November. Freelance journalist Simon Ateba was temporarily detained in late August for entering the Minawao refugee camp in the Far North Province without official permission, and on suspicion of spying on behalf of Boko Haram. The camp houses roughly 50,000 Nigerian refugees who fled from Boko Haram.

Several other detentions occurred in 2015, including the brief arrest and subsequent questioning in October of journalist Elie Smith, moments before his scheduled appearance on the privately owned Equinox TV station's political program, *Le Débat*. He had been set to discuss the state of the opposition in Congo (Brazzaville). In September, Cameroonian reporter and publisher of the newspaper *Génération Libre*, François Fognon Fotso, was arrested for photographing the police as they broke up a workshop on democracy that had been organized by a nongovernmental organization (NGO). His trial was postponed several times during the year. In July, Xavier Messe, editor of the daily newspaper *Mutations*, was detained for six hours, and interrogated about an article in the paper about tensions between members of Cameroon's ruling party.

Separately, Félix Ebolé Bola, president of Cameroon's National Union of Journalists and a senior reporter at *Mutations*; Rodrigue Tongue of the opposition newspaper *Le Messager*; and Baba Wamé, a former journalist, were charged in 2014 with possessing national security information concerning an insurgent from the Central African Republic, and failing to notify the authorities. In December 2015, the three were called before a military tribunal judge and informed that the case against them would move forward.

The country's media regulator, the National Communications Council (CNC), was created by a presidential decree in 1991 and given powers extending from frequency allocation to arbitration on libel and defamation cases. In 2012, another presidential decree authorized the CNC to impose sanctions including bans on media outlets. The council has increasingly exercised this authority in recent years.

Political Environment: 22 / 40 (↑1)

A number of independent newspapers report critically about the government, and radio call-in shows and television debate programs often feature strong criticism of the administration and individual officials. However, media outlets operate under the constant threat of prosecution or regulatory sanctions, leading many journalists, particularly in the broadcast media, to self-censor. State-owned media outlets are frequently given privileged access to official sources.

The presence of Boko Haram in the north has made reporting there extremely difficult. No serious physical attacks on members of the press were reported in 2015. In April 2014, the car of Denis Nkwebo, an editor at *Le Jour*, was destroyed in an explosion outside his home. In previous articles, Nkwebo had scrutinized security forces' efforts to curb attacks by Boko Haram in the north.

Economic Environment: 21 / 30

Cameroon's only national newspaper is the state-owned *Cameroon Tribune*, which publishes articles in both French and English and has a daily circulation of about 20,000. Several hundred other newspapers and periodicals operate throughout the country, often with regional concentrations; regular publication for smaller newspapers can be challenging due to cost and irregular enforcement of government regulations. A number of the dailies with the largest circulations are openly critical of the government, but they are not well distributed outside of urban areas.

The state-owned broadcaster, Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV), is widely viewed as progovernment in its news coverage. Owners of mainstream private broadcast media, including private television stations, are also reportedly under the government's influence. Though radio remains an important medium for news broadcast in Cameroon, most of the country's privately owned stations, of which there are about 200, are in large urban areas. Only major international broadcasters – the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), RFI, and Africa No. 1 – air across the entire country; Cameroon's private radio stations have local or regional reach. Radio and television stations must be licensed, which requires a lengthy application process and expensive annual fees. Rural nonprofit radio stations are exempt from licensing fees but in the past have been barred from discussing politics. No cases of this were reported in 2015, though programming at many such stations is typically apolitical.

While there are no official restrictions on the internet, usage is limited to about 21 percent of the population in 2015. Online media are expanding rapidly, driven in large part by mobile internet access. Cameroon is burdened with some of the highest bandwidth charges in West and Central Africa despite its access to a submarine cable, SAT3, which links the region to Europe.

Corruption in the media is considered pervasive, with contributing factors including low wages for journalists, lack of formal training, and lack of familiarity with the profession's ethical standards.

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