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Freedom of the Press 2010 - Sierra Leone

Status: Partly Free

Legal Environment: 15

Political Environment: 23

Economic Environment: 17

Total Score: 55

- The constitution guarantees freedom of expression, but the Public Order Act (POA) of 1965 – which allows for prison terms of one to three years for criminal libel and rejects the use of truth as a defense – continues to threaten the observance of this freedom in practice.
- In November 2009, the Supreme Court upheld the criminal and seditious libel provisions of the POA, rejecting a lawsuit in which the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists argued for their repeal. Section 32 of the law was invoked in May against Sylvia Blyden, publisher and editor of the *Awareness Times* newspaper, who was charged for "publishing false statements against the president" in an article concerning an alleged extramarital affair. She initially went into hiding, but turned herself in later that month.
- In August 2009, the legislature passed the Broadcasting Act, which would merge the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service (SLBS) with United Nations Radio to create a public-service broadcaster, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC). However, the president returned the bill to lawmakers for revisions following complaints from civil society organizations, notably the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists, about provisions that would allow him to unilaterally appoint the director general and deputy director general of the new broadcaster. A revised bill had not passed by year's end.
- During the year, discussions continued on a draft Right to Access Information Bill. Among other provisions, it would guarantee freedom of information in Sierra Leone.
- Despite improvements in the government's attitude toward the media and a significant decline in the number of attacks against journalists, some violent incidents were reported during 2009. In February, four female journalists from the SLBS and Eastern Radio were kidnapped in Kanema for reporting on female genital mutilation. Their captors were apparently supporters of the practice. The journalists were forced to walk naked through the streets, but were released after a few hours. In May, Sitta Turay, editor in chief of the biweekly *New People* newspaper, was stabbed in his office by loyalists of the ruling party for allegedly defaming the president. He subsequently went into hiding until he was assured protection by the information minister.

- The number of newspapers and radio stations in the country has grown significantly in recent years. Dozens of newspapers now publish, and over 45 government and private radio and television stations provide domestic news and political commentary. Self-censorship is much less common than in previous years.
- Poor journalistic training and corruption within the media sector continue to weaken the quality of news coverage, which is at times politicized and inaccurate.
- Just 0.3 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2009, though at least five internet-service providers were operating in the country.

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