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Freedom of the Press 2012 - Côte d'Ivoire

2012 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score: 70

Legal Environment: 20

Political Environment: 31

Economic Environment: 19

Since the onset of civil conflict in 2002, press freedom has generally not been respected in Côte d'Ivoire, despite constitutional protections. While gradual improvements had been seen over the previous few years, with a reduction in the number of attacks on the media and a tentative opening of the space for independent reporting, the situation deteriorated in connection with the long-delayed presidential election held at the end of 2010. The incumbent, Laurent Gbagbo, refused to relinquish power after losing to opponent Alassane Ouattara, leading to a protracted conflict in which both men claimed the presidency. Ouattara finally assumed power in April 2011, and Gbagbo was arrested, but the fighting left 3,000 people dead and an estimated one million displaced.

While imprisonment for defamation was abolished in 2004, defaming the head of state or other state institutions is still punishable by fines of up to 20 million CFA francs (\$44,000). During the postelection violence in 2011, journalists were arrested on a regular basis and imprisoned for a variety of offenses. In January, two journalists were held for 20 days on allegations of rebellion and threatening national security. Even after Ouattara assumed the presidency in April, journalists who criticized him often faced a similar fate. In July, Hermann Aboa, a presenter on the national broadcaster,

Radiodiffusion Télévision Ivoirienne (RTI), was arrested and put in a military detention facility on charges that included inciting racial hatred. He was provisionally released in December after persistent pressure from international press freedom organizations. Also in December, three journalists with the pro-Gbagbo newspaper *Notre Voie* were charged with "inciting theft, looting, and destruction of property in the media," but were cleared after 13 days in custody.

Media regulatory bodies were frequently used to control critical journalism during the year. In February 2011, Gbagbo replaced the entire leadership of the National Press Council (NPC), which is responsible for regulating the print media, with his supporters. The council then fined, suspended, and banned pro-Ouattara outlets, including *Le Nouveau Réveil* and *Nord-Sud*. The former head of the NPC had resisted government pressure to forcibly close such outlets following the 2010 election. After Ouattara assumed power, his administration continued to use the NPC as a political tool, filling it with staunch supporters who worked to suppress opposition voices. The pro-Gbagbo *Le Temps*, in particular, was targeted multiple times by the Ouattara administration and repeatedly suspended on accusations of inciting hatred.

Throughout the postelection crisis, control of information available to the public was of the highest importance to both sides, putting the media and journalists squarely in the middle of the conflict. Gbagbo's camp violently attacked and threatened journalists who recognized Ouattara's presidency; raided and often torched the offices of opposition media houses; banned all international media, including Onuci FM, a UN radio station, from operating and broadcasting inside the country; and attacked and prevented Edipresse, the country's main newspaper circulation service, from distributing newspapers. There were numerous reports of journalists and newscasters being killed by both sides. Pro-Ouattara forces were reportedly responsible for the violent death in February of Marcel Legré, an operator at La Réfondation Printing Press, which produced *Notre Voie*. Near the end of the conflict in early April, pro-Ouattara forces attacked and virtually destroyed the offices of RTI, which had been operating as a source of pro-Gbagbo propaganda. The United Nations and other international organizations had previously criticized Gbagbo for his use of RTI and state-owned *Fraternité Matin* in a calculated campaign of disinformation about the opposition and the UN-led peacekeeping force. RTI journalists fled and broadcast intermittently from a truck. Ouattara's eventual success in blocking the dissemination of pro-Gbagbo media represented a significant turning point in the conflict.

Although the pro-Gbagbo forces were defeated in April, the situation for the media did not markedly improve. Instead, forces loyal to Ouattara continued to directly target pro-Gbagbo journalists. In late April, the offices of La Réfondation were destroyed in an

arson attack attributed to Ouattara's vigilante security forces. These groups also controlled a number of the formerly pro-Gbagbo media outlets for months. Many outlets relocated to other sites and were not able to resume distribution until late May. Also that month, **Sylvain Gagnetaud**, a pro-Gbagbo journalist, was arrested and executed by Ouattara supporters. A hit list of pro-Gbagbo journalists reportedly circulated after Ouattara officially became president, and his government stated that it would prosecute journalists involved in the Gbagbo regime's propaganda operation.

Côte d'Ivoire has a history of vibrant reporting despite its unstable political situation. However, the media became extremely polarized during the postelection conflict, as journalists were harassed and intimidated into taking sides; very few were able to remain independent in their coverage. By the end of the year, opposition outlets were still recovering, and the pro-Ouattara camp dominated the information landscape; RTI was directly controlled by the Ouattara administration, and *Fraternité Matin* switched allegiance after Gbagbo's arrest. The new broadcast regulator, the High Commission for Audiovisual Communication (HACA), stated that safeguards had been put in place to prevent RTI from resuming a divisive role.

State-run media comprise the largest radio stations, including the only one with national reach, the largest daily newspaper, a news agency, and the national television broadcaster, RTI. With three public radio stations and more than 100 low-power, noncommercial stations, radio is the most popular medium in Côte d'Ivoire, though a 2004 press law prohibits the transmission of any political commentary by private radio outlets. There are about 20 daily papers, more than 30 weeklies, and several monthly journals available. Although most newspapers are privately operated, politicians and politically engaged businessmen have a considerable share in their ownership. The government-controlled daily newspaper, *Fraternité Matin*, has the largest circulation among print media and rarely criticizes the government, but a number of private papers compete with it and contain more critical coverage. Foreign media are generally accessible, though during the postelection conflict all international stations were suspended.

While only 2.2 percent of the population was able to access the internet in 2011 as a result of infrastructure limitations, online news sites and particularly blogs are becoming a more popular source of information among urban Ivoirians. Gbagbo's administration restricted mobile-telephone communications after the election and through the first half of 2011. The Côte d'Ivoire Telecommunications Agency (ATCI) announced its intention to block access to several independent and anti-Gbagbo websites early in the year, but the sites remained unblocked. This period also represented the first time bloggers were targeted for harassment and punishment by the Ivoirian government.

