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Freedom of the Press 2012 - Guinea

2012 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score: 62

Legal Environment: 18

Political Environment: 27

Economic Environment: 17

Status change explanation: Guinea declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to the failure of newly elected president Alpha Condé's government to implement reforms enacted in 2010 that improved the legal environment for press freedom. Further, the regulatory body imposed a brief media blackout after a July assassination attempt on Condé, and several media workers were detained, suspended, and threatened by the government and members of the security forces.

In 2011, the government of newly elected Guinean president Alpha Condé, who had taken office in November 2010, showed uneven progress in consolidating an ambitious democratic reform agenda begun in early 2010 by a transitional government that had taken over from a military junta. Constitutional and legislative reforms enacted in 2010 that improved the legal environment for press freedom were generally not implemented, and members of the media were subject to censorship, suspension, detention, threats, and assaults by the government and the security forces. Legislative elections scheduled for late 2011 were delayed until 2012 due to disputes between the government and the opposition over the election date and the composition of voter lists. In the interim, a nonelected but pluralistic transitional council operates as a quasi-legislative body.

The transitional government promulgated a new constitution by decree in March 2010 that guarantees press freedom, and in June it passed two new media laws that were viewed as a significant improvement by international press freedom groups. The first removed prison penalties for press offenses and narrowed the previously vague definition of defamation. The second called for the creation of a new media regulatory agency with 5 of the 11 members selected by media organizations, as opposed to being appointed by the president, as in the past. However, libel against the head of state, slander, and false reporting remain offenses under the new law and can be subject to high fines. In late 2010, a law on access to information was adopted. Yet, according to Reporters Without Borders, none of these laws were implemented by Condé's administration in 2011, reportedly held up by bureaucratic delays, procedural errors, and – in the view of critics and Guinean media members – disinterest or resistance on the part of government officials.

After an assassination attempt on Condé in July 2011, allegedly by rogue members of the military, the as-yet unreformed media regulatory body, the National Communication Council (CNC), ordered the "temporary suspension of any broadcast or article relating to the attempt on the life of the head of state." One particular target of the media blackout was popular radio call-in shows, which CNC head Martine Condé accused of inciting ethnic "tensions." Although the blackout was lifted after three days, it was widely criticized as a violation of constitutional free speech guarantees.

Media practitioners continued to operate in a politically polarized and occasionally dangerous environment in 2011, although they enjoyed a greater degree of freedom than in 2009, when the military unleashed a violent crackdown on opposition supporters and the local press. Some journalists practice self-censorship. Three journalists at the state-owned broadcaster, Radio Télévision Guinéenne (RTG), were suspended indefinitely in May 2011 for allegedly having sympathies for the opposition Union of Democratic Forces of Guinea (UFDG) party. In June, the CNC suspended the privately owned *Le Défi* weekly newspaper for two months for alleged defamation of the country's ombudsman, General Facinet Touré. The government's campaign against *Le Défi* – which it accused of having sympathies with former military junta leader Captain Moussa Dadis Camara – continued throughout the year. In July, the paper's offices were ransacked by alleged supporters of Condé, and in December, the police entered the offices and sought the arrest of the publisher, El Hadj Thierno Mamadou Bah, for an article that was critical of Condé. The publisher reportedly had gone into hiding. Despite the transition to civilian rule, there were also several instances of abuse of journalists by the security forces.

The new media laws passed in June 2010 guarantee the freedom to open a newspaper. A number of private publications, mostly weeklies, are published in Conakry, the capital, though distribution in the interior is irregular. The only daily newspaper is state-owned and avoids criticism of the government. Advertising revenue is insufficient to cover the costs of operating a newspaper, but since 1996 the government has provided increasing subsidies for both print and online media, regardless of their political allegiances. Low pay for journalists has led to ethical compromises, such as accepting bribes to suppress unflattering stories.

In a country with high illiteracy rates, radio is by far the most influential medium. RTG operates radio and television stations with programming in French, English, and a number of vernacular languages. Numerous private radio stations operate throughout Guinea. Some local newspapers and broadcast outlets are thought to be controlled by political or business interests. Many citizens listened regularly to foreign radio programs on FM and shortwave radio. The government did not restrict access to or distribution of foreign television programming via satellite or cable, even though few citizens could afford these services.

In general, there were no government restrictions on access to the internet or reports that the government monitored internet activities, and the internet is gaining importance as platform for voicing antigovernment criticism, with the most popular sites managed by the diaspora community. Access has expanded through the growing number of privately run internet café in the capital and a few large towns, but only 1.3 percent of the population used the internet regularly in 2011.

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