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2015 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score (0 = best, 100 = worst): 79

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

Political Environment (0 = best, 40 = worst): 34

Economic Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 23

Press freedom in Rwanda deteriorated in 2014 as independent journalists were frequently harassed, threatened, and arrested. Exiled and foreign journalists were increasingly subject to extralegal intimidation, violence, and forced disappearances for criticizing officials in their reporting. A culture of fear among journalists has led to widespread self-censorship. In October 2014, the government suspended indefinitely the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Kinyarwanda-language radio service following the airing of a controversial BBC television documentary about Rwanda's 1994 genocide.

Legal Environment

Article 34 of Rwanda's constitution stipulates that "freedom of the press and freedom of information are recognized and guaranteed by the state," but other broadly worded clauses allow for restrictions, interference, and censorship. Statutes in the penal code forbid defamation of the head of state or other public officials, which can carry up to five years in prison and fines of up to 10,000 Rwandan francs (\$14). Meanwhile, public incitement to "divisionism" remains punishable by up to five years in prison and fines of up to 5 million Rwandan francs (\$7,000). "Divisionism," broadly defined as "a crime committed by any oral or written expression or any act of division that could generate conflicts among the population or cause disputes," offers extensive leeway for the government to crack down on dissent. Human Rights Watch researchers were routinely unable to obtain a stable definition of the term while interviewing judges who had tried defendants on divisionism charges.

A 2009 media law was amended in 2013 to grant journalists the "right to seek, receive, give and broadcast information and ideas through media" and to guarantee freedom for online communications; however, no further reforms were made in 2014, leaving problematic clauses intact. The law authorizes the state, rather than an independent body, to determine operational rules for media outlets and to define journalists' professional standards. The law also grants the

minister of information and communication technologies (ICTs) unlimited powers to set conditions for establishing media outlets and authorizing foreign audiovisual media companies to operate in Rwanda. In October 2013, President Paul Kagame approved amendments to the restrictive 2008 genocide ideology law, which had prohibited the propagation of ideas based on "ethnic, regional, racial, religious, language, or other divisive characteristics." More definitive and easier to interpret, the amended law reduced prison sentences from 25 years to a maximum of 9, and requires proof of criminal intent behind an offending act.

A number of journalists were arrested and prosecuted under Rwanda's restrictive media laws in 2014. In April, the director of a Christian radio station, Cassien Ntamuhanga, was arrested alongside singer Kizito Mihigo for allegedly associating with an opposition political party and a Hutu rebel group. Ntamuhanga went missing for a week prior to his court appearance; and both individuals were charged in December for inciting violence and conspiring to overthrow the government. Stanley Gatera, editor of the independent news website *Umusingi*, was also arrested in April on charges of attempted extortion, which he believed were linked to a critical interview he conducted on Al Jazeera's *People and Power* program in March. Gatera was held for six hours and received death threats following his release; he fled the country later in April. Previously, he had been arrested and found criminally liable for a controversial opinion piece published in June 2012, for which he was fined and sentenced to one year in prison for gender discrimination and inciting divisionism. In May 2014, two women from the University of Rwanda radio station, Radio Salus, were arrested for broadcasting material deemed offensive to Kagame, but were released the following day with the assistance of the Rwanda Media Commission (RMC), the media's self-regulatory body.

Umurabyo newspaper's Agnès Uwimana Nkusi was released in June 2014. Nkusi, jailed in 2010, initially had faced a 17-year sentence for genocide denial, inciting civil disobedience, and defaming public officials based on a 2009 article that criticized Kagame. Her sentence was reduced on appeal.

A revised Access to Information Bill, enacted in March 2013, set new standards for public access to information and protects whistleblowers. Welcomed by international rights organizations, the law applies to public and some private bodies that work in the public interest, though there are some broad exemptions that restrict access to information on topics related to national security and trade.

The 2013 media law provided for self-regulation under the RMC and removed a previous provision that required journalists to hold certain academic qualifications. The bill also eased the process for acquiring press cards, and reduced the grounds on which authorities can refuse to provide information. For broadcast regulation, the RMC makes recommendations to the Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authority (RURA), which issues or withdraws licenses. The Vienna-based International Press Institute initially expressed concern about the genuine independence of the RMC, given that it was enacted by a government statute. However, under the commission's president, Fred Muvunyi, the body has been known to push back against government infringements on press freedom.

In July 2013, Kagame signed into law a bill establishing the Rwanda Broadcasting Agency (RBA), a public broadcaster that would purportedly be more autonomous from the state than its predecessor, the Rwanda Bureau of Information and Broadcasting (ORINFOR). The law established the RBA as a purveyor of impartial news with no government oversight, though some question its impartiality in practice; its current leader, Arthur Assimwe, is known to have close ties to the government.

Political Environment

Although pre-publication censorship is not an official policy, journalists struggle to cover sensitive topics such as ethnicity and the 1994 genocide. On October 25, 2014, the RURA suspended indefinitely radio broadcasts of the BBC's Kinyarwanda-language service following the airing of a controversial television documentary about the 1994 genocide entitled "Rwanda, The Untold Story." Days earlier, Rwanda's Parliament had approved a resolution calling on the government to ban the BBC and open an investigation into charges of "genocide denial" against the broadcaster. Kagame also leveled similar accusations against the BBC. RMC president Muvunyi criticized the RURA's decision, arguing that the body was required to first consult with the RMC on suspensions related to content and that it had overstepped its authority. He faced a wave of online attacks as a result, including a campaign of harassment on Twitter. In early November, the RURA set up a special commission of inquiry to investigate the BBC, which remained suspended as of the end of 2014.

Government censorship of internet content has increased in recent years, and all provisions of the 2012 new media laws apply to online publications. In 2014, a growing number of opposition blogs and independent online news outlets were intermittently inaccessible, including the websites of independent newspapers *Umuwugizi*, *Umusingi* and *Inyenyeri News*, which had been blocked in the past.

Rwanda's restrictive laws encourage self-censorship, as journalists hesitate to cover controversial subjects due to fears of reprisal and government surveillance. Journalists became increasingly concerned about government surveillance after 2012 amendments to the Law Relating to the Interception of Communications empowered the police, army, and intelligence services to monitor online and offline private communications in order to protect "public security." The law also requires all communications service providers to have the technical capability to enable interception upon request.

Rwanda's repressive media environment has led many journalists to flee, including Stanley Gatera, who left the country with his family after his April 2014 arrest. Similarly, Eric Udahemuka of *Isimbi* newspaper left Rwanda in April following months of harassment and threats for publishing articles critical of the Rwandan government. But even once in exile, journalists are increasingly subject to extralegal intimidation, violence, and forced disappearances, resulting in a chilling effect on both exiled journalists and those hoping to flee harassment at home. In February, Andrew Muhanguzi, the brother of John-Bosco Gasasira, the exiled editor of the independent *Umuwugizi* news website, was reported missing from his home in Uganda, where he and his family had been living. Muhanguzi's family claims that he was kidnapped by men in Ugandan police uniforms outside their home in February, and he remained missing as of the end of 2014. He had previously been kidnapped by alleged Rwandan operatives in Kampala and released after two weeks in captivity in September 2013. Charles Ingabire, editor of the Uganda-based online publication *Inyenyeri News* and an outspoken critic of the Kagame regime, fled Rwanda in 2007 due to threats and was shot dead in Uganda in November 2011. His murder remained unsolved at the end of 2014.

Foreign journalists critical of Rwandan leaders also suffered harassment in 2014, often at the hands of government officials. A journalist for Radio France Internationale was repeatedly harassed on Twitter by a user known as @RichardGoldston, an account later revealed to be operated by the president's office. Rwandan security agents harassed journalists in neighboring Uganda for covering sensitive events in Rwanda. Four journalists with the Ugandan newspaper *Daily Monitor* received death threats after Rwandan state-owned media accused them of associating with the Rwanda National Congress (RNC) opposition group in exile.

Economic Environment

Progovernment newspapers and radio stations dominate the Rwandan media, which disseminate information in English, French, and Kinyarwanda. Although more than 50 print publications were registered with the government in 2014, fewer than 10 published regularly. Eight of the country's more than 30 radio stations are government-owned. The main government-run television station was joined by two private stations in 2012 – the first private television channels to operate since 1994 – and four privately owned television channels were on the air during 2014. State-owned media maintain the largest audience, and most private outlets do not cover controversial topics, although privately owned radio stations occasionally criticize government policies, as do Kinyarwanda-language newspapers.

Market entry for media outlets remains expensive, but the government eliminated taxes on imported media equipment and removed sales tax on domestic media materials to decrease costs and spur future investment. Most newspapers are printed in Uganda, where printing costs are much cheaper than services provided by Rwanda's government-owned printing facility, the Rwanda Printing and Publishing Company (RPPC), which frequently denies service to critical newspapers. In February 2014, the government privatized the RPPC, handing over 70 percent of shares to a Kenyan printing firm and Rwandan public relations firm.

Low salaries, especially in private media, encourage corruption; journalists often alter coverage for bribes, and extortion is common. Media outlets face pressure to provide favorable coverage to large investors, and the government withholds state advertising from outlets considered critical of the regime. A survey conducted between January and March 2014 found that nearly half of Rwandan journalists earn less than \$293 a month – barely enough to rent a house without basic amenities in Kigali, the capital.

Approximately 10 percent of the population used the internet in 2014, and the vast majority of users accessed it via mobile devices. The government has made ICTs a priority and invested heavily in their development, including the expansion of broadband access. There are 10 internet service providers (ISPs) and three telephone operators, and Rwanda had a mobile penetration rate of 64 percent in 2014.

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