



Freedom of the Press 2015 - Cameroon

Publisher [Freedom House](#)

Publication Date 22 September 2015

Cite as Freedom House, *Freedom of the Press 2015 - Cameroon*, 22 September 2015, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5605367a11.html> [accessed 19 February 2016]

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2015 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score (0 = best, 100 = worst): 66

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

Political Environment (0 = best, 40 = worst): 23

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

Cameroon's media regulator continued to suspend journalists and outlets for criticizing the government during 2014. Journalists also faced arrests, prosecutions, and the threat of violence in connection with their work. A new antiterrorism law signed in December raised concerns that reporters could be sentenced to lengthy prison terms for "defending terrorism."

Legal Environment

Although the preamble to Cameroon's 1996 constitution guarantees freedom of expression and freedom of the press, these rights are not 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 December 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, would face up to 20 years in prison and a fine of 25 to 50 million CFA francs (\$51,000 to \$102,000). Moreover, defendants would be tried in military courts.

Several journalists were arrested or punished for their work under existing laws during 2014. In March, Amungwa Tanyi Nicodemus, editor of the English-language weekly the *Monitor*, was sentenced to four months in prison and ordered to pay 10 million CFA francs in damages for criminal defamation; the damages were later converted into an additional two years and three months in prison. The *Monitor* had published several articles on alleged corruption at the Cameroon Co-Operative Credit Union League, a microfinance network. Two other journalists, Zacharie Ndiomo of the bimonthly *Le Zénith* and Guy Nsigué of Radio Sport Info and

Mboafootball.com, were arrested in October in separate defamation cases linked to their reports on alleged corruption. While Nsigué was soon released, Ndiomo remained in pretrial detention as of December.

Also in October, Félix Cyriaque Ebolé Bola, president of Cameroon's National Union of Journalists and a senior reporter at the daily newspaper *Mutations*, and Rodrigue Tongue of the opposition newspaper *Le Messenger* were charged in a military court for allegedly possessing national security information and failing to notify the authorities. Although officials did not publicly specify the nature of the information, a press report said it concerned the president's health. The two journalists remained under house arrest at year's end.

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.

Radio and television stations must be licensed, which requires a difficult application process and expensive annual fees. Rural nonprofit radio stations are exempt from licensing fees but barred from discussing politics.

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 the past two years.

In late November 2014, the CNC banned several journalists from "exercising their profession." The anchor of Vision 4 TV's *Major Issues* program, Parfait Eyissi, was suspended for allegedly insulting Martin Belinga Eboutou, the head of Biya's civil cabinet. Three other Vision 4 TV presenters – Ernest Obama, Ernest Belinga and Romeo Mbida – were indefinitely banned from journalism after their shows carried criticism of the Biya government. The CNC also issued a warning to Eric Kwamo of Equinox Television for broadcasting pictures of a boy with congenital defects. And it banned journalist Jacques Blaise Mvie and his weekly publication, *La Nouvelle*, for allegedly failing to respect professional ethics. In May, the CNC had imposed a six-month suspension on the newspaper *La Scene* and its publisher for allegedly defaming Côte d'Ivoire's communications minister.

Political Environment

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.

Reporters are occasionally harassed or detained by security forces while attempting to cover sensitive stories. In April 2014, the car of Denis Nkwebo, an editor at *Le Jour*, was destroyed in an explosion outside his home. In recent articles, Nkwebo had scrutinized security forces' efforts to curb attacks by Boko Haram in the north.

Economic Environment

Cameroon's only national newspaper is the state-owned *Cameroon Tribune*, which is published in French and English and has a daily circulation of about 20,000. Several hundred other newspapers and periodicals operate sporadically throughout the country; regular publication 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 relatively expensive and are not well distributed outside 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. Radio is the most important medium for the majority of the population, though 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), Radio France Internationale, and Africa No. 1 – air across the entire country; Cameroon's private radio stations have local or regional reach.

While there are no official restrictions on the internet, usage was limited to about 11 percent of the population in 2014. Online media are expanding rapidly, driven in large part by mobile internet access. However, users continue to endure slow connections and high fees at internet caf  s; 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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