

Freedom of the Press 2014 - Mali

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2014 Scores

Press Status: Partly Free

Press Freedom Score (0 = best, 100 = worst): 37

Legal Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 9

Political Environment (0 = best, 40 = worst): 20

Economic Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 8

Mali's political and media environments were among the freest in Africa until 2012, when rebel fighters overran the north and a military coup ousted the government in the south. A French-led international military intervention in January 2013 liberated much of the north from Islamist and Tuareg militants, but Mali remained under a state of emergency from January 12 to July 6, with severe restrictions on information and obstructions on reporting. In July and August, a presidential election put the country back on a democratic path. Ibrahim Boubacar Keita won a strong mandate in the voting, which was deemed free and fair by international observers. Despite the return to civilian rule, however, peace in the north remained fragile. French troops had largely withdrawn by year's end, leaving Malian troops and UN peacekeeping forces to secure the extensive northern region. Some areas, including Kidal in the northeast, were not under government control, and the killing of two French journalists in November underscored the vulnerability of media professionals in the region.

Freedom of speech is guaranteed under Article 4 of Mali's 1992 constitution. Despite severe criminal punishments for libel under a 1993 law, no journalists have been prosecuted on such charges since 2007. Mali does not have legislation guaranteeing access to information. In the months following the coup, information was particularly difficult to obtain in the south, as coup leader Captain Amadou Sanogo and his supporters maintained restrictions on news and banned interviews with the deposed president. These restrictions continued under the interim civilian government during the first part of 2013. In March, state security agents arrested Boukary Daou, editor of the daily *Le Républicain*, after the paper published an open letter – allegedly written by a Malian soldier serving in the north – that contrasted poor army conditions with the high salary

awarded to Sanogo, who had been appointed to head a committee tasked with the reform of the armed forces. Daou was held for more than a week without charge at the state security headquarters in Bamako, where he was reportedly beaten and pressured to reveal the source of the letter. He was eventually charged with "inciting disobedience" and transferred to the capital's main prison. The Malian media rallied to Daou's defense and announced an indefinite news blackout until he was freed. Daou was finally granted bail on April 2, after almost a month behind bars; all charges against him were later dropped.

The two existing bodies tasked with regulating the media – the High Communications Council (HCC) and the Committee for Equal Access to the State Media – have long lacked the capacity to mediate press affairs due to insufficient funding. In 2009, the government invested in building a Maison de la Presse, an umbrella organization for existing press unions, providing journalists with work facilities, training centers, and a body to help centralize the protection of journalists' rights. Journalism training, led mainly by regional and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) and International Media Support (IMS), was stepped up in 2011 to help journalists prepare for a planned election in 2012. However, the coup of March 2012 destabilized the new agency, resulting in a leadership crisis as heads of the various smaller unions vied for control. Though the Maison de la Presse continues to struggle with problems of limited funding and low capacity, there was some improvement in the situation during 2013, as the agency boosted efforts to encourage professionalism among its members and respect for the role of media in a democratic society. In May, the Union of Journalist Reporters (SYJOR) was launched to unify media professionals and complement the work of the Maison de la Presse. In addition, MFWA, IMS, and other local and international NGOs conducted conflict training for journalists ahead of the presidential election. The training appeared to have a positive influence on election coverage.

Local and international journalists attempting to cover French military operations in the north in early 2013 were subjected to broad restrictions. Journalists with the French state-owned broadcaster France 2 were the only reporters allowed near the front line, and they were required to cover the action from embedded positions within French units; all other media outlets were kept at least 100 kilometers (62 miles) from the conflict zone. In April, French freelance journalist Dorothée Thiénot was expelled from the northern city of Gao by the Malian military for reporting on its alleged extrajudicial killings of suspected insurgents. The Malian news portal Mali Actu, which is based in Paris, republished a similar report by the Associated Press in December; Malian authorities subsequently contacted the site's editor and threatened to block it in Mali if the piece was not taken down.

From 2008 to 2011, there were virtually no reports of journalists being harassed in the course of their work in Mali. However, by March 2013, the Committee to Protect Journalists had documented an alarming 62 attacks against the press across the country since the 2012 military coup. In February 2013, a Reuters photographer and two French journalists were detained for several hours and had their cameras and other equipment confiscated by soldiers loyal to Sanogo after they witnessed an attack by the unit on the barracks of ousted president Amadou Toumani Touré's bodyguards. The equipment was later returned, but without the memory cards. Although conditions for journalists improved significantly following the return to civilian rule in July, the murder of the two French journalists in Kidal in November confirmed the continued instability of the north, particularly around that city. The two reporters, Ghislaine Dupont and Claude Verlon of Radio France Internationale (RFI), were kidnapped by armed men shortly after they went to interview a

leader of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), an ethnic Tuareg separatist group; their bodies were found about an hour later next to their vehicle outside the town. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb claimed responsibility for the attack.

Mali has long hosted a diverse media environment, and as of early 2013 there were about 325 radio stations operating across the country, as well as roughly 60 newspapers that published on a semiregular basis, though few other than the state-owned *L'Essor* had circulations of more than 1,000 copies. Foreign programming, including from the British Broadcasting Corporation and RFI, is available on FM radio in Bamako and some areas outside the capital. The only domestic television station with national reach is the state broadcaster, the Malian Office of Radio and Television Broadcasting (ORTM), which generally airs progovernment programming. By 2013, ORTM was freed from the control of the military in the south and had reopened in the north.

Media outlets in the north were directly targeted by the MNLA and Islamist militants during the 2012 rebellion, leading to a near-complete shutdown of all independent outlets in the region. Radio – the most important medium in the north due to its isolation and high illiteracy rate – was specifically targeted, with both private stations in the cities and local community radio stations destroyed, forcibly closed, or co-opted by the militants. Following the French military intervention in early 2013, many stations began to reemerge, with more following suit in subsequent months as civilian rule was reestablished. By June, 25 of the 57 radio stations and newspapers that were closed during the crisis had resumed operations.

A lack of sufficient funding and access to equipment and electricity continue to prevent many media outlets in Mali from operating at full capacity, particularly in the north. Regular blackouts in Timbuktu and Gao, for example, mean that many radio stations are forced to broadcast only in the evenings, when power is available.

Only 2.3 percent of Malians were able to access the internet in 2013, one of the lowest penetration rates in West Africa. However, as residents come to rely on mobile phones for transmitting information in the remote regions of the north, new technologies are reshaping the media environment in Mali.

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