

Freedom of the Press 2014 - Burkina Faso

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2014 Scores

Press Status: Partly Free

Press Freedom Score (0 = best, 100 = worst): 44

Legal Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 14

Political Environment (0 = best, 40 = worst): 17

Economic Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 13

The media in Burkina Faso continued to face challenges in 2013, as political tensions between the government and the opposition increased in the run-up to the 2015 presidential election, which is expected to be highly contentious. These tensions have extended to the media sphere, with press unions challenging the Ministry of Communication and Culture on incidents of heavy-handed interference in both public and independent media.

Article 8 of the constitution and the 1993 Information Code guarantee freedoms of expression, information, and the press. However, libel remains a criminal offense, and media outlets are prohibited from insulting the head of state and publishing or broadcasting graphic images. Few journalists have been charged in recent years; however, two journalists from the private weekly *L'Ouragan* who had been sentenced to 12 months in prison in October 2012 served the totality of their sentence, despite an appeal to the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights in June 2013. The appeal remained pending at year's end.

Article 49 of the Information Code grants every journalist free access to sources of information, with exceptions for information pertaining to the internal or external security of the state, military secrets, strategic economic interests, ongoing investigations or legal proceedings, and anything that threatens the dignity and privacy of Burkinabés. In practice, officials use these exceptions frequently, and accessing government information remains difficult.

Burkina Faso's media regulatory body, the High Council of Communication (CSC), consists of 12 members appointed by government bodies. Since its creation in 2012, the council has been

criticized for inconsistent and mismanaged licensing procedures. The body has the power to summon journalists to hearings about their work and monitors media content for compliance with ethical standards and the law. There are no specific government restrictions on internet access or content, though the CSC does monitor websites along with other media.

To avoid the ire of public authorities, state-run outlets generally refrain from covering controversial subjects, though in 2013, media workers from both public and private outlets vocally protested the government's perceived heavy-handed meddling in their reporting. In July, hundreds of journalists organized a 24-hour sit-in in front of the Ministry of Communication and Culture in the capital, Ouagadougou, as well as in other regions of the country. The protest, led by the Autonomous Syndicate of Information and Culture Workers (SYNATIC) and the Association of Journalists of Burkina, was preceded by a press conference in which the ministry denied all accusations of attempting to direct the tone of media content and claimed to be fulfilling its mission. In August, the public media workers gave the government a 30-day ultimatum to respond to their request for better working conditions and salaries, as well as political interference in editorial policies. After the workers' protest was held, the Minister of Communication publicly acknowledged the importance of media workers' right to protest and to voice their criticisms, but continued to deny any wrongdoing. In a minor concession, the ministry established a "Monitoring Committee on Social Issues," tasked with studying the media workers' concerns. The committee presented its findings in December, but as of the end of 2013, the government had taken no concrete action to meet the protesters' demands. The legitimacy of the CSC was also called into question due to its total absence from the negotiation process.

No cases of serious physical attacks against journalists were reported in 2013. However, ongoing impunity in past cases, such as the 1998 murder of editor Norbert Zongo, remains a concern.

Although private print media are growing, including through the emergence of news magazines, the ownership of print outlets still lacks transparency. The Burkinabé print sector's struggles with interrupted production, low literacy rates, and generally poor economic conditions make the broadcast media the preferred choice for news and entertainment. Whereas there are five national daily newspapers, more than 200 radio and television stations operate in the country. Radiodiffusion Télévision du Burkina (RTB) was established as the national broadcaster in 1963 and remained the only television channel for many years, but a handful of private television stations now compete with RTB. Radio is still the most popular medium and source of information. Community radio stations are prevalent throughout the country and play a significant role in local development and community building. Programming in local languages such as Mòoré, Mandinka, and Bambara that addresses issues of gender equality, reproductive health, and domestic violence has contributed to diversity of content. Foreign radio stations are able to broadcast freely. While the CSC has approved a growing number of private radio stations, newspapers, and television channels, as well as requests for radio frequency spectrum, critics argue that it should focus additional efforts on addressing the economic sustainability of media outlets. Throughout all forms of media, low levels of training and expertise, as well as low salaries, affect the integrity of journalism as a profession. The issue of insufficient infrastructure also affects internet access, which stood at just 4.4 percent of the population in 2013.

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