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Freedom of the Press 2012 - Sudan

2012 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score: 78

Legal Environment: 26

Political Environment: 31

Economic Environment: 21

The formal secession of South Sudan in July 2011, following a referendum on the issue in January, brought with it an outbreak of insecurity in the border regions and continued attempts to stifle press freedom. High rates of censorship, journalist intimidation, and repressive government oversight severely limited the media throughout the year.

Though the constitution guarantees press freedom, the legal environment for media is largely unfavorable. Article 29 of the 2005 Interim National Constitution – adopted in connection with that year's Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the Khartoum government and the Southern rebel group, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) – nominally protected freedom of the press and citizens' expression. The CPA created somewhat greater space for journalists to report freely and reduced the common practice of censoring newspapers prior to publication. Another step toward expanded press freedom was taken in June 2009, when the government replaced the highly restrictive Press and Printed Press Materials Law. However, media freedom organizations criticized the new law for falling short of international standards. It allows for restrictions on the press in the interests of national security and public order, and contains loosely defined provisions related to the encouragement of ethnic and religious

disturbances and incitement of violence. The law also gives the National Council for Press and Publications (NCP) the authority to shut down newspapers for three days without a court order. Several other laws were used against the press in 2011, including elements of the 1991 penal code, the 2010 National Security Forces Act, and the emergency law applied in the western region of Darfur.

Defamation is a criminal offense, and there is no freedom of information law, making access to public information difficult. The Ministry of Information manages broadcast licensing in a highly politicized manner, allowing progovernment stations to acquire licenses more easily than independent outlets. The NCP regulates the journalism profession and entry into the field. Journalists are required to pass a test prior to receiving accreditation and a license.

Throughout 2011, authorities in Khartoum maintained their tight grip on the media sector, and repression intensified in the period surrounding the secession of South Sudan in July. Direct prepublication censorship was officially lifted in 2009, but it occurred on a nightly basis between May and August 2011. Editors of newspapers sometimes received orders from the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) on what they are allowed to report. Publications were instructed not to carry any information about rebel groups or activities, and a media blackout on stories from the restive states of Blue Nile and South Kordofan was instituted. One day before the official independence of South Sudan, Sudanese authorities revoked the licenses of six newspapers, including the pro-SPLM daily *Ajrass al-Hurriyah*, on the pretext that their shareholders included Southerners. The government closed the independent newspaper *Al-Jarida* in September after it reported on a Sudanese military presence in the contested border area of Abyei. The paper was allowed to resume publication in December, but the NCP denied its request for new hires.

Journalists were regularly harassed, attacked, arrested, detained, and reportedly tortured throughout the year, despite President Omar al-Bashir's announcement in August that he intended to free all imprisoned journalists in the country. The announcement was followed by the release of a journalist with the daily *Al-Sahafa* who had been detained without charges since November 2010. Separately, two senior staff members of the opposition daily *Rai al-Shaab* were released in February after being detained for a year. In January, two journalists from the weekly *Bar'ut* were detained and accused of attacking the constitution in an article discussing partition for the east of the country; they were released without charge after three weeks in detention. Six journalists with the opposition newspaper *Al-Midan* were arrested for their coverage of street protests in January. Three of them were released after three days, and another in late February. Journalists who covered the arrest, torture, and gang rape of human

rights activist Safiya Ishag by members of the NISS in February were especially targeted. Three were jailed or fined for their coverage of the attack, and another seven faced investigations. A repressive environment for press freedom leads many journalists to actively self-censor.

The government selectively restricted the activities of international media in 2011. Some foreign journalists were denied visas, while others were allowed unfettered access to the country and the opposition, though international media were not granted access to opposition leaders during the referendum. A team from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was detained and interrogated about their coverage of the referendum in January, after which the BBC withdrew its staff from Khartoum. In June, a team from Qatar's Al-Jazeera television network was attacked and beaten by security forces in South Kordofan and then temporarily detained for an investigation into their activities.

Despite these constraints, there has been a proliferation of media outlets in recent years. There are nearly 20 political dailies operating in the country, plus dozens of sports and social affairs publications. However, experts have argued that there is little difference between private and state-run media, as all are subject to serious government intrusion, ranging from interference in management decisions to censorship of content. Newspapers are generally too expensive for most citizens. The state dominates the broadcast media, which are the main source of information for much of the population. Television programming continues to be formally censored, and radio content must reflect the government's views. There are approximately 60 private radio stations broadcasting on FM frequencies, in addition to the state radio network. As the licensing of radio stations remains firmly under government control, private stations avoid reporting on political affairs and focus instead on entertainment and music. Some foreign shortwave radio services were available in 2011, though the government restricted UN-sponsored radio broadcasts. A cable network directly rebroadcasts uncensored foreign news and other programs.

Ownership of media houses is generally not transparent. There are no laws requiring the release of ownership information. Moreover, many owners refrain from acknowledging their status in order to evade taxes and avoid possible attacks. Journalists work for low pay, and many freelancers do not earn enough to cover the cost of living. Some analysts believe this has encouraged corruption within the media, with journalists and editors selling coverage to politicians. Independent media do not receive public subsidies, but do benefit from secret financial support if their coverage is deemed friendly to the government. Khartoum authorities also withhold the flow of state advertisements from newspapers that are deemed critical of the government.

The confiscation of entire press runs of newspapers appears to have become a favorite tactic of the authorities for intimidating and financially crippling publications. In many cases, no official reason for the confiscation is given. During 2011, eight newspapers, mostly independent or oppositionist, had entire editions seized by NISS agents. In August, security forces confiscated two editions of the independent newspaper *Al-Ahdath*, which had planned to run an interview with a senior SPLM official and had a history of reporting on corruption and terrorism in Sudan. In September, NISS agents confiscated copies of the progovernment daily *Akhbar al-Yawm* after it published a statement by a rebel leader.

Internet penetration in Sudan is relatively high for sub-Saharan Africa, with 19 percent of the population accessing the medium in 2011. The government monitors the internet, including e-mail correspondence, through the National Telecommunications Corporation. Websites and proxy servers deemed offensive to public morality were blocked during the year, and access to the video-sharing site YouTube was regularly obstructed.