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Freedom of the Press 2011 - Cameroon

Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 21

Political Environment: 25

Economic Environment: 21

Total Score: 67

Press freedom in Cameroon in 2010 remained constrained by the use of both laws and extralegal arrest and detention to harass journalists. The 1996 constitution guarantees the freedoms of expression and of the press "under the conditions fixed by law." Libel and defamation remain criminalized. The burden of proof rests on the defendant in libel cases, and a guilty verdict can carry prison terms and heavy fines. Laws against libel and publishing obscene materials were used against journalists several times during the year. In January, Jean Bosco Talla, publication director of the privately owned weekly *Geminal*, was released early from prison after paying a fine of \$6,800. He had been held for a month in prison for offences such as insulting the president and publishing an extract from a book that spoke about "homosexuality at the highest level of the state." Even though much of the independent press reports critically about the government, the threat of prosecution leads many, particularly within the broadcast media, to self-censor. Meanwhile, the political landscape has continued to fan a media environment that remains devoid of any professional organization, unity, and solidarity among journalists.

Radio and television stations must be licensed, and the application and annual fees can be burdensome. No new licenses were issued in 2010, but the government tolerated the numerous stations operating without licenses. Rural nonprofit radio stations are exempt from licensing fees but are barred from discussing politics. There is no law allowing citizens access to government information, and the government does not generally make documents or statistics available to the public or the media.

During the year, a number of cases were reported of extralegal abuse of journalists, particularly those investigating corruption – and the government's lack of effort to address it – or other sensitive topics. Jean-Marc Soboth, one of four journalists who had been charged in 2009 regarding leaked documents in an official embezzlement case, fled into hiding in January 2010 after receiving anonymous death threats. Many instances of extralegal abuse involve official attempts to uncover journalists' sources. In February, Simon Hervé Nko'o, a reporter for the Douala-based weekly *Bebela*, and Serge Sabouang, the editor of the fortnightly *La Nation*, were arrested by members of the General Directorate for External Investigation (DGRE) and detained without charge for a week. Nko'o was arrested for possession of a compromising document implicating the secretary general of the president's office; his home was searched and ransacked, and he was

tortured by security agents in order to reveal his sources. After his release, Nko'o went into hiding.

Harsh prison conditions make extended detention an even worse punishment for targeted journalists. Sabouang was arrested again later in February together with Bibi Ngota of the *Cameroun Express* and Robert Mintya of *Le Devoir* in connection with an anticorruption case, and the three were detained in common cells holding 30 hard-core felons with no beds and poor sanitary facilities. Ngota died in April after being held for nearly two months in jail without access to his high blood pressure medications. Sabouang and Mintya were released conditionally in November. Mintya had been taken from the prison to a hospital in August, two weeks after he had been seriously injured by a fellow inmate in his cell. In May, Lewis Medjo, a journalist and publisher of the Douala weekly newspaper *Détente Libre*, was released from prison. He had been sentenced to three years in 2008 for "publishing false news" about the president. While in prison, he suffered from ill health and shared a cell with more than 30 others in very poor sanitary conditions. After Medjo's release, he claimed that contributors to his newspaper, who have been writing under pseudonyms for fear of reprisals, had been receiving anonymous calls and threats asking them to break their contract with *Détente Libre*.

In addition, there were several cases of security forces directly interfering with journalists' attempts to report on corruption cases. In January, Nadège Christelle Bowa of *Le Messager* had her notes confiscated from an interview with Thierry Michel Atangana, a former presidential adviser jailed on corruption charges. In February, detained reporter Justin Blaise Akono was forced to delete courtroom photos taken during a hearing in the trial of Titus Edzoa, a former presidential adviser accused of embezzlement.

Cameroon has about 25 regularly published newspapers, private and state owned, as well as dozens of others that publish sporadically. A number report on a range of controversial issues and criticize the government, although their reach is largely confined to urban areas. Radio is the most important medium for most of the population. The state-owned CRTV operates both radio and television outlets. The first private radio and television licenses were granted in 2007, and dozens of private stations operate as well, but have more limited reach. Foreign broadcasters are permitted to operate within Cameroon and are widely accessible to those who can afford the necessary equipment. However, such stations are required to partner with a national station in order to broadcast. The government is the largest advertiser, and some private media sources noted that it used this financial heft to influence certain content. Official funding to support private media outlets is also disbursed selectively, according to the U.S. State Department.

Access to the internet is not restricted by the government, though consumers suffer slow connections and high fees at internet cafes. Cameroon is burdened with some of the highest bandwidth charges in West and Central Africa despite its access to the SAT3/WASC submarine cable, which links it to Europe. Access was limited to 4 percent of the population in 2010, increasing marginally from approximately 3.8 percent the previous year.

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