



Freedom of the Press 2013 - Cameroon

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2013 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score: 66

Legal Environment: 21

Political Environment: 24

Economic Environment: 21

Press freedom in 2012 remained constrained by the use of both laws and extralegal detention to harass journalists. The 1996 constitution guarantees the freedoms of expression and the press, though libel and defamation are criminalized. The burden of proof rests with the defendant in libel cases, and a guilty verdict can carry prison terms and heavy fines. The 1990 "Liberty Laws" include nominal safeguards for independent print and audiovisual media, and the protection of sources is guaranteed by the Social Communication Law, though judges can compel journalists to reveal their sources in closed sessions. The 2010 Cybersecurity and Cybercriminality Law, which allows criminal investigators to access user data without any constraints on time or justification, does not include sufficient protections against the abuse of power and invasion of privacy.

State authorities were active in attempting to silence critical journalists through legal means in 2012. In October, Nigerian national Baature Edua Mvochou, editor of a Nigerian magazine, and Martin Yembe Fon, editor of the local *Frontier Telegraph*, were arrested and charged with unlawful assembly while reporting on a secessionist gathering. They remained free on bail pending trial at year's end, and faced a fine of up to 100,000 CFA francs (\$200) and six months in jail if convicted. In December, three journalists were convicted of forgery for their investigation into alleged corruption in the management of a state oil company. Two of the journalists were fined and given suspended prison terms, while a third was sentenced in absentia to 15 years in prison. These journalists had originally been arrested and detained for 10 months in 2010 along with another editor, Germain Cyrille Ngota Ngota, who died in April 2010 due to inadequate medical care while in detention. No arrests have been made in that case. Also in December, a state prosecutor threatened to charge Aaron Kah, editor of the bimonthly *Kilum 24*, with defamation if he continued to refuse to reveal his sources for a series of articles.

There is no law granting citizens access to government information, and the government does not generally make documents or statistics available to the public or the media. Representatives of privately owned media are not accredited with the president or the prime minister and do not

accompany the president on official trips. The communications minister is a political appointee and issues directives that regulate the activities of the press. In January 2012, the National Communication Council (NCC) was reorganized and given sanction powers by presidential decree. These sanctions can range from warnings to bans of media outlets. In June, the prosecutor general issued a reminder to the NCC that under a 1990 law, all newspapers are required to submit editions to the prosecutor for review two hours before they are published.

Print media licensing ended in 1990, but new publications must submit a declaration to authorities and have it approved in order to begin publishing. Radio and television stations must be licensed, and both the application process and annual fees can be burdensome. Rural nonprofit radio stations are exempt from licensing fees but barred from discussing politics. The first private broadcast licenses were granted in 2007. However, the government is largely tolerant of media operating without licenses. The media environment demonstrates a widespread lack of professionalism and ethical standards, and there is no independent body to provide self-regulation for the media or to encourage the use of codes of conduct. Numerous journalist associations exist, but they are often redundant and disorganized.

Although much of the independent press reports critically about the government, the threat of prosecution leads many journalists, particularly within the broadcast media, to self-censor. Radio call-in shows and television debate programs in particular carry strong criticisms of the government and individual officials, but they operate under the threat of repercussions for exceeding the limits of "administrative tolerance," as public officials are empowered to shut down a publication or broadcaster and arrest citizens for comments judged to be threats to public order.

There were fewer reported attacks on journalists in 2012 than in previous years, though a publishing house in the capital was attacked with explosive devices in November. Reporters are also occasionally harassed or detained by security forces while attempting to cover sensitive stories, and some have faced ill-treatment in detention.

Cameroon has only one national newspaper, which is state owned, and over 50 privately owned regional newspapers. The state-owned broadcaster, Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV), is widely considered to be biased in favor of the government in its news and current-affairs reporting, and the owners of mainstream private media have also been reported to influence content. Radio is the most important medium for most of the population, though about 75 percent of the country's 375 privately owned stations are in large urban areas. The state monopoly on television ended in 2001, and there are currently 19 independent television stations. Television has a high level of influence in cities and towns, while more remote parts of the country can go weeks or months without a television or radio signal due to malfunctioning and outdated infrastructure. Foreign broadcasters are permitted to operate within Cameroon and are widely accessible to those who can afford the necessary equipment. However, such services are required to partner with a Cameroonian station in order to broadcast. A single private newspaper distribution company has a near-monopoly in the industry, which has kept prices high and circulation limited largely to urban areas. The government is the largest advertiser, and it has been accused of using this financial heft to influence content. Official funding to support private media outlets is also disbursed selectively. Corruption is pervasive, due in large part to low wages for journalists.

Internet usage was limited to less than 6 percent of the population in 2012. There are generally no official restrictions on access to the internet, though there are reports that some content has been censored or blocked by officials. Structural barriers, brought about in part by the government's control of infrastructure and its strict regulations, present significant obstacles to affordable and reliable access to the internet. Nevertheless, new media are experiencing rapid growth in the country, particularly among the increasing number of people who access the internet from their mobile telephones. Users continue to endure slow connections and high fees at internet cafés. Cameroon is burdened with some of the highest bandwidth charges in West and Central Africa, despite its access to a submarine cable, SAT3, that links the region to Europe. Connection to the

West Africa Cable System (WACS) was completed in May 2012, which could enhance the speed and quality of internet service in the future.

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