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Freedom of the Press 2011 - Sierra Leone

Status: Partly Free**Legal Environment:** 15**Political Environment:** 22**Economic Environment:** 16**Total Score:** 53

Sierra Leone's constitution guarantees freedoms of speech and of the press, but journalists remain subject to attacks and harassment by politicians who rarely face any consequences for their actions; also, media outlets continue to face difficult economic conditions. Self-censorship is rare, however, and although most Sierra Leonean journalists are poorly trained and ill-equipped, many show great bravery in the face of frequent dangers.

The Public Order Act of 1965 allows for prison terms of up to three years for criminal libel and up to one year for the separate crime of publishing false news. Criminal libel charges apply in some cases even when the defendant can prove the published information was true, and defendants charged with publication of false news must prove they took reasonable measures to verify the information's accuracy. The constitutionality of the act was challenged in 2009 by the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), but the Supreme Court upheld it. In January 2010, legislator Ibrahim Bundu filed criminal libel charges against three activists from National Elections Watch who had written a report alleging that Bundu interfered with the result of a chieftaincy election in Northern Province and imposed as chief a candidate who had been disqualified from the election. The case was dismissed for lack of evidence after nine months.

Discussions on a Right to Access Information Bill to guarantee freedom of information in Sierra Leone have been ongoing for several years. In 2009, President Ernest Bai Koroma and other government figures pledged their support for a draft law prepared by the Society for Democratic Initiatives, a local advocacy group, and largely endorsed by Article 19. In June 2010, after slightly weakening the draft law, Sierra Leone's cabinet passed the bill, and in November the parliament gave it a first reading and referred it to a committee. The passage of the bill was still pending at year's end.

The media in Sierra Leone are regulated by the Independent Media Commission (IMC), whose members are appointed by the president "acting on the advice of SLAJ and subject to the approval of parliament," according to the Independent Media Commission (Amendment) Act of 2006. The IMC provides an alternative to pressing charges under the Public Order Act; aggrieved parties can register complaints with the IMC, which affords them a hearing. If the IMC agrees that a complaint of libel, defamation, or falsehood is valid, it can request that the offending media outlet publish a retraction and an apology. If the outlet does not comply, after three reminders the IMC can levy a fine of 500,000 leones (about \$11). The IMC can also summon editors at its own discretion, as it did, for example, in August 2010, when it called in the heads of two newspapers to reprimand them for publishing ethnically inflammatory articles.

Journalists face threats, harassment, and assaults, especially from authorities, while covering the news. On February 27, 2010, 10 journalists covering the national conference of the opposition Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) were attacked, beaten, and robbed of their recording devices and mobile phones in full view of several top SLPP leaders, who did nothing to stop the attack. According to SLAJ, the attackers later admitted their responsibility and agreed to pay the journalists' medical bills and replace the damaged items. In March, the deputy minister of labour, employment, and industrial relations, Moijue Kaikai, allegedly made threatening phone calls to radio journalist Melvin Rogers and Rogers's mother. Rogers had

reported on local radio station Radio Democracy that Kaikai had illegally visited an area in the Bo District shortly before a local council by-election to campaign for the ruling All People's Congress (APC) candidate. Kaikai later repeated the threats against Rogers's life and job at a press conference on March 2. SLAJ and the Independent Radio Network (IRN) sent a letter of complaint to Koroma with a CD recording of Kaikai's death threat. According to the *Awareness Times*, Kaikai physically attacked Rogers with "hired thugs" on March 20 and again on April 10. In September, the Media Foundation of West Africa reported that Radio Democracy was suffering threats and harassment from unknown persons. After its rent was suddenly increased by a factor of four, it was evicted and forced to set up a temporary studio on the premises of another radio station, Sky Radio. Radio Democracy and the proprietor of Sky Radio then began receiving threats. In August, Arthwah Maddie, a court reporter for the newspaper *For Di People*, was detained at Pademba Road Prison for about four hours on the orders of a Freetown court magistrate. According to Maddie, the magistrate, Bankole Shyllon, was angered by a typographical error in an article that misstated the age of a young man accused of incest. In October, Kadijatu Savage, a journalist with the *Independent Observer*, was beaten and detained by police after photographing them attacking motor taxi riders.

Numerous independent newspapers circulate freely, and there are dozens of public and private radio and television outlets. The number of community radio stations has proliferated in recent years. However, all Sierra Leonean newspapers are written in English, a language only about a third of Sierra Leoneans speak. Many radio and television programs are also in English, although some are in local languages. Due to Sierra Leone's poverty, newspapers lack resources and advertising rates are among the lowest in the world. Also, the business management and structures of media outlets are not always entirely efficient. Many community radio stations are not sustainable due to their dependence on foreign grants for operations and the difficulty of overcoming high operational costs such as providing electricity, especially in the rural areas. Few news sources can afford to station reporters outside Freetown, and printing presses and other materials are scarce and unreliable. Journalists' pay, in general, is very low, and many work without pay, leading them to take second jobs that can cause conflicts of interest. According to SLAJ president Umaru Fofana, business interests often attempt to influence the editorial content of newspapers. In June, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service and United Nations Radio were merged to create a public-service broadcaster, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation. The government does not restrict internet access, though only 0.8 percent of the population used the medium during the year, according to Internet World Stats.

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