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Freedom of the Press 2015 - Eritrea

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2015 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score (0 = best, 100 = worst): 94

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

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

Economic Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 24

Eritrea continued to rank among the most repressive media environments in the world in 2014 under the harsh authoritarian regime of President Isaias Afwerki. It has lacked any form of privately owned media since 2001, when the government banned the once-vibrant private press. Key editors and journalists were imprisoned, and the crackdown later extended to state-employed journalists.

Legal Environment

The Eritrean constitution guarantees freedoms of speech and of the press, but these rights are ignored in practice. The 1996 Press Proclamation Law mandates that all newspapers and journalists be licensed. It also stipulates that publications must be submitted for government approval prior to release, and prohibits reprinting articles from banned publications. In 2013, there was an attempted mutiny when 100-200 junior army officers struggled to take over the Ministry of Information, locally known as "Forto." They forced the station's director to read a statement over the government channel EriTV calling for the implementation of the constitution – which allows for multiparty competition – and the release of political prisoners and those who had been arrested attempting to leave the country. While the attempted coup was quickly put down, it demonstrated the fragility of the state and the degree of discontent with the secretive regime.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 23 journalists were imprisoned in Eritrea as of December 1, 2014, one of the largest numbers in the world and the most in Africa. Nine have been in prison since 2001, and almost all are being held incommunicado. The most recent jailings came in 2011, when four journalists working for the government radio and television station, Dimtsi Hafash, were arrested and imprisoned; the government has yet to disclose the charges against them. There is little information on the condition of those imprisoned, though unconfirmed reports indicate that several jailed journalists are in very poor health or have died in detention.

The year 2014 saw thwarted attempts on the part of lawyers to press Swedish courts to investigate crimes against humanity, torture, and abduction in the well-known case of the Swedish-Eritrean journalist Dawit Isaak, who was imprisoned without charge in 2001. The case was closed when the Swedish prosecutor claimed that it would not be worthwhile to pursue because the Eritrean authorities were unlikely to cooperate. While there have been reports that Isaak died in detention in 2011, this could not be confirmed, and he was reported to be alive in 2013, renewing international initiatives to release him. This included efforts to bring a case on his behalf before the African Court of Human and Peoples' Rights.

Political Environment

Most independent or critical journalists have left the country due to intimidation and arbitrary imprisonment, and those who remain engage in self-censorship. Although Eritrea has one of the lowest internet penetration rates in the world, the government makes an effort to block many websites managed by Eritrean exiles. Authorities are believed to monitor e-mail communications, and some users suspect that government informants track users' activity in internet cafés.

Ali Abdu, the minister of information and a close confidant of Isaias, fled into exile in late 2012 while on a trip to Germany, and in early 2013 began to speak out about the brutal tactics used against journalists. Media professionals who seek refuge abroad, especially in Sudan, have come under continued pressure, as have their families. For example, after Ali Abdu fled, his father, teenage daughter, and brother were reportedly arrested.

Foreign journalists are not able to freely enter the country and are generally not welcome unless they agree to report favorably about the regime. There have been occasional reports from journalists operating undercover, and Isaias has granted interviews to foreign broadcasters such as Sweden's TV4 and the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera. However, in 2013 the Eritrean government blocked Al-Jazeera for 11 days and issued a decree forbidding the provision of access to the station. The station was reportedly censored due to its coverage of demonstrations outside diplomatic missions in cities such as London, Rome, and Stockholm by Eritreans in the diaspora who were supporting the 2013 mutiny.

Economic Environment

The government controls all media in the country, including a newspaper published in three languages, a television station, and three radio stations. A permit is required to print a publication or to distribute a foreign publication. However, individuals are allowed to purchase satellite dishes and subscribe to international media. Several radio stations run by Eritreans abroad are attempting to reach listeners in Eritrea, including Radio Erena, which broadcasts via satellite and over the radio from Paris, and opposition-aligned stations broadcasting from Ethiopia. Radio Erena has been repeatedly jammed in recent years.

Access to internet technology is extremely limited, as Eritrea has one of the lowest rates of internet access – 1 percent – and mobile phone use – 5.6 percent – in the world due to high costs and government restrictions. The government requires all internet service providers to use state-controlled internet infrastructure, and almost all connections remain dial-up and extremely slow.

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