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Freedom of the Press 2012 - Somalia

2012 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score: 84

Legal Environment: 27

Political Environment: 35

Economic Environment: 22

The media environment in Somalia varies significantly depending on the region, with different conditions in chaotic southern and central Somalia, the semiautonomous Puntland region in the northeast, and the breakaway region of Somaliland in the northwest. In the southern region, the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and its president, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, tenuously held on to power. Throughout much of 2011, the TFG, which was backed by African Union (AU) peacekeepers, controlled only a small portion of the country, while the Islamist militant group Al-Shabaab continued to dominate large swathes of territory and most of the capital, Mogadishu. The situation for the TFG gradually started to improve toward the end of the year after Al-Shabaab withdrew from Mogadishu in August.

Somalia's Transitional Federal Charter (TFC) provides for freedom of speech and of the press, but owing to pervasive violence across much of the country, journalists continue to face restrictions on their reporting in practice. There is no freedom of information law to guarantee access to public information, and defamation is a criminal offense, although many cases are resolved outside the formal court system according to *xeer*, or customary law. A media bill approved by the Transitional Federal Assembly (TFA) in late 2007 was criticized by press freedom groups for imposing vague and severe restrictions, including limits on images and speech; calls for media law reform by advocacy groups continued in 2011. However, given the TFG's inability to impose its authority over much of Somalia, the practical implications of the law remain unclear.

The struggle between the TFG and Al-Shabaab has dramatically affected the media environment in southern Somalia. Media outlets have aligned themselves with political factions as a means of survival, making neutral or objective reporting a rarity. Frequent incidents of harassment, arbitrary arrest, and violence against journalists continue to encourage high levels of self-censorship. Meanwhile, concerns about safety also make journalists who did gain access to rebel leaders reluctant to edit or interrupt interviews. Complaints from other regions, including Somaliland, suggested that Al-Shabaab was getting too much airtime and was not being adequately challenged by journalists on-air. Direct censorship also remained a problem, as Al-Shabaab took over some stations and

forced others to close, while demanding that those that were still on the air cease broadcasting music.

In recent years, numerous journalists have been killed in Somalia, either for supporting the wrong political faction or as accidental casualties in armed clashes. Somalia remained one of the deadliest countries for journalists in 2011; according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), at least two journalists and one media worker were killed, and many more were injured. In August, Farah Hassan Sahal of the popular Radio Simba was killed outside the radio station in Mogadishu; the perpetrators remain unknown. A Malaysian journalist, Noramfaizul Mohd of Bernama TV – who was in Mogadishu to cover the humanitarian situation – was accidentally shot and killed by AU peacekeeping troops in September. In December, Abdisalan Sheik Hassan, a freelance journalist working for HornCable, was assassinated after allegedly receiving numerous death threats that were apparently related to his coverage of disputes in the TFA.

Despite the violence, dozens of radio stations aligned with particular factions continued to broadcast in Mogadishu and in other parts of the country. The TFG continued to support Radio Mogadishu, a new outlet with the objective of carrying government-sponsored news and information, as well as providing space for a variety of groups and individual Somalis to voice their opinions. This includes journalists from popular stations such as Horn Afrik and Radio Shabelle, which have found it challenging to operate under Al-Shabaab or the more moderate Ahlu Sunna Waljama militia. In early 2010, a joint UN-AU radio station, Radio Bar Kulan, began broadcasting from Nairobi, Kenya's capital. Similar to Radio Mogadishu, the new station has sought to offer a platform for voices that may be critical of the extremists and more sympathetic to the TFG and AU forces. Many Somalis also accessed news via foreign radio transmissions, including the Somali services of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Voice of America.

The advertising sector is weak and advertising is often not enough to sustain media houses, leaving some to depend on financial support from politicians, compromising editorial independence. Some proprietors are able to fund their media houses with their own money. Journalists in all regions of Somalia receive low or even no pay and rely on trainings, corruption, or blackmail for additional income. Many media outlets also prefer to hire cheaper, less-skilled workers or even relatives over more experienced journalists. Because there is an abundance of journalists, those who complain about low wages usually face threats of being replaced.

The status of press freedom is somewhat better in Puntland, a self-declared semiautonomous region. Puntland's interim constitution provides for press freedom as long as journalists demonstrate "respect" for the law, but the region also recognizes the TFG. In July 2010, the government of Puntland approved a counterterrorism law that specifically targeted terrorism suspects and their allies, and also prohibited media outlets from reporting on Al-Shabaab. This new law was part of an effort to combat Al-Shabaab and other insurgent groups that were responsible for political assassinations and bombings in the region. In 2011, journalists also faced threats, attacks, and harassment from security forces, who usually enjoyed impunity for their actions. Despite Puntland president Abdirahman Mohamud Farole's stated commitment to greater openness, restrictions remained harsh, and coverage of political and security issues continued to be particularly dangerous for journalists. In October 2011, Farole and his minister of information accused Universal TV and Somali Channel TV of threatening Puntland's security and suspended the networks from reporting in Puntland. Universal was allowed to reopen in early December, but Somali Channel remained closed as of the end of 2011. Journalists also came under pressure from other political actors; in March 2011, for example, Liban Abdi Farah, a reporter for the Somali Broadcasting Corporation (SBC), was arrested by Puntland police for reporting on a bomb blast in the town of Galkayo. However, his case did not go to court and he was not formally charged.

In 2011, Somaliland – a region whose claims of independence have not been internationally recognized – retained its position of tolerating a relatively free media compared with the rest of Somalia, although at year's end the relationship between the government and the press appeared to be growing increasingly tense. The Somaliland constitution guarantees freedoms of speech and of the press. Defamation is not a criminal offense, and libel cases are sometimes settled through the clan system of

arbitration, although in 2011 judges appeared more eager to use criminal law in media cases. There is no access to information law in Somaliland, and public officials often do not divulge information unless it is favorable to the government.

In general, 2011 saw a continuation of a trend that had begun in the run-up to the 2010 elections, whereby privately owned newspapers were aligned with political parties, and many journalists and papers were financially supported by the parties. The new Somaliland government under President Ahmed Silanyo has been critical of some media, and suspended broadcasts by Universal TV, a satellite television station. The government accused the station of being biased and presenting a pro-Puntland perspective; this is particularly sensitive, as disputes along the border with Puntland have continued to simmer. In March 2011, Somaliland forces arrested Mohamed Shaqale, a journalist from Universal TV, and Abdinur Hashi from Somali Channel while they were reporting from Las Anod near the Puntland border. Both, however, were soon released. As in years past, several Somaliland journalists continued to face threatening text messages and harassment from Al-Shabaab. Fearing retaliation, some outlets refrained from openly reporting and condemning the activities of the group.

There are about 10 newspapers in Somaliland, although this number fluctuates as some publish intermittently. Most of these outlets are not economically sustainable and are heavily subsidized by the diaspora as well as by political parties and their interests. Media outlets tend to be aligned with particular political or individual interests but they largely share a pro-independence agenda. Newspaper reporting is often critical of the government but has limited reach due to low levels of literacy. In contrast, the Somaliland government has been reluctant to liberalize the airwaves, citing the potential of instigating clan violence, an argument that some Somalilanders support.

Due to the low literacy rate and the relatively high cost of newspapers, radio remains the most accessible and widespread medium for news in Somaliland. The establishment of independent radio stations is banned, and government-owned Radio Hargeisa remains the only FM station, although the BBC is available in Hargeisa, the capital. There has been a small but notable growth in internet-based radio stations operating both within Somaliland and broadcasting from the diaspora. There is one government-owned television station, Somaliland National Television. A number of Somali-language satellite stations, such as HornCable and Universal TV, broadcast from the Middle East and London, and are accessible and highly influential. The advertising sector is gradually growing but remains small.

The Somali diaspora in Europe, North America, and the Gulf states has established a rich internet presence. Internet service is available in large cities in Somalia, and users enjoy a relatively fast and inexpensive connection, including through mobile devices. Around 7 percent Somalis owned a mobile phone, and 1.25 percent of Somali citizens were registered as internet users in 2011. Although there were no reports of government restrictions on the internet, some factions reportedly monitored internet activity. In 2011, Al-Shabaab began using Twitter to promote its agenda, often issuing propaganda statements, announcements about its attacks on AU or TFG troops, and virulent criticisms of the Kenyan and other African troops backing the TFG in Somalia.

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