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Freedom Of The Press - Burundi (2010)

Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 21

Political Environment: 30

Economic Environment: 22

Total Score: 73

- The constitution provides for freedom of expression, but this right is rarely respected in practice.
- Burundi's vague 1997 Press Law forbids the dissemination of "information inciting civil disobedience or serving as propaganda for enemies of the Burundian nation during a time of war." The 2003 Media Law provides for harsh fines and prison terms of up to five years for the dissemination of information that insults the president or is defamatory toward other individuals.
- During 2009, judges threw out two defamation suits against journalists, suggesting that defamation could be decriminalized in the future. Alexis Sinduhije, a former radio journalist who had served four months of a 30-month jail term for "insulting the president," was released in March after appellate judges ruled that the charges against him were unsubstantiated. Also that month, the editor of the Net Press news agency, Jean-Claude Kavumbagu, was acquitted of criminal defamation charges. He had been held since September 2008 for claiming that the president spent 100 million Burundian francs on a trip to Beijing for the opening of the Olympic Games.
- In July 2009, Jean Bosco Ndayiragije, a talk-show host on the privately owned Radio Publique Afrique (RPA), was ordered to hand over audiotapes of a show that included criticism of local judicial authorities. Two other people were summoned for questioning in relation to the case: the journalist who filed the critical report and a human rights defender interviewed during the show.
- Also in July, Marc Niyonkuru of the private station Radio Isanganiro received death threats over a news item in which he claimed that a city official used a government vehicle to undertake activities for the ruling party. He was told, over the telephone and in person, that his life would be in danger if he dared to broadcast such information again.
- In August, the National Communications Council (CNC), the country's media regulatory body, ruled against the

editing director of RPA, Eric Manirakiza, stating that he had damaged the “public persona” of the minister of planning in a report claiming that the minister’s second marriage was illegal. The CNC also ruled against an RPA report on the border conflict between Burundi and Rwanda, arguing that it could jeopardize national security.

- The Burundi Journalists’ Association in October transformed itself into a trade union in a bid to obtain more legal powers and serve its members more effectively.
- The government dominates Burundi’s media industry. It owns *Le Renouveau*, the only daily newspaper, and the public television and radio broadcaster. Two private television stations also operate. The state radio outlet is the only one with national coverage; while nearly a dozen private stations are heard in only a few parts of the country, many of them host both government and opposition politicians. Radio remains the most widely used medium for information dissemination.
- There are up to eight private newspapers, but they do not publish regularly, their readership is limited, and they are hampered by financial and infrastructural constraints. Several dozen private internet and fax-based news sources complement the traditional media landscape.
- The costs of gathering information and obtaining private media licenses remained prohibitively high.
- There were no apparent government restrictions on internet access, although the CNC barred websites from “posting documents or other statements by political organizations that disseminate hate or violence.” Less than 1 percent of Burundians had access to the internet in 2009, mainly as a result of high prices.