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Freedom of the Press 2011 - Somalia

Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 27

Political Environment: 35

Economic Environment: 22

Total Score: 84

The media environment in Somalia varies significantly depending on region, with different conditions in chaotic southern Somalia, the semiautonomous Puntland region in the northeast, and the breakaway region of Somaliland in the northwest. In June 2010 Somaliland held a much-anticipated presidential election that was widely regarded to be free and fair; Ahmed Silanyo defeated the incumbent, President Dahir Riyale Kahin, and power was transferred peacefully. In the south, the president of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, tenuously held on to power. The TFG, which was backed by African Union (AU) peacekeepers, controlled only a small portion of southern Somalia, while the Islamist militant groups Al-Shabaab and Hizbul Islam continued to control large swathes of the south and most of the capital, Mogadishu.

Somalia's constitution provides for freedom of the press, but owing to the lawless conditions in 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. A media bill approved by the Transitional Federal Assembly 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 2010. However, given the TFG's inability to impose its authority over much of Somalia, the practical effects of the law remain unclear.

The struggle between the TFG, Hizbul Islam, 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. Journalists working for international broadcasters such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Voice of America (VOA) also face pressure from Al-Shabaab and Hizbul Islam. In April 2010, Al-Shabaab banned local radios from retransmitting VOA or the BBC, accusing the stations of airing "Christian propaganda." Frequent incidents of harassment, arbitrary arrest, and violence against journalists continue to encourage high levels of self-censorship. On the other side, concerns about safety also make those journalists that did interview 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 both groups took over some stations and forced others to close, while demanding that those that were still on air cease broadcasting music. At least 14 radio stations in Mogadishu complied with Hizbul Islam's April ban on the broadcast of music. However, radio stations faced being closed by the central government for their compliance. According to the local Somali Foreign Correspondents Association, two stations were temporarily taken off the air for not playing music until then information minister Dahir Mohamud Gelle reversed the order.

Numerous journalists have been killed in the capital, either for supporting the wrong political faction or as accidental casualties in armed clashes. Somalia remained one of the deadliest countries for journalists in 2010; according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), three journalists were killed – two in southern Somalia and one in Puntland – but many more were injured. In May, Radio Mogadishu journalist Sheikh Nur Mohamed Abkey was killed, allegedly for his affiliation with the state-owned radio station. Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the murder. In a dramatic incident in June 2010, eight journalists were seriously wounded when a bomb went off at a press conference convened by Al-Shabaab. As fighting ensued, the director of the community station, Hurma Radio Barkhat Awale, was killed in the crossfire between Al-Shabaab and AU troops.

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. 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 is intended to offer a platform for voices that may be critical of the extremists and more sympathetic to the TFG and AU forces. The advertising sector is weak and advertising is often not enough to sustain media houses, leaving some to depend on financial support from politicians, thus compromising editorial independence. Some proprietors are able to fund their media houses with their own money. According to the local National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ), journalists in all regions of Somalia receive low pay, and many also work either unpaid or without an employment contract. Many media outlets also prefer to hire cheaper, less-trained labor or 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 was visibly better in Puntland, a self-declared semiautonomous region. The Puntland interim constitution provides for press freedom as long as journalists demonstrate "respect" for the law, but the region also recognizes the TFG. Despite the Puntland president's stated commitment to greater openness, restrictions remained harsh, and coverage of political and security issues continued to be particularly dangerous for journalists. In August, Abdifatah Jama Mir, the director of Horseed Media FM, was arrested and held for 86 days for interviewing a "rebel leader." Following this incident, Puntland banned journalists from interviewing rebel militants, citing security threats. In addition, the government accused VOA of fomenting instability in the region. In August, VOA journalist Nuh Muse Birjeb was banned from working in Puntland. That followed the release of his VOA colleague, Mohamed Yasin Isak, after being held for 17 days in early January 2010. Journalists also faced threats, attacks, and harassment from security forces, who usually enjoyed impunity for their actions. In February, a correspondent for Radio SIMBA, Ahmed Ibrahim Noor, was beaten by court guards in the high court in Bosaso town. In August, reporter Abudllahi Omar Gedi was stabbed and left to die after he left work at Radio Daljir in the Galkayo district of Puntland.

Somaliland, a region whose claims of independence have not been internationally recognized, enjoys more press freedom than the rest of the country. The Somaliland constitution guarantees freedoms of speech and of the press. In general, privately owned newspapers were aligned with political parties during the 2010 presidential election, as many journalists and papers were financially supported by the parties. The

government media remained sympathetic to the incumbent, despite demands for more balanced reporting and greater access for the opposition. The new Somaliland government has been critical of some media and suspended broadcasts from Universal TV, a satellite broadcaster based in London and Djibouti. The Somaliland government has regularly accused the station of being biased and presenting a pro-Puntland perspective; this is particularly sensitive, as disputes along the border with Puntland have intensified in 2010. Defamation is not a criminal offense, and libel cases are settled through the clan system of arbitration. There is no access to information law in Somaliland, and public officials often do not divulge information unless it is favorable to the government. 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 at least seven independent daily newspapers in Somaliland, one government daily, and two English-language newspapers. Most of these outlets are not economically sustainable and are heavily subsidized by the diaspora as well as by political parties and their interests. While the repeatedly postponed regional elections have led to the establishment of more newspapers, the delays have also caused greater polarization in the media. The Somaliland government has been reluctant to liberalize the airwaves, citing the potential of instigating clan violence, an argument that some Somalilanders support. 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. Radio Horyaal circumvents the ban on private broadcasting by having its recorded programming transmitted on shortwave from a studio in Belgium. Due to the low literacy rate and the relatively high cost of newspapers, radio remains the most accessible and widespread medium for news. There is one government-owned television station, Somaliland National Television, and a number of Somali-language satellite stations are also accessible. The advertising sector is gradually growing but remains small. Nevertheless, advertising is the main source of revenue for many independent media outlets.

The Somali diaspora in Europe, North America, and the Gulf states have established a rich internet presence. Internet service is available in large cities in Somalia, and users enjoy a relatively fast and inexpensive connection. Nevertheless, owing to pervasive poverty and the internal displacement of many Somalis, access is limited. According to Internet World Stats, approximately 1.1 percent of the Somali population had internet access in 2010. Although there were no reports of government restrictions on the internet, some factions reportedly monitored internet activity.

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