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Freedom of the Press 2012 - Djibouti

2012 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score: 74

Legal Environment: 24

Political Environment: 27

Economic Environment: 23

The prodemocracy demonstrations that spread across the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 arrived in Djibouti in early February with tens of thousands of people taking to the streets in the capital in opposition to the government of President Ismaël Omar Guelleh. The ensuing government crackdown resulted in several deaths and numerous injuries. The media environment suffered for the rest of the year as the government enforced an almost-total blackout of the Arab Spring in the state-run and -controlled media and imposed severe restrictions, arrests, and closings on the opposition media. Even before the demonstrations, the media environment was among the most restrictive in Africa, with almost complete government ownership of print and broadcast media, very low levels of internet access, severe limitations on free speech, and frequent harassment of journalists.

Although Article 15 of the constitution affords the right to free expression, in practice the government imposes restrictions on the independent press. Free speech is limited by prohibitions on libel and distributing false information. The 1992 Freedom of Communication Law provides for prison sentences for media offenses and imposes age and nationality requirements on anyone establishing a private news outlet; the creation of a National Communication Commission, charged with issuing radio and television broadcasting licenses, has been delayed for 10 years.

The U.S. military presence in Djibouti creates additional pressures for self-censorship, as journalists are encouraged to refrain from reporting on soldiers' activities. Journalists generally avoid covering sensitive issues, including human rights, the army, the rebel group the Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy (FRUD), and relations with Ethiopia. The official media, which accounts for almost all the outlets in the country, does not criticize the government and practices widespread self-censorship.

The February crackdown ensnared several journalists, as well as others who attempted to cover the unrest. Jean-Paul Noël Abdi, president of the Djiboutian League of Human Rights, was arrested on February 9 for his reporting on the demonstrations. He was released from prison 12 days later, but the charges of participation in an insurrection remained. Also arrested for insurrection in early February were six reporters and

informants for the opposition radio station *La Voix de Djibouti*. Held for over four months, they were released in June, but placed under judicial control pending trial. Two reporters, Farah Abadid Hildid and Houssein Robleh Dabar, were rearrested on November 21 and reportedly tortured before being released four days later.

The domestic media sector is very limited. Because of high poverty levels, radio is the most popular news medium, as few Djiboutians can afford newspapers, televisions, or computers. The government owns the principal newspaper, *La Nation*, as well as Radio-Television Djibouti, which operates the national radio and television stations. Community radio, which has gained great popularity across Africa, is nonexistent, and Djibouti is one of the few countries in Africa without any independent newspapers (one periodical run by an opposition party still publishes). Although Djiboutian law technically permits all registered political parties to publish a newspaper, the opposition-oriented *Le Renouveau* newspaper was permanently closed by the authorities in 2007 on the grounds of libel, after it printed an article stating that a businessman had paid a bribe to the national bank governor, the president's brother-in-law. Printing facilities for mass media are government-owned, which creates obstacles for those attempting to publish material critical of the government.

While there are no private radio stations within the country, a clandestine independent radio station operating from abroad, *La Voix de Djibouti*, started broadcasting in the country in January 2010. Foreign newspapers and magazines are sold freely in Djibouti, and foreign radio broadcasts are available from the British Broadcasting Corporation, the Voice of America, and Radio France International, offering alternative sources of information to the public.

Approximately 7 percent of the population was able to access the internet in 2011. The only internet service provider is owned by the government. Although there are no reports that the government monitors e-mail or internet activity, the Association for Respect of Human Rights in Djibouti claims that its site is regularly blocked. During the February demonstrations, opposition activists reported that the government had blocked the mobile network to prevent dissemination of information by phone and short-message service (SMS), and social-media networks are closely monitored.

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