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Freedom of the Press 2014 - Eritrea

Eritrea continued to rank among the worst media environments in the world in 2013. 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. In January 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 state channel EriTV calling for the implementation of the constitution—which allows for multiparty competition—and the release of political prisoners and those who have 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 of President Isaias Afwerki.

The 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.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 22 journalists were imprisoned in Eritrea as of December 2013, the fourth-largest number in the world. Nine have been in prison since 2001, and almost all are being held incommunicado. 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. In February and March 2011, 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. One of the most well-known journalists in prison is Swedish-Eritrean Dawit Isaac. While many thought he died in detention, in 2013 he was reported to be alive and his case was referred to the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights for Eritrea’s denial of habeas corpus, the principle under which every prisoner is entitled have their case brought before a judge or a court.

Most independent or critical journalists have left the country due to intimidation and arbitrary imprisonment, and those who remain engage in self-censorship. 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. Individuals who seek refuge abroad have come under continued pressure. 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 February 2013, Al-Jazeera was blocked by the Eritrean government for 11 days and a decree was issued 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 early January 2013 mutiny. Overall, it remained almost impossible for foreign journalists to report from within the country during the year.

The three newspapers, two television stations, and three radio stations that operate in the country remain under state control. Individuals are allowed to purchase satellite dishes and subscribe to international media, though the importation of foreign publications without prior approval is not permitted. 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.

The government requires all internet service providers to use state-controlled internet infrastructure. Many websites managed by Eritrean exiles are blocked, as is the video-sharing site YouTube. Authorities are believed to monitor e-mail communications, although internet use is extremely limited, with just 0.9 percent of the population able to access the medium in 2013.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Not Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

94

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

30

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

40

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

24

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