

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	64
Land:	Sydsudan
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	Freedom of the press 2013
Udgivet:	10. oktober 2013
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	21. februar 2014



Freedom of the Press 2013 - South Sudan

Publisher [Freedom House](#)

Publication Date 10 October 2013

Cite as Freedom House, *Freedom of the Press 2013 - South Sudan*, 10 October 2013, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/52677b9c14.html> [accessed 28 November 2013]

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2013 Scores

Press Status: Partly Free

Press Freedom Score: 60

Legal Environment: 16

Political Environment: 27

Economic Environment: 17

Hopes for improvements in the media environment in South Sudan in 2012 were subdued after auspicious media bills, first introduced in 2007, were not passed during the year. Working in a legal vacuum, many South Sudanese journalists describe an increasingly intolerant stance by authorities toward the media.

The new constitution, ratified upon independence and considered one of the most progressive charters in Africa, guarantees press freedom and ensures that all levels of government uphold this principle. Three progressive media bills were introduced in 2007 but had not been enacted by the end of 2012, leaving journalists without comprehensive legal protections and the media sector without a regulatory framework. The bills were designed to facilitate access to information, set up a public broadcaster, and establish an independent press ombudsman. While Information Minister Barnaba Marial Benjamin claimed that the delay in the bills' passage was due to a glut of legislation in the parliament, local journalists voiced suspicions that individuals within the government opposed their adoption. Local journalists and editors also fear that the draft media bills have been altered in ways detrimental to press freedom and without consultation with the local press during the nearly six-year interval. For instance, the latest version of the draft Broadcasting Corporation Bill, designed to create a public broadcaster, differed from its original draft by giving the executive branch, rather than the legislature, power over board appointments.

Legal measures were rarely used against the press, although a handful of high-profile defamation cases did occur. In March 2012, Pagan Amum, secretary general of the ruling Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement (SPLM), was acquitted in court on corruption charges linked to an alleged \$30 million payment in 2006. Amum then successfully sued two newspapers, *The Citizen* and *Al-Masir*, for \$37,000 each in a libel suit; the papers were also required to publish an apology. A draft freedom of information bill was under consideration by the Council of Ministers in 2012, but no legislation had been introduced by year's end. Access to interviews and official information largely depends on journalists' personal connections.

It is relatively easy to acquire accreditation and licenses to work as a journalist in South Sudan. Although there is no official censorship, journalists have no effective legal protection from harassment by state officials, and many self-censor to avoid repercussions for their reporting. In certain cases, authorities have visited media outlets and ordered publishers to stop publishing stories about sensitive issues. In June 2012, publishers were warned about printing stories on corruption, while an alleged military coup attempt in August prompted more visits. Also in June, authorities suspended the Arabic-language newspaper *Al-Khabar* for an article criticizing the government's capacity to rule effectively.

Security officials and individuals within the government rely on extrajudicial means to silence the private media, and journalists and media outlets were regularly subjected to intimidation and physical attacks. Police and security personnel physically assaulted and arbitrarily detained journalists without charges throughout the year. As media outlets expanded their reach from Juba to regions further afield, more cases of security personnel harassing journalists trickled in from around the country. In December, security agents arrested Radio Tamazuj journalist Assad Al Tahir in Wau without explanation, releasing him only on condition that he not report on political and ethnic tensions in the town. Also in December, threats against the hosts of two political programs on Bakhita Radio forced suspension of the programs, which remained off the air at year's end. The most tragic event of 2012 occurred when unidentified men shot dead Isaiah Diing Abraham Chan Awuol, a prominent columnist and blogger, in Juba in December. Relatives and colleagues linked his death directly to his reporting. Notably, an article Abraham published calling for President Salva Kiir's resignation had resulted in his interrogation by security forces a few weeks prior to his death. Investigation into the murder led to the arrest of two suspects late in the year.

As border disputes between Sudan and South Sudan continued in 2012, journalists were often caught in the middle. Soldiers detained *Sudan Tribune* correspondent Bonifacio Taban for three days in June and questioned him repeatedly over a story concerning 500 soldiers' widows who complained of poor compensation. In addition to the story's main subject, the sheer number of widows implicitly challenged the lower casualty figures reported by the military. Foreign correspondents also faced harassment. In August, McClatchy reporter Alan Boswell was publicly accused of being a spy for Sudan after publishing a story suggesting U.S.-South Sudan relations were under strain due to false statements made by Kiir to U.S. President Barack Obama. In October, Al-Jazeera correspondent Anna Cavell's camera was seized by a group of men who also threatened her with arrest while she filmed in Juba's Custom Market area. Officials do not permit photography in many urban areas, and occasionally also restrict the movement of reporters.

Print media in South Sudan are burdened with small staffs and budgets, low advertising revenue, and a national illiteracy rate of 74 percent. Newspapers are largely concentrated in urban areas because of the high cost of transportation and a lack of reliable infrastructure. Newsprint is very expensive, and because the country has only one printing press, a majority of the printing is done in Uganda or Sudan. A number of private dailies and weeklies publish regularly, though individuals within the SPLM own the majority of titles. There is a general lack of diversity of viewpoints, as reporters are either employed by progovernment media owners or fear reprisals from state authorities. Papers allied with the ruling party are favored in terms of winning advertising revenue. Government-owned Southern Sudan Television is the sole television station operating in the country. Journalists working at the station complain of self-censorship and lack of professional integrity among their superiors. Radio remains the main source of news for most citizens, with several dozen stations in operation across the country; however, many remote areas remain outside the reach of FM broadcasts. There are no reliable statistics regarding internet use in South Sudan during 2012. Penetration is low, as most of the country lacks online access because of a lack of electricity and infrastructure. However, there are no reports of the government restricting access to or the content of the internet, and the lack of official restrictions on online news has allowed several professional, critical websites to emerge, including *Sudan Tribune*, *Sudan Votes*, and *Gurtong*.

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