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Freedom of the Press 2011 - Côte d'Ivoire

Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 21

Political Environment: 28

Economic Environment: 19

Total Score: 68

Since the onset of civil conflict in 2002, press freedom has generally not been respected in Côte d'Ivoire, despite constitutional protections. While gradual improvements had been seen over the past few years with a reduction in the number of attacks on the media and a tentative opening of the independent media space, the situation noticeably deteriorated following the second round of the much-awaited, and frequently delayed, presidential election in November 2010.

While imprisonment for defamation was abolished in November 2004, defaming the head of state or other state institutions is still punishable by fines of up to 20 million CFA (\$44,000), and journalists can, and have, been imprisoned for this as well as a variety of other offenses. For example, in July 2010 three journalists at *Le Nouveau Courrier* were arrested and held in pre-trial detention after they refused to reveal their sources for a story on corruption in the cocoa and coffee sectors. While in the end the court was legally unable to sentence them to prison for the offense, it suspended the paper for 15 days and fined each individual journalist 4.6 million CFA (\$10,000).

According to an in-depth report from Reporters Without Borders on the quality of presidential election coverage in Côte d'Ivoire, Ivorian media outlets on the whole performed fairly well in their coverage leading up to the first round in October 2010 and the second round in November. During the first round, the media devoted more than three times as much coverage to President Laurent Gbagbo compared with his next-closest rival, Alassane Ouattara, but in the second round the two candidates received roughly equal and generally even-handed coverage. However, national regulations prevented radio stations from providing political commentary, and on October 13 the National Audiovisual Communication Council (CNCA) prohibited radio stations from covering political activities during the campaign.

While the lead-up to the polls was relatively peaceful despite the tensions created by such a highly anticipated election and increasingly xenophobic campaign rhetoric, the subsequent behavior of Gbagbo's administration dispelled any hope that the media environment in Côte d'Ivoire might be improving. As soon as the electoral commission announced that Ouattara had won, the Constitutional Council, filled with Gbagbo loyalists, rejected the announcement, and Gbagbo supporters began harassing,

attacking, and unlawfully detaining journalists, both domestic and international, who acknowledged Ouattara's internationally recognized victory. Despite the escalation of the situation – which was not resolved by year's end – no journalists were killed in 2010. An exception to the crackdown by the Gbagbo administration on the media was the behavior of Eugène Dié Kacou, president of the Ivoirian National Press Council (NPC) and himself a former journalist. Dié Kacou showed remarkable resilience in the face of government pressure, refusing to use the council, which regulates the print media, to forcibly close pro-Ouattara media outlets. After the Republican Guard raided a publishing house and two printing presses in December, temporarily stopping distribution of opposition papers, the NPC issued a strongly worded press release condemning the raids and supporting media freedom.

While the international media – and French outlets in particular – have long had difficulty operating in Côte d'Ivoire, they were directly targeted in 2010 both before and after the election. In February, when Gbagbo took the extraordinary step of disbanding both his cabinet and the electoral commission due to disagreement with their preparations for the upcoming election, the French television station France 24 was banned for more than a week when it tried to cover the ensuing protests. More drastically, after the second round of the election in November, the National Broadcasting Council banned the broadcasts of all international radio and television news programs, and by the end of December more than a dozen foreign journalists had been arrested and many others had been directly and violently targeted by pro-Gbagbo militia groups. Although it was also threatened for its acknowledgement of Ouattara's victory, the UN radio station in the country was still able to broadcast in the country at year's end.

The government-controlled daily newspaper *Fraternité Matin* had the largest circulation among print media and rarely criticized the government, but a number of private papers competed with it and contained more critical coverage. Control over Radiodiffusion Television Ivoirienne (RTI) – the state broadcaster and the only terrestrial television station in operation in the country – was a major focus of both camps following the election, with RTI employees being threatened if they did not support Gbagbo's victory in their coverage. In response, the Ouattara camp launched its own radio station, Radio Côte d'Ivoire-Voice of the Assembly, broadcasting political statements, pro-Ouattara coverage, and music 24 hours a day from the Abidjan hotel where Ouattara was sequestered. By the end of December, control of RTI was of such importance that pro-Ouattara supporters marched on its headquarters in an attempt to gain control of the facility, which they believed belonged to Ouattara after his electoral victory. The ensuing violence resulted in at least 30 deaths. While RTI is the only national terrestrial television station, there are more than 100 low-power noncommercial community radio stations operating throughout Côte d'Ivoire, though many have logistical difficulties broadcasting at the end of the year and their content is restricted by broadcasting regulations that prohibit political commentary on such stations.

The internet was not restricted by the government, even following the election. However, due to poverty and infrastructural limitations, less than 2.6 percent of the population was able to access the internet in 2010. However, from October 31 through the end of the year, the government suspended all SMS messaging services, limiting people's ability to send and receive news through this medium during a crucial political period.

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