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Freedom of the Press 2015 - Burkina Faso

2015 Scores

Press Status

Partly Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)
44

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)
18

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)
13

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)
13

The media in Burkina Faso faced challenges in 2014 as tensions between the government of President Blaise Compaoré and the opposition mounted ahead of a planned 2015 presidential election. Journalists operated in an unpredictable and dangerous environment marked by street protests, a series of suspicious break-ins in newspaper offices, and official efforts to limit coverage of growing dissent. However, Compaoré's pursuit of an unpopular constitutional amendment to scrap term limits provoked a popular uprising in October that ended his 27 years in power. A new transitional government promised advances in media freedom, including an end to years of impunity in the murder of a prominent journalist; however, concrete changes had yet to be seen as of the end of the year.

Legal Environment

Article 8 of the constitution and the 1993 Information Code guarantee freedoms of expression, information, and the press. In 2014, the constitution was suspended for a brief period in early November after Compaoré fled the country; however, it was restored after the transitional government took power in mid-November.

Libel is a criminal offense, and media outlets are prohibited from insulting the head of state and publishing or broadcasting graphic images. In October 2014, the newspaper *Le Citadin* was suspended and its editor fined and sentenced to 12 months in prison for allegedly defaming a local politician in Ouagadougou.

In December, the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights issued a landmark ruling in the case of *Konaté v. Burkina Faso*, finding that imprisonment for defamation violated the right to freedom of expression as guaranteed by the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and other international charters to which Burkina Faso was a signatory. The ruling came in the case of newspaper editor Lohé Issa Konaté, who had been convicted of defamation in 2012 and sentenced one year in prison and a fine of \$3,000 for publishing articles in the weekly *L'Ouragan* alleging public corruption. The paper was also suspended for six months. The court ordered the government to amend its laws and compensate Konaté. However, no action toward decriminalizing defamation in line with the court's order was initiated by year's end.

Article 49 of the Information Code grants every journalist free access to sources of information, with exceptions pertaining to the internal or external security of the state, military secrets, strategic economic interests, ongoing investigations or legal proceedings, and anything deemed to undermine the dignity and privacy of Burkinabés. In practice, officials use these exceptions frequently, and the lack of a formal access to information regime makes obtaining government information difficult.

The official media regulatory agency, the High Council of Communication (CSC), is nominally independent. However, of its 12 members, eight are state appointees and only four are drawn from professional media groups, giving the government outsize influence over media regulation. For years, the CSC has been criticized for inconsistent and mismanaged licensing procedures. The body has the power to summon journalists to hearings about their work and even suspend or ban outlets that violate ethical standards or the law. The CSC actively monitors the media sector to ensure compliance with its dictates. Critics argue that it should focus more on addressing the economic sustainability of the country's media.

Political Environment

Under the Compaoré regime, the national public broadcaster, Radiodiffusion Television du Burkina (RTB), exhibited a progovernment slant and was heavily influenced by the executive branch. It operated under the direct control of the minister of communication, a political appointee who also served as the government's spokesperson. Seven of the nine members of RTB's board of directors were government representatives, and the president's cabinet handpicked its director general. Beginning in 2013, tensions between journalists and the RTB management over editorial freedom led to street protests championed by the main journalists' union, which called for an end to the government's persistent interference in editorial content.

In late October 2014, antigovernment protesters stormed and looted RTB's offices in Ouagadougou during the political uprising that saw Compaoré ousted from power. The attack knocked the station temporarily off the air, forcing Compaoré to issue his resignation speech on a private station, Canal 3. By year's end, an interim director had been installed at RTB; the interim director appointed new heads of the national television and radio services, drawn from the journalism community. A search was also underway to find a new permanent director general to take the lead in transforming the agency into a truly independent public service broadcaster.

Reflecting the more open editorial policy, RTB in December 2014 aired a documentary about slain journalist Norbert Zongo, which authorities had previously blocked and which movie theaters had declined to show in fear of government reprisals. Zongo, a former editor in chief of the weekly *L'Indépendant*, was murdered in December 1998 while investigating the brutal murder of a driver for former presidential adviser François Compaoré, a brother of Blaise Compaoré. In 2006, despite intense local and international pressure, the

Compaoré regime had dropped all charges against the only suspect indicted in the case. Total impunity in the Zongo case cast fear and self-censorship on the Burkinabè media and society at large. Although Zongo's murderers were never discovered, the new government has publicly pledged to reexamine the case.

A series of unsolved break-ins at three independent newspapers earlier in 2014 drew suspicion. In all three cases, the suspects seized reporting equipment, leaving behind valuables. In February 2014, intruders broke into the offices of weekly *L'Opinion* and stole desktop and tablet computers. In July, a break-in at the leading independent paper *L'Événement* saw the theft of a reporter's notebook, a USB drive, a computer, and cash belonging to editor in chief Newton Ahmed Barry. And in August, unknown assailants broke into the offices of the bimonthly *Complément d'Enquête* and stole a newsroom mobile phone, a tablet and a laptop computer, and some cash. Police did not make any arrests by year's end.

Cases of harassment and physical violence against journalists are rare. In July 2014, police seized the camera of photojournalist Hippolyte Sama of the independent newsmagazine *Fasozine* and deleted photos he took of relatives of the victims in an Air Algeria plane crash in Mali. In August, Newton Ahmed Barry of *L'Événement* claimed that earlier in the year his house had been broken into and his car vandalized in what he believed to be retaliation by the authorities for his reporting.

During the protests and the uprising against Compaoré, most journalists were able to report freely and broadcasts were generally unhindered, except for the brief takeover and disruption at RTB.

Economic Environment

Although private print media are growing, including through the emergence of news magazines, the ownership of print outlets still lacks transparency. The Burkinabè print sector's struggles with interrupted production, low literacy rates, and generally poor economic conditions make the broadcast media the preferred choice for news and entertainment. Whereas there are five national daily newspapers, more than 200 radio and television stations operate in the country. RTB was established as the national broadcaster in 1963, and operated the only television channel for many years, but a handful of private television stations now compete with RTB. Radio is still the most popular medium and source of information. Community radio stations are prevalent throughout the country and play a significant role in local development and community building. Programming in local languages such as Mòoré, Mandinka, and Bambara that address issues of gender equality, reproductive health, and domestic violence has contributed to diversity of content. Foreign radio stations are able to broadcast freely. Insufficient infrastructure and cost has limited internet access, which stood at just 9.4 percent of the population in 2014.