

Press Freedom Index 2014 Africa

WARS AND TERRORIST THREATS WEAKEN MEDIA IN WEST AFRICA

When wars assume new forms, a commitment to serve freedom of information means taking risks that are hard to calculate. The negative correlation between conflicts and freedom of information was highlighted by the way **Mali** and **Central African Republic** plunged in the index.

Control of the media has always been a strategic goal in conflicts. When soldiers led by Capt. Amadou Sanogo staged a coup d'état in the Malian capital of Bamako in March 2012, their first move was to take over the national radio and TV broadcaster.

Thanks to new technology, traditional media such as radio stations and newspapers are no longer the only news outlets, and the number and type of news and information providers operating on the ground has increased. Conflicts in Africa are also now assuming many different forms. No longer limited to battles between armies, they may take the form of lower-level or asymmetric conflicts pitting armed groups against more or less proper armies or against other armed groups. At the same time, the terrorist threat is increased by the way some groups with a political agenda use armed conflict for economic gain, as seen in the internecine wars for the control of mineral deposits in eastern **Democratic Republic of Congo**.

These problems impact the flow of news and information. Because of the dangers, journalists find it increasingly difficult to access the terrain of military operations. During France's Operation Serval in **Mali**, some reporters chose to travel with military convoys going to the front line into order not to leave the French military as the only source of information about this war. But this method nonetheless resulted in very partial coverage, from a single viewpoint, of events on the ground.

Armed conflict's new protagonists, especially terrorist groups, do not feel bound by the Geneva Conventions, which protect civilians, including journalists, during armed conflict. On the contrary, journalists become high-value targets in an "information war."

Somalia's Islamist militia Al-Shabaab, for example, has always targeted journalists as unwanted witnesses of its terrorist methods. With seven journalists killed in 2013, Somalia is Africa's deadliest country for media personnel. No fewer than 18 were killed in terrorist attacks in 2012. The threat in Mogadishu is so great that some media went so far as to let their journalists live at

their workplace to avoid dangerous commutes. Can a terror campaign be presumed successful when journalists can no longer move about freely in search of information?

Another characteristic of these guerrilla “wars” is that they are not resolved. Ceasefires are not signed or not respected. Law and order break down in a more or less permanent manner leaving varied groups to alternate in power. Inasmuch as the conflict situation is not resolved, control of the media continues to be a strategic goal to the detriment of freedom of information.

After taking control of parts of Nord-Kivu, in eastern **Democratic Republic of Congo**, in the winter of 2012, the M23 armed group insisted on checking newspapers prior to distribution, and threatened radio station managers who broadcast reports that reflected badly on M23.

Constant instability makes for weaker governments, ones that easily feel threatened. The situation in **Central African Republic** in November was a good example. The former rebel politicians tried to normalize the situation but the coalition that brought them to power, Seleka, did not disarm and so the supporters of François Bozizé, the ousted president, themselves took up arms. In Bangui, a general heading the government’s political police personally interrogated and threatened a journalist just for raising the possibility of a cabinet reshuffle.

This persecution is nonetheless also indicative of the immense power that journalists still wield as watchdogs. They make it possible for the population to see and hear, and they make sense out of scraps of information, fashioning it into something intelligible to all and thereby maintaining their importance, all the more so in time of war.

Boko Haram: “predator of press freedom”

A Nigeria-based Islamist militia with suspected links to Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram distinguished itself by targeting journalists for not being “objective” enough. Two TV journalists were killed and the offices of three newspapers were destroyed in bombings. More and more journalists are censoring themselves on the subject of this dangerous group because they know it does not want their coverage.

Talking about Boko Haram has even become a taboo for the authorities. Journalists trying to cover a trial of some of its members were expelled from a courtroom in October 2013. In neighbouring Cameroon, proceedings were initiated against a newspaper editor for reporting that his country was cooperating with Nigeria’s efforts to detain Boko Haram members. Boko Haram’s offensive against freedom of information seems to be succeeding.

DESCENT INTO HELL CONTINUES IN HORN OF AFRICA

The levels of poverty and authoritarianism are higher in the Horn of Africa than anywhere else in the continent. Civil liberties are collateral victims.

Post-Zenawi Ethiopia - a missed chance to liberalize

Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's death in August 2012 and his replacement by Hailemariam Desalegn raised hopes of political and social reforms that would benefit freedom of information. Sadly, these hopes have been dashed. The repressive anti-terrorism law adopted in 2009 is a threat that continues to hang over journalists, forcing them to censor themselves. Media that dare to violate the code of silence, especially as regards government corruption, are systematically intimidated.

Five journalists are currently detained in Kality prison on the outskirts of Addis Ababa. Two of them, Woubeshet Taye, the deputy editor of the Amharic-language weekly *Awramba Times*, and Reyot Alemu, a columnist with the national weekly *Fitih*, have been held for two and a half years, since their arrest in June 2011 on terrorism charges. There is no sign of any loosening of the vice that grips the Ethiopian media and the regime is unlikely to tolerate criticism before the elections in 2015.

Djibouti - unable to hear the voice of those without a voice

Djibouti is a highly strategic regional crossroads. Because of its economic and geopolitical advantages, it is easy to turn a blind eye to the dictatorial methods used by Ismail Omar Guelleh, who has ruled since 1999. Under Guelleh, Djibouti has steadily cut itself off from the outside world and suppressed criticism. The list of journalists who have been jailed and tortured gets longer and longer. Releases are only ever provisional. The journalist and Guelleh opponent Daher Ahmed Farah is a case in point. He has been jailed five times and arrested a dozen times since returning to Djibouti in January 2013.

The concept of independent media is completely alien to Djibouti. The only national broadcaster, *Radio-Télévision Djibouti*, is the government's mouthpiece. The few opposition newspapers have disappeared over the years. There is an independent radio station based in Europe – *La Voix de Djibouti*. Two of its journalists have been jailed in the past 12 months.

Eritrea – Africa’s biggest prison for journalists

Ever since President Issayas Afeworki closed down all the privately-owned media and jailed 11 journalists in 2001, **Eritrea** has been Africa’s biggest prison for the media. A total of 28 journalists are currently detained.

There are no longer any privately-owned media, and the state media are subject to such close surveillance that they have to conceal entire swathes of contemporary history such as the Arab Spring. Accessing reliable information is impossible in the absence of satellite and Internet connections. A few independent radio stations, such as *Radio Erena*, manage to broadcast from abroad.

Radio Erena – voice of Eritrea

President Issayas Afeworki’s crackdown in September 2001 dashed the dreams of 35 years of independence struggle in Eritrea. In a single night, privately-owned media were closed down, news ceased to circulate and the country was plunged into darkness. If they can, journalists flee the country, now Africa’s biggest prison.

With support from Reporters Without Borders, two of them, Biniam and Amanuel, founded the only independent Eritrean radio station in 2009. Operating out of a small studio in Paris, they broadcast by shortwave and satellite to the Eritrean plateaux. In a daily one-hour news show, they provide national and international news to thousands of Eritreans and breathe hope into a people robbed of its destiny.

Somalia - danger and authoritarianism

Those who had seen some improvement in **Somalia** were quickly disabused. Journalists still trying to provide objective news coverage are targeted by both terrorists and security-driven government officials. In 2013, seven journalists were the victims of terrorist attacks blamed with varying degrees of certainty on the Islamist militia Al-Shabaab. In November, Al-Shabaab deprived an entire region of television by seizing satellite dishes on the grounds they carried images that did not respect Islam. Information is seen as threat.

Unfortunately, the Somali government did not help. On the interior minister’s orders, police evicted *Radio Shabelle*, winner of the 2010 Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Prize, from its building and seized its equipment in October 2013 after a series of reports criticizing the upsurge in violence in Mogadishu. It was a double blow because the station also used the building to house its

journalists, for whom moving about the city is very dangerous. When the equipment was returned a few weeks later, it was so badly damaged as to be unusable. Not that the station can broadcast anyway, because the communication ministry refuses to give it a permit.

CONTINUING DECLINE IN CENTRAL AFRICA

In 2013, the situation of freedom of information continued to decline in Central Africa, in the region extending from the Atlantic to the Great Lakes.

A respite seems to be taking hold in the conflict in eastern **Democratic Republic of Congo** even if the situation is still tense for the media. But Central African Republic is still in the grip of fighting of unpredictable consequences. President Idriss Déby's Chad is cracking down on journalists, the climate for the media is getting tougher in Cameroon, Burundi has adopted disturbing media legislation and Equatorial Guinea continues to be a black hole for news and information.

The situation in **Equatorial Guinea**, Africa's only Spanish-speaking country, is perhaps the most extreme. No media freedom violation was reported because of the complete absence of independent media. Journalists have to censor themselves or flee abroad. Freedom of information is non-existent.

The armed conflict in **Central African Republic** led to the complete disbanding of a weakened and discredited media network. By taking sides in the conflict, the print media helped to fuel tension instead of providing reliable news and information.

Chad is rightly regarded as an authoritarian country. Its ruler of the past 23 years got even tougher in 2013, jailing three journalists on trumped-up charges for several months. Although finally released, they have not been able to go back to independent journalism. One has kept a low profile, another has become a government ally and the third has fled abroad. It was a victory for state intimidation, which helps to ensure that the country is deprived of media watchdogs.

Security grounds are used when needed to defend increased control over the media or the repressive status quo. In **Cameroon**, for example, the National Communication Council is trying to penalize coverage of the government's cooperation with **Nigeria** in combatting Boko Haram. In Chad, a newspaper editor was accused of "inciting a revolt" for reporting discontent within the army. The armed conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo has been paralyzing the rest of the country for years with the result that, while media law reform is often described as a government priority, it is never actually addressed.

Defamation laws are used to keep corruption under wraps. In eastern DRC, Nicaise Kibel'oka, the editor of the bimonthly *Les Coulisses*, has been the target of judicial harassment for the past year

over an article about customs fraud. His trial has been postponed seven times since June 2013 and the judicial proceedings have been accompanied by many irregularities. In **Angola**, the journalist Rafael Marques de Morais has been arrested and questioned several times in connection with his book *Diamantes de Sangue: Corrupção e Tortura em Angola*, which looks at the dark side of his country's diamond mining.

Some countries are working actively to make their legislation much more repressive. **Burundi** is an example. Despite civil society's protests, it approved a law in April 2013 that constitutes a grave attack on media freedom and violates all international standards. The law has a long list of vaguely defined subjects which, if addressed by a journalist, could lead to imprisonment. Neither proportionality of penalties, nor the status of journalists nor respect for the confidentiality of their sources is guaranteed. The law is all the more disturbing for being part of a legislative package that would also restrict freedom of association and political expression.

Western governments do not however seem very bothered by Burundi's growing authoritarianism. Is Africa's strategic heart doomed to sink further, with its media increasingly unable or prevented from acting as the independent watchdogs of regimes that seek more and more control?

Reporting in Nord-Kivu

Reporting in Nord-Kivu has become a daily battle. Whether governed by the M23 armed rebels or the Congolese authorities, the region's journalists are subjected to constant pressure and harassment. M23 distinguished itself by imposing total censorship, insisting on seeing newspaper issues before distribution. Six news outlets were ransacked or closed and at least seven journalists were injured or threatened when M23 was in control.

The Congolese authorities are complicit in threats against journalists in the territories they control. They also tolerate arbitrary arrests and even abductions, such as the kidnapping of a journalist who was found tied up at a roadside in Beni in October 2013. In a country with a flawed judicial system, such crimes go unpunished. The result is self-censorship, while dozens of journalists have fled to other parts of the country in search of refuge. Some continue their courageous work, but for how much longer?