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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS 2008

Mauritania

Status: Partly Free

Legal Environment: 18

Political Environment: 20

Economic Environment: 18

Total Score: 56

Mauritania's media environment has opened considerably since a bloodless coup in 2005 overthrew the existing authoritarian regime. Starting with reforms initiated by the transitional military government, authorities have subsequently passed numerous reforms to improve media freedom in the country. Reforms enacted in 2006 include the elimination of the requirement for prepublication government approval for newspapers, the granting of journalists the legal right to the protection of sources, and the establishment of the High Authority for the Press and Broadcasting (HAPA), the country's first independent media regulatory body. Although HAPA's independence is compromised by the president's ability to appoint three of the body's six members, including the chair, and it had not fulfilled its mission by year's end to foster private television and radio stations, media coverage of the March 2007 presidential election was relatively balanced, with free newspaper space and air time allotted to each candidate.

Nonetheless, despite these positive trends and the constitutional guarantee of free expression, newspapers are still subject to closure for publishing materials seen to denigrate Islam or pose a national security risk. During 2007, journalists faced the threats of detention, imprisonment, and even physical harm for publishing or broadcasting stories considered libellous.

In March, assailants, including a supporter of a failed first-round presidential candidate, raided the al-Jazeera office in Nouakchott claiming that the station had not given enough time to lesser-known candidates. In response, authorities arrested four suspects and initiated an investigation to identify the other participants. In May, Isselmou Ould Mustapha, the managing editor of the independent weekly *Tahalil Hebdo*, was threatened with physical force by the board chairman of the credit union Mutpeche, Mohammed Ould Saleck, for refusing to disclose his sources on an article accusing Saleck of corruption. Also in May, Abdel Fettah Ould Ebeidna, the managing editor of the private daily *Al-Aqsa*, was detained for four days on libel charges brought by Mohamed Ould Bouammatou, a businessman who the paper accused of being involved in a drug ring. In November, Ebeidna was sentenced to one year in prison on the charge of making a "false accusation" and fined approximately US\$ 250. At year's end, Ebeidna was out of the country with an appeal pending.

Throughout 2007, Mauritanian journalists faced other instances of harassment from prominent public figures and their associates. In August, first lady Khattou Mint El Boukhary charged the private daily *El Bedil Ethalith* with libel following a report alleging she attempted to influence hiring in the national television office. In the same month, she also accused Sidi Mohamed Ould Ebbe, the paper's editor, of libel following reports that accused her of using her public role to raise private charity funds. The first lady withdrew these libel suits in December, however. On August 16, the prime minister's bodyguards assaulted Mohamed Mahmoud Ould

Moghdad, a reporter with Radio Mauritanie, for allegedly avoiding a security check at a health ministry event. Following an investigation, the government issued a formal apology and Moghdad withdrew his complaint. On August 31, two of the first lady's body guards attacked Elvaka Ould Cheibany, a correspondent with the private daily *Nouakchott Info*, allegedly due to a report on the first lady's increasingly tense relationship with the media.

Mauritania is currently the only West African country without a private radio or television station. However, a new public television station began broadcasting in October that will devote airtime to the country's minority languages—Pular, Soninke, and Wolof. In addition to several state-controlled papers, there are numerous private daily and weekly papers. However, Mauritania's relatively low literacy rate of 51 percent limits the impact of the print media in general. Internet access is available and is not restricted by the government, although this electronic resource is only used by approximately one percent of the population.