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ERITREA

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Shortly after September 11, 2001, the history of Eritrean independent media came to an end. In 1995, after independence from Ethiopia, the first independent newspaper was established and seven more emerged in the next five years. It is reported that they enjoyed an advantage in popularity over their government-sponsored counterparts. However, as part of a larger crackdown on pro-reform forces within the government, on September 18, 2001 and the following few days the government saw to it that all independent and potentially dissenting voices in the media were silenced.

It is beyond the scope of this report to account for all the kinds of injustices being committed in Eritrea. However, as one panelist put it, MSI scores do serve as an indicator that “Things are not looking that well for Eritrea.” Another panelist summarized his view on Eritrean media with the following statement: “The humanitarian condition in Eritrea has now reached such a horrifying point that one cannot answer the questions presented in [the] MSI without, at the same time, having this odd feeling of disconnect with reality.”

The state of media in Eritrea is not at all comparable to any Sub-Saharan African country. One panelist wrote that it can only be put on par with North Korea. There is not a semblance of an independent media. Media in Eritrea have become a tool for government propaganda. In short, journalists—even those working for government media—are a liability and potential threat to “national security.”

Indeed, last year Eritrea scored the lowest of all countries studied by the MSI, not only in Africa but when compared to the countries in the Middle East and Eastern Europe studies as well. One panelist wrote, “...the first MSI Eritrea report of last year was an eye opener for Eritreans. A lot of people didn’t know or didn’t want to admit it was that bad. Everyone understands the importance of strong media sector to support governance and development—particularly in Africa.” Eritrea again scored the lowest of all countries studied in 2008.

These results very much reflect the extent of damage that has been, and is being, inflicted on the media sector and the formidable challenges Eritrea faces to develop and establish an independent media culture in the coming years.

All MSI participants were Eritreans living in exile. The MSI panelists participated remotely by completing the MSI questionnaire and being interviewed by the IREX moderator, also an Eritrean in exile. Given the geographic dispersion of the panelists, a full discussion was not held. While not all panelists asked to remain anonymous, because of the political situation in Eritrea IREX decided not to publish their names.

ERITREA AT A GLANCE

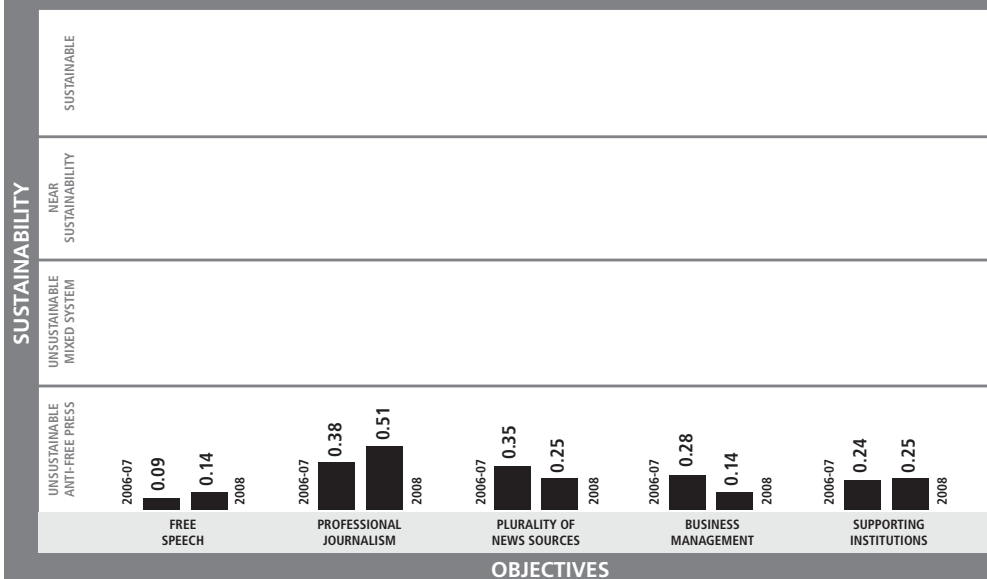
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 5,647,168 (July 2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Asmara
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Tigrinya 50%, Tigre and Kunama 40%, Afar 4%, Saho 3%, other 3% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Muslim, Coptic Christian, Roman Catholic, Protestant (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages (% of population):** Afar, Arabic, Tigre and Kunama, Tigrinya, other Cushitic languages (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2007-Atlas):** \$1.308 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2009)
- > **GNI per capita (2007-PPP):** \$620 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2009)
- > **Literacy rate:** 58.6% (male 69.9%, female 47.6%) (2003 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Isaias Afworki (since June 8, 1993)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Newspaper readership is low, but there are some radio and television stations. All of these are state-owned however
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** N/A
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** None
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 120,000 (2007 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: ERITREA



Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1):

Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2):

Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

Near Sustainability (2-3):

Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

Sustainable (3-4):

Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Eritrea Objective Score: 0.14

The legal and social norms to protect and promote free speech and access to public information are non-existent in Eritrea. Ever since its independence in 1993, the government of Eritrea has taken a negative stance on freedom of expression by overt or covert means. This may well be a culture inherited from the 30-year liberation struggle. It seems that Eritrean leadership is permanently looking out for “enemies” to fight against and uses this as the main excuse to curtail civil liberties including freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

Article 4 (1) of Eritrea’s press law, proclaimed in 1996, allows plenty of leeway to prevent the exercise of the freedom of the press, which it implies exists. Article 4 (1) (b) prohibits censorship “except under the provisions of this proclamation or with the approval of the competent court.” Further, the following section states that, “The Government may, under special circumstances, where the country, or part of it, is faced with a danger threatening public order, security and general peace caused by war, armed rebellion or public disorder or where a natural disaster ensues, by proclamation, undertake measures to censor all publications and mass media. The Government shall rescind the proclamation by another one upon the termination of the conditions warranting it.”

However, the constitution, which has not been implemented (one of the main causes of the 2001 crackdown), would have set the groundwork for freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Article 19 states, “Every person shall have the freedom of speech and expression which include freedom of the press and other media.”

In the absence of a constitution and a government interested in promoting such freedoms, the reality remains bleak. One panelist wrote, “...when we talk about the freedom of the press in Eritrea, we are talking only about a part of freedom of expression. We have to remember that the latter is a much...broader phenomenon. In a nation where any congregation of more than seven persons has been outlawed, minority religions banned, the only university in the nation closed for good, and the whole nation put under a totalitarian grip, to talk about the state of private media is a bit misleading unless it is at the same time put in context within that larger picture of pervasive repression.”

There is no broadcast licensing. Eritrea’s press law makes it quite clear that the government is the sole owner of radio and television. Article 4 (1) (d) states, “Except for radio and television, the ownership of which is reserved for the

Based on reports of international organizations and informed Eritreans who have left the country, the government is the chief, if not sole, culprit of violence against journalists.

Government, private ownership of press and all equipment of expression shall be permitted to Eritreans only.” Likewise, market entry is strictly limited, as beyond the inability to open a broadcast outlet, under the current conditions it is impossible to publish any sort of print media outside of the auspices of the government.

Based on reports of international organizations and informed Eritreans who have left the country, the government is the chief, if not sole, culprit of violence against journalists. Within a few days of the 2001 crackdown, on top of rounding up 11 members of parliament, at least 16 editors and journalists from independent newspapers were arrested and put in prison. At least four of them—Said Abdulkader, Medhane Haile, Yusuf Mohamed Ali, and Fesshaye Yohannes—have died in detention while the fate of the rest remains unknown. All are kept incommunicado in undisclosed locations.

One panelist wrote that even the “loyal” government journalists opt to leave the country whenever the opportunity arises, evidence of the constant pressure they are reported to be operating under. Some have died or been killed trying

LEGAL AND SOCIAL NORMS PROTECT AND PROMOTE FREE SPEECH AND ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION.

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

- > Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- > Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.
- > Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- > Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

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to cross the border into Sudan, while those captured are spending time in prison. A significant number of Eritreans who recently graduated from journalism programs in Eritrea have left the country.

An ex-member of the security police who fled the country reported, on a web site administered by members of the Eritrean diaspora, that four staff members of the Ministry of Information were apprehended while attempting to cross the Eritrea-Ethiopia border. Ahmed Bahja, Daniel Kibrom, Semret Sereke, and Selamawit were given prison sentences ranging from one to five years. However, in an apparent move to ease rumors that the government had imprisoned these journalists, the information minister intervened to release Bahja, who later appeared on a television show covering festivities on the eve of St. John’s Day in late September of 2007. In another section, the writer notes that such prison sentences are delivered without any legal guidelines and by an ad-hoc committee whose members have no legal background.¹

The state media enjoy legal advantages through their monopoly position although there is no legal guarantee or expectation of editorial independence.

Libel laws provide for criminal punishment of offenders. However, these provisions are not used against journalists. Journalists considered untrustworthy (there are not even any journalists left in the country that could be called “critical”) are generally arrested without charges and taken to prison.

The government does not grant any freedom of information. Rather, there is a seamless relationship between state media and the government, and the former simply releases whatever information the government desires the public should know. Veracity of this information is often doubtful.

Journalists have access to international news sources but they cannot freely relay information from these sources, particularly if it has anything to do with Eritrea.

The government does not have licensing procedures for journalists, but since they are the only employer of media professionals, by default the government defines who is, and who is not, a journalist.

¹ <http://erit-alliance.com/erit/magazines/vol.No%203%20Eng.pdf>

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Eritrea Objective Score: 0.51

Journalists in Eritrea make little effort to report fairly or present alternate views. Rather, they present what amounts to government propaganda. In a conference held in July of 2008, the president of Eritrea stated, “We are at an era where the hardest of wars are fought with media.” However true that statement might sound in our current world, it reflects a different reality when put in its proper context. When the practice of “media” is qualified by the word “state” in front, it denotes a media atmosphere in which a government is the sole owner, manufacturer, controller, and distributor of information.

For example, Eritrea’s 2008 report on meeting UN Millennium Development Goals, on health and education in particular, portrayed progress as promising and on target. Without a media able to probe and report objectively, even in a limited way, there is no method to present to the public any bit of reality to counter those claims. In other words, one of the main functions of an independent media is to hold a government accountable for its failures, shortcomings and, indeed, report on success stories as well. In Eritrea however, failure to achieve goals is usually attributed to lack of finance, expertise, or some external factors; it is not the fault of the government.

Officials use various excuses to justify this situation. As described above they rely on external “enemies.” In an interview conducted with Press TV on the October 6, 2008, Ali Abdu, the information minister, is reported to have provided another justification: “In view of the fact that the

JOURNALISM MEETS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF QUALITY.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

- > Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.
- > Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- > Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- > Journalists cover key events and issues.
- > Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.
- > Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- > Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- > Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

dominant Western media is striving to serve the interest and strategy of the big powers in violation of the ethics and norms of journalism, the voice of the majority of the world population is being muffled and marginalized.” In this respect, he underlined that the marginalized people should work in a coordinated manner so as to portray the correct picture of issues and bridge the information gap created as a result of such domination. He indicated that the agreements concluded in Tehran on media cooperation were done within this context.

Because of this situation, journalism ethics are non-existent. One simply follows the wishes of editors, who in turn are taking orders from the political bosses. Similarly, self-censorship is not simply a matter of choice, it is part of the censorship and control over the media as a whole.

Furthermore, media do not cover key events, or any event unless the government wishes it to. For example, media does not cover the thousands of Eritreans fleeing their country. Such information is only available from external sources, such as the revelations made by the escaped member of the security police, referenced above. In addition to the arrests of journalists detailed above, the author also describes the systemic extermination of the Kunama people of Eritrea. An Eritrean radio station based in South Africa and Sudan will eventually broadcast this report. However, as one panelist pointed out, the government makes frequent attempts to jam these broadcasts.

Pay for journalists is very poor. In fact, according to one panelist, media is mostly comprised of unpaid “journalists,” and their work is considered as a contribution towards time spent for national military service, therefore with minimum pay.

There is a respectable balance between news and entertainment content; however, the descriptions given by panelists on the reliability of news content do not make such balance a particular strength in the media.

In 2007, the government invested millions dollars in opening a new media center that included modern equipment.

What niche reporting exists is typically tainted by political influence. Investigative reporting is totally absent.

Radio broadcasts from outside Eritrea are raising awareness and breaking the unstated taboo imposed by the government that “Eritreans are not supposed to see, hear, or speak evil about Eritrea.”

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Eritrea Objective Score: 0.25

Minimal plurality of news exists to the extent that various forms of media, such as print, radio, and television, exist. The perspective and message are the same, however: it is the governments’ viewpoint.

Some openings do exist that people can take advantage of. Privately owned Internet cafés operate with an indeterminate, yet not oppressive, level of control. Access to satellite television is not restricted. However, according to a number of panelists, this gives a false sense of openness. Most of those who have the means and the privilege to access international sources of information are residents of the capital city and represent a negligible percentage of the Eritrean population.

When it comes to radio transmissions from outside Eritrea however, anyone who owns a radio can have access to all

MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE AND OBJECTIVE NEWS.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- > Citizens’ access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- > Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- > A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.

Further, media ownership is wholly transparent: the government owns all of it, effectively creating a monopoly conglomerate.

kinds of sources from anywhere. Radio broadcasts from outside Eritrea are raising awareness and breaking the unstated taboo imposed by the government that "Eritreans are not supposed to see, hear, or speak evil about Eritrea."

Radios are cheap and available to most of the population. A panelist reported that the government made several attempts in mid-2008 to jam Voice of Meselna Delina, a satellite radio station based in South Africa and run by Eritreans. Voice of Meselna Delina is financed by Eritreans living abroad and reports on controversial news and comments for just half an hour a day. For lack of finances, it is now confined to broadcasting on the Internet.

The media content provided by government media outlets mainly focuses on foreign news, sports, entertainment, the "good" news about government-run development projects, and the stalled border issue between Eritrea and Ethiopia and its effect on the economy and security of Eritrea. None of the "bad" news is raised or discussed or, if it is, it is done in a way that will not incriminate the government.

Erina is a state-run news agency, but it is not independent. There are no local independent news agencies. Foreign journalists are closely monitored and are given little or no access to information on the country's situation, which results in the absence of credible and objective news and reports about Eritrea.

There is no independent production of broadcast news, and no independent broadcasters to distribute it if it existed. Further, media ownership is wholly transparent: the government owns all of it, effectively creating a monopoly conglomerate. Foreign ownership of Eritrean media is prohibited by Part 11 of 1994 Press Proclamation Law, which states: "private ownership of press and all equipment of expression shall be permitted to Eritreans only."

As reported last year, various languages are used in the media, although the government clearly prefers the use of Tigrinya. However, this is not for the purpose of covering minority specific issues apart from culture. Discussion of minority grievances that may exist is not allowed and news is the same as that the government prepares in Tigrinya.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Eritrea Objective Score: 0.14

Media are run as an arm of the government, not as profit-seeking businesses; their revenue stream is largely limited to state budget allocations. Advertising agencies do not exist, but there is a limited advertising market centered on the local catering and travel industries. Such advertisements appear infrequently. Newspapers also generate limited revenue from sales of copies.

Overall, however, the extreme poverty in the country is a severe limitation on both supply of advertising and their likely usefulness and impact on the public. Should the political situation change, this weakness would severely hamper any initiatives to reignite independent media.

In terms of management generally, there is little specific information but financial accountability is weak in all government ministries.

Panelists had not heard of efforts at conducting serious market research or measurement of circulation or broadcast audience.

INDEPENDENT MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED BUSINESSES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

- > Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- > Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- > Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- > Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.
- > Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- > Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Eritrea Objective Score: 0.25

There are no independent associations, media-related or otherwise, except those affiliated with the ruling party. The government does not allow international human rights NGOs to operate in the country, either.

Regarding journalism education, panelists report that there is a new diploma-level program offered. Although it is not reported on national news, there is evidence that a number of the first batch of young Eritrean graduates of journalism, a course of study that was primarily established to boost and serve government propaganda, have left the country. Reliable sources indicate that the number of those who are escaping is increasing.

As with the media itself, the government controls all printing presses and channels of distribution for both print and broadcast media.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- > Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of newsprint and printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

List of Panel Participants

All MSI participants were Eritreans living in exile. The MSI panelists participated remotely by completing the MSI questionnaire and being interviewed by the IREX moderator, also an Eritrean in exile. Given the geographic dispersion of the panelists, a full discussion was not held. While not all panelists asked to remain anonymous, because of the political situation in Eritrea IREX decided not to publish their names.