

The State of Media in Sudan

SUMMARY

Broadcasters and print media face challenges in Sudan that include government restrictions, logistical hurdles, lack of security, and financial constraints. Overall, the political situation in which the media operate in Sudan has improved slightly in the past few years, but significant roadblocks remain to establishing a free, independent, and unconstrained media.

Journalists encounter a variety of difficulties as they report news and information. They generally are required to check with local officials and obtain travel documents. In some cases, the terrain makes it difficult to travel, and they are subject to threats. Several Sudanese journalists said they felt pressure from officials seeking to restrict the free flow of information.

Several media outlets in Sudan are owned and controlled by the government. There are a number of independent outlets, reaching a limited portion of the Sudanese population, primarily in large cities, but they are heavily regulated and self-censor due to fear of government harassment. Citizens in rural areas, where many do not speak Arabic or English, the two main languages of media in Sudan, have little access to news. Current efforts to promote community radio throughout the country have met with limited success, primarily due to government restrictions, especially in the north and in Darfur.

Nevertheless, Sudan's media sector has the potential to contribute to the development of a peaceful democratic system within the country.

Training for journalists, the development of self-sustaining media outlets, support from international organizations, and efforts to bring about change through, among other things, full implementation of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, can lead to significant improvements in Sudan and provide tremendous benefits to the people, including increased access to information.

BACKGROUND

On September 12, 2007, the Center for International Media Assistance and the Africa Program at the National Endowment for Democracy convened a discussion on the status of media in Sudan. Approximately 50 representatives of international organizations, media development implementers, Sudanese and international journalists, the Government of the Republic of Sudan, and the Government of Southern Sudan came together to discuss the current status of the media in Sudan. The discussion centered on print, broadcast, and new media throughout Sudan, including Northern Sudan, Southern Sudan, and Darfur.

Presenters included: Jonathan Karl, senior national security correspondent at ABC News; Ladu Jada Gubek, civil rights leader, teacher, and Sudanese journalist; Elmgidad Gebril, broadcast news editor at Radio Sawa; Deng Deng Nhial, trade and investment officer of the Government of Southern Sudan's Mission to the United States; and Seifeldin Omer Yasin, press and information counselor of the Embassy of the Republic of Sudan.



The format of the event was presentations followed by discussion. This report outlines the presentations and discussions in the order in which they occurred.

SUDAN'S MEDIA ENVIRONMENT: THE GOVERNMENT PERSPECTIVE

Presentations:

Seifeldin Omer Yasin, Press and Information Counselor, Embassy of the Republic of Sudan. Yasin told participants:

- The role of the National Press Council is to serve as a regulatory entity overseeing the issuance of media licenses, conducting trainings and “raising standards for journalists.” Two-thirds of the council’s members are elected by journalists, and one-third is appointed by the government.
- The council also is a necessary organizing body that can coordinate the media in an often disorganized situation. “We are a very delicate country with a lot of delicate issues,” he said. “If you let everything go [without regulation], there would be chaos.”
- Media in Sudan currently include six television stations, five of which are independently run. Only the state-run National Corporation for Radio and Television station, reaching 80 percent of the country, has a broad range. Several of the independent stations broadcast into Sudan from nearby countries because of the government’s strict licensing laws. Of the nine radio stations in Sudan, one is government-owned. Twenty-seven independent newspapers operate within Sudan.

Deng Deng Nhial, Trade and Investment Officer, Government of Southern Sudan’s Mission to the United States. Nhial told participants:

- The Ministry of Information, which controls licensing and other aspects of government regulation of the media, plays a central role in the development

of the Government of Southern Sudan’s media policy.

- Several bills have been submitted to the Southern Sudan Parliament on media issues, including on establishing an independent broadcasting authority, a journalist association, and a foreign journalist accreditation office, and on freedom of information laws. It was unclear when decisions on these bills were expected.
- While Southern Sudan has its own laws and political system, it remains under the authority of the Government of National Unity. Consequently, media licensing is a two-step process in which the Government of National Unity must approve a media outlet after a license has been granted by the Government of Southern Sudan. A number of licenses that have been approved for Southern Sudan have either been denied or delayed indefinitely by the national government. However, this would likely change in the future once the two governments reach agreement on media licenses.
- International support is needed in order to develop a media infrastructure. This could help educate citizens on the importance of independent media, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, and the 2009 upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections.
- There have been “regrettable” instances of journalists being arrested or otherwise threatened. He called these incidents isolated and said that the Ministry of Information, along with the rest of the Government of Southern Sudan, is committed to upholding the law.

Discussion

A number of the participants were critical of the National Press Council’s role in restricting the topics on which Sudanese journalists can and cannot report. Several Sudanese journalists said that the national government’s definition of “sensitive issues” was too broad and restricted

reporters immensely. While Yasin reiterated his belief that the council is necessary to organize the press, a number of participants contended it was not responsive and has not protected media rights as guaranteed by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. All the participants agreed with the government representatives' assertion that the standards of journalists need to be raised throughout the country.

Several participants also complained that journalists have little to no access to government officials and when they do they are not likely to get a response on important issues.

REPORTING IN SUDAN

Presentations:

Elmigdad Gebril, Broadcast News Editor, Radio Sawa. Gebril told participants:

- Both northern and southern governments have made some small movements to ease restrictions.
- Broadcast media (radio and TV) have been corrupted by government-run stations so that in Sudan “the term journalism means newspapers,” because “broadcasting has been serving the ruling powers ... and it has been telling people what to believe” for so long that the Sudanese people see radio and TV broadcasting as primarily tools of the government.
- Most independent radio and TV stations do not broadcast news for fear of getting in trouble with the government. They primarily broadcast music.
- Overregulation remains a significant problem.
- Sudanese journalists need more training opportunities.
- Sudan lacks research institutions that provide journalists with surveys, studies, databases, and other reference materials.

Ladu Jada Gubek, Civil Rights Leader, Teacher, and Sudanese Journalist. Gubek told participants:

- Sudan is moving in the right direction, but still has a long way to go.
- There have been several instances when journalists' rights were threatened. In one incident, however, Salva Kiir Mayardit, the president of the Government of Southern Sudan, stepped in to protect a newspaper journalist's rights after the journalist was arrested.
- Freedom of expression is a new concept in Sudan, and training of journalists is needed.
- Most Sudanese media are located in the main cities and use Arabic and English. Consequently, as most Sudanese live in rural areas and speak local languages, the media do not reach them, even if they can receive broadcasts or newspapers. Rural populations have a limited understanding of the news in Sudan or in the world.
- Local media, especially community radio in local languages that could reach illiterate populations, is needed.

Jonathan Karl, Senior National Security Correspondent, ABC News. Karl told participants:

- It is very difficult to report news from Sudan as a foreign journalist.
- Another challenge is convincing news organizations that it is worth the time and expense to report from Sudan.
- Advance planning in Sudan is nearly impossible. Reporting from the countryside, especially from Darfur, requires improvisation when it comes to travel arrangements.
- The Sudan government's attempts to “protect foreigners” also restrict their mobility.
- There is a general “culture of silence” in Sudan, where people are afraid to talk

about sensitive issues, especially with foreigners.

- Several foreign workers with nongovernmental organizations have demurred from speaking for fear of retribution from the government against them or their organizations.

Discussion

Many participants agreed that media freedoms in Sudan, while more secure than in the past, are still under serious threat. Basic journalistic practices such as vetting of information and research become extremely difficult in most parts of the country as a result of continuing conflict and the everyday dangers of life in Sudan, one participant said. A Sudanese journalist expressed similar frustration with the logistical challenges of working in Sudan. “Moving from one area to another is a huge task. Anywhere you go, you have to report to the authorities.”

An official with the Government of Southern Sudan (GOSS) conceded that while there has been significant improvement in recent years, “there are still some regrettable incidences of journalists being arrested.” However, both he and a representative of the government of the Republic of Sudan blamed these problems on local authorities who are ignorant of the law. These incidents are isolated, the GOSS official said, and do not reflect “the commitment of the Ministry of Information to uphold the law . . . The media has a big role to play in educating the public of their rights and the importance of the rule of law,” so that local authorities better understand media rights and respect the rule of law. Several participants disagreed that this was simply a matter of local misunderstandings, contending that problems related more to the restrictions of the government as a whole, along with its inability or unwillingness to enforce certain aspects of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Many participants agreed that a general lack of understanding of the role of media often contributes to undue restrictions on journalists and reporters, particularly by local officials.

MEDIA DEVELOPMENT IN SUDAN

Discussion

Several representatives of international organizations operating in Sudan discussed their experiences developing media throughout the country. A few have been able to assist in the development of community radio stations in Southern Sudan, but have been thwarted by government restrictions in Northern Sudan and Darfur. Several participants (both Sudanese and foreign) described how their media outlets were forced to operate outside the country because they were unable to get a license to work within Sudan.

Several participants agreed that radio holds significant potential to reach a significant number of Sudanese, especially those who do not have access to or cannot read newspapers. Particularly in the rural areas, community radio could be expanded—especially in local dialects—to better inform local communities and provide a forum for community members to share ideas and speak about issues. The primary obstacle to this expansion is government restrictions on licensing, participants said.

Nearly all participants agreed that the Sudanese people are uninformed about the political situation, including the status of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and the upcoming elections. “Both the GOSS [Government of Southern Sudan] and the GNU [Government of National Unity] have an interest in promoting the CPA through the media,” said Dave Peterson, Senior Director of the Africa program at the National Endowment for Democracy. “To see more collaboration for the Sudanese people would be a key to greater acceptance and credibility for the CPA around the country” and would also encourage participation in the elections, he said. The government representatives agreed that more needs to be done to raise awareness, but placed the responsibility for this on the media, rather than the government. Several international organizations’ representatives described their efforts to promote understanding of the CPA throughout Sudan, but said the government needs to do more to help this process.

GOING FORWARD

A number of participants suggested ways in which the environment for the media in Sudan could be improved. There was not a general consensus on recommendations, but some of the suggestions raised by individuals included:

- **Training Programs:** Journalists' professional standards need to be raised. Existing training programs for journalists and media managers need to be expanded, and others should be developed.
- **Community Radio:** Government restrictions on community radio should be lifted, especially in northern Sudan and Darfur. Foreign governments should pressure the Sudanese governments to ease restrictions on media licensing to allow for community radio development.
- **Local Authority-Media Cooperation:** The media should educate and engage local authorities in a dialogue to help them better understand the role of the media in Sudanese society. In addition, the national and Southern Sudanese governments should work with authorities to ensure they understand laws and are prepared to protect the rights of journalists.
- **United Nations Assistance:** Dissemination of information is key to keeping the peace in Sudan, so both the governments and international organizations should encourage the United Nations to emphasize media development in its efforts to preserve peace in Sudan.
- **Promotion of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA):** The Sudanese governments and international organizations should work harder to promote understanding of the CPA throughout Sudan and should improve the media's capacity to disseminate information for this purpose.

*Summary by: Spencer Hayne
CIMA Staff*

The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), an initiative of the National Endowment for Democracy, works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of media assistance programs by providing information, building networks, conducting research, and highlighting the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies around the world. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development.

CIMA convenes working groups, discussions, and panels on a variety of topics in the field of media development and assistance. The center also issues reports and recommendations based on working group discussions and other investigations. These reports aim to provide policymakers, as well as donors and practitioners, with ideas for bolstering the effectiveness of media assistance.

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