



International Research & Exchanges Board

- [EDUCATION](#)
- [INDEPENDENT MEDIA](#)
- [CIVIL SOCIETY DEVELOPMENT](#)

Search:

- [About IREX](#)

- [Overview](#)
- [Leadership](#)
- [History](#)
- [Partners](#)
- [Career Opportunities](#)

- [Programs](#)

- [Search IREX Programs](#)
- [Grant Opportunities](#)
- [Host Opportunities](#)

- [Newsroom](#)

- [Recent IREX News](#)
- [IREX in the Press](#)
- [Media Assistance](#)
- [IREX Mailing List](#)

- [Resources](#)

- [Contact](#)

- [IREX DC](#)
- [Regional Offices](#)
- [Field Offices](#)

Home Subscribe

Media Sustainability Index (MSI) Africa

- [MSI Overview](#)

- [Africa](#)

- [Europe & Eurasia](#)

- [Middle East & North Africa](#)

▪ [In the Press](#)

▪ [Contact](#)

MSI Africa 2006-2007

 [E-mail this page](#)

ERITREA

- [Introduction](#)
- [Objective 1: Free Speech](#)
- [Objective 2: Professional Journalism](#)
- [Objective 3: Plurality of News Sources](#)
- [Objective 4: Business Management](#)
- [Objective 5: Supporting Institutions](#)
- [Panel Participants](#)

INTRODUCTION

Overall Country Score: 0.28

Eritrea became an Italian colony in 1890, was administered by the UK from 1941 to 1952, and was federated with Ethiopia until 1961, when Ethiopia made Eritrea a province. This sparked a war of independence that lasted until 1991. Following a UN-supervised referendum, Eritrea became independent in 1993.

The Proclamation for Freedoms, Functions, and Objectives of the Press in Eritrea became effective in June 1994. Eritrea's constitution was ratified in 1997 but has not yet been implemented; a timeframe was not imposed on the government. The head of the Constitutional Commission later acknowledged that the Commission had mistakenly trusted the government to simply do so, and the government has delayed it on the grounds of national security.

In 1997, new independent newspapers began to circulate. Given the political, social, and economic state of affairs after a 30-year armed struggle for independence, Eritreans looked on the beginnings of press freedom as quite an achievement. Sadly, it was a short-lived spring.

Conflict with Ethiopia reignited in May 1998 and ended in December 2000. Shortly thereafter, the government promised to hold democratic elections in December 2001 and created an election commission. A month later, however, the commissioner was relieved of his duties without explanation, rendering the commission inactive. In May, 15 government ministers and other officials wrote an open letter to the president pleading for a national congress and hoping to rein in executive power. Over the next few months, the few newspapers facilitated public debate on the issue with on-going discussion and dissemination of information. On September 18, 2001, the president ordered the signatories of the letter and at least a dozen journalists be arrested, claiming that an Ethiopian threat was still real and dissenting voices a menace to national security. Some are reported to have died in prison while the rest are held incommunicado in unknown locations.

Today, there is no private media in Eritrea, making it unfortunately unique among the 37 African countries studied by the MSI. State-owned newspapers, television, radio, and Internet sites report to the Ministry of Information and are the only legal sources of information in the country. These sources serve the dictates of the government. Many former journalists have left the country, are in hiding, or are imprisoned.

The scores for Eritrea reflect a media system that has been completely subsumed into the role of public relations for the state. Extremely low scores in Objectives 2 through 5—none was higher than 0.38—show a media currently incapable of taking on the role of the “fourth estate.” The pitiful score of 0.09 in Objective 1, free speech, provides the main reason for this state of affairs. The photograph at left, of an exiled Eritrean journalist’s office, shows the empty chair that is the Eritrean media today. Simply put, Eritrean media are in exile.

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.

OBJECTIVE 1: FREE SPEECH

Score: 0.09

The score for this objective reflects a state of total suppression of freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and other civil liberties imposed by the government. A majority of indicators scored a flat 0. Indicator 8, media access to foreign news sources, led all indicators, but even then did not crack half a point.

Article 19 of the Eritrean Constitution, ratified in 1997 but never implemented, covers “Freedom of Conscience, Religion, Expression of Opinion, Movement, Assembly and Organisation.” It provides for, among other liberties, freedom of thought and conscience; freedom of speech and expression, including “freedom of the press and other media,” and; “the right of access to information.” The 1994 Press Proclamation Law of Eritrea is more restrictive. Part 11 leaves open the possibility of banning newspapers and censorship with court approval. It allows for censoring all publications and mass media by government decree in emergency situations. Finally, it sets aside radio and television ownership as a government monopoly.

On September 18, 2001 the Press Proclamation Law was revoked and the government not only closed down all independent newspapers but also began literally hunting down every editor and journalist. Within weeks, it managed to detain at least a dozen of them; reports on where they are now vary, but a number have been confirmed dead. One of the first reported deaths was that of Yohannes Fessehaye, a veteran of the liberation war who managed to establish one of the earliest newspapers, *Setit*.

Ever since the crackdown, the pressure on silencing dissent has been escalating in various sectors. Anyone criticizing government policy runs the risk of being jailed or made to disappear without due process of law. “Very senior government ministers (more than 10 of them) are detained since 2001 for just expressing their views (which was different from that of the government) on the private press.... One can imagine the lack of freedom of speech for the general population if these senior ministers, including the deputy president, are denied that basic right,” wrote one panelist.

Another wrote, “There is no freedom of speech. If journalists oppose the government policy, or write critical articles, it is considered to be a crime and the punishment is imprisonment, torture and disappearance. The Eritrean public who live inside the country are terrorized and oppressed by the cruel regime and they have not been able to protest openly against the human rights abuses which have been perpetrated by the state.” Panelists characterized the crackdown and its aftermath as the most devastating event in Eritrea’s short history of independence.

Press freedom had not been secure previous to September 2001. At different times before the crackdown, the government raised issues of national security as a reason to discourage dissent. When it proved impossible to hold back the tide, the government invoked the state of emergency loophole provisions of the Press Proclamation Law. This was their justification for the closure of private newspapers and imprisonment of those seen as critics. The government also began questioning the sources of funding for the newspapers, saying that they were funded by “foreign agents.”

This situation has not abated, and journalists for the state are not immune. The International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) has documented several recent arrests. In November 2006, several

journalists employed by the state defected. Shortly thereafter, at least nine journalists were arrested on suspicion of maintaining contact with those who had left. A few who were released remain under surveillance. In June and August 2007, different employees of state broadcasting were imprisoned after being caught trying to flee the country.

There is no licensing of broadcast media in Eritrea, as the Press Proclamation Law explicitly states that broadcast media ownership is “reserved for the government.” Before the September 2001 suspension of the Press Proclamation Law, newspapers did require a license. At this time, however, according to one panelist, “...no private media are allowed and no license is issued from the government.” Naturally, there is no market entry as covered by Indicator 3, either.

Violence against journalists and the media occurs at the hands of police and other security personnel during and after arrest. Journalists are held in prisons that international human rights groups have called “concentration camps.” They are held incommunicado and are reportedly subject to inhumane conditions and torture. According to IFEX, there are unconfirmed reports that at least three journalists have died while imprisoned.

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. Time of detention is arbitrary. One panelist wrote, “Journalists detained by the regime have never been brought before a court of law and no charges are put forward against them despite continued pleas from international human rights organizations to release or try them fairly for any alleged offences.”

Access to information is supply, rather than demand, driven. “The ruling party exercises a full monopoly on information and it releases information that serves its interests,” one panelist stated.

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.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Score: 0.38

Although scoring better than Objective 1, in absolute terms Objective 2 received a very low score from panelists. The only indicator to exceed half a point was Indicator 6, balance of news and entertainment programming.

“The use of media outlets in Eritrea is mainly for the promotion of the ruling party’s image, in particular that of the president. The country’s persistent economic hardship, food insufficiency, hyperinflation, human rights abuses, and government incompetence are replaced by images of the president inaugurating agricultural or cultural projects.” These words by one of the panelists sums up news reporting in Eritrea. What is not reported, people only learn through word of mouth and rumor.

Objective and well-sourced reporting does not have deep roots in Eritrea. Before independence, the media was based in the so-called “liberated areas” and under the control of the liberation movement. The trained reporters in these areas who could provide the nucleus of a professional press corps are either in jail, in exile, or have been forced to work for state media where they cannot practice what good habits they may have learned.

Regarding journalism ethics, one panelist remarked, “There is only government owned media. The only journalistic standard they follow seems to be excessive deference to the ruling regime.”

In discussing self-censorship, one panelist wrote, “The journalists and editors who work for the government exercise self- censorship massively. Mostly not because they believe in the government policies, but for personal safety: they know their fate if they are slightly out of the government line.”

Key events are defined by the government and are covered in the media. This is typically news about road construction, hospitals, schools, training programs and seminars of various kinds, health and agricultural project achievements, meetings of government officials often chaired by the president, the president’s travels within the country, and his departure for, or arrival in, a foreign country.

Journalists in Eritrea typically earn minimal salaries. “Some of the asylum-seeking journalists complain that they were put under strict surveillance and were often forced to work under low or no payment,” wrote one panelist regarding journalists’ salaries. However, “Corruption is rare,” said another.

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. However, one panelist wrote that, “The non-Tigrinya [dominant language of Eritrea] sections of the government media are even put at a greater disadvantage due to denial of adequate resources and budget and the absence of qualified and skilled professionals.”

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

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Score: 0.35

The score for this indicator suffered due to the total control of the domestic media by the government. Indicators 3, 4, and 5—which measure the degree to which state media reflect the views of the political spectrum, the activity of independent news agencies, and private broadcasters produce their own news and information programming—all scored 0. Indicator 2, citizen access to news, and Indicator 7, social interests represented in the media and minority language information sources, scored better. Indicator 2 was the only indicator in all five objectives to exceed 1, though just barely.

In describing plurality of news sources, one panelist wrote that multiple news sources existed “only on the internet... there are two newspapers and one magazine in the country, all owned by the government.” There are also two radio stations and one television channel. As mentioned above, these are state owned as well.

In the absence of private and independent news sources, it is unlikely that people in Eritrea can become informed about local, national, or international developments. The Internet might be one exception. Eritrea is probably the last country to join the Internet community, not because it was a newly independent country but, as one panelist put it, as a deliberate attempt by the government to control the flow of information and hamper public participation in governance. However, one panelist wrote, “In October 2004, the government moved further to restrict access to information by bringing all private Internet cafés in Eritrea under government control, claiming that they were a danger to the morals of young people who could use them to access pornography.” Further, according to another panelist, “The digital divide between the minority who can afford and know how to use a PC and the majority without access also hinders fair distribution of information.”

One panelist wrote: “What the government is afraid of is news that targets it with systematic consistency. First, it is deadly afraid of news *coming out* of the nation: it is suspicious of all foreign correspondents

stationed in the country. Many of them have already been expelled under the slightest pretext. And second, it is scared of the Internet. Not only can people easily Google up all the information they need in a systematic way (something that they cannot do with a satellite dish), they can also surf through all the opposition websites. But few people own a computer, and fewer still can afford the Internet. Further, it has restricted the use of Internet to where it [can] supervise it, be it at schools or Internet cafés. It is even known that it keeps stalking people who frequented the handful of Internet cafés.”

Because of general poverty, the inability to access news would be a weakness in this objective if viewpoints other than the government’s were available. In general, people wishing to get the government’s news can find at least one avenue. Accessing other points of view means accessing the Internet, as described above, or foreign electronic media. Those who can afford satellite television have the choice to watch other channels, but very few can afford this luxury. Radio broadcasts beamed into Eritrea by opposition groups are routinely jammed. One panelist noted, “Although the government jams opposition radio, it has neither a law against listening to foreign media nor does it censor it. It is not clear whether this is due to lack of resources or because Eritrea is rarely in the news.”

Regarding the indicator covering state media reflecting the views of the political spectrum, one panelist wrote, “The Eritrean state media serve one purpose only: to advance the message that the government is doing a good job and that the people love and respect the government. When it is not doing this, it is telling its audience of all sorts of nefarious activities that the ‘enemy’ is engaged in. Most of the time, the enemy is the government of Ethiopia. Occasionally, others appear on the enemy list including, lately, the United States.”

Print and broadcast media along with government Internet sites focus mainly on a limited set of topics. These include government construction projects; presidential travel and state visits; government meetings and their resolutions or success stories; documentaries on the history of the armed struggle for independence; entertainment and cultural programs, including modern or traditional styles of music; the looming dangers of the border demarcation impasse between Eritrea and Ethiopia and the perpetual need for vigilance; selective coverage of international news, and; denials regarding unfavorable news reports.

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.

Media ownership is 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.”

“The government owned media does use different local languages to indicate representation of the country’s ethnic diversity. However, this effort is artificial and does not go beyond the recitation of less objective news and analysis. The overwhelming broadcasting time and space, including dramas, are presented mainly in one language (Tigrinya), which is the preferred language of the ruling regime and one of the nine Eritrean languages,” stated one panelist. Another wrote, “...the government, although for its propaganda interests, gives to all ethnic nationalities in the country access to broadcast in their own language. And this may give them a sense of involvement even if it made it for the wrong reasons.”

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Score: 0.28

Observed one panelist, “Most of the questions posed in this section are not applicable.” All indicators scored poorly. Only Indicator 3, advertising agencies support an advertising market, exceeded half a point.

Media are run as an arm of the government, not as profit-seeking businesses; their revenue stream is largely limited to state budget allocations. In terms of management generally, there is little specific information but financial accountability is weak in all government ministries.

“There are no privately owned media or advertising agencies in the country. But there is limited advertising of local businesses mainly on catering and travel (Eritrean Airlines), which are produced and broadcast on an irregular basis, noted one panelist. Another wrote, “In a nation where most of the enterprises are owned by the nation, and where there are scarcities of all types of goods, advertisement as we know it hardly makes sense.” Newspapers also generate limited revenue from sales of copies.

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

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Score: 0.24

“There is no civil society in Eritrea. Period. Thus, there are no independent associations, journalistic or otherwise. The only ‘associations’ are affiliated with the ruling party. Thus, the ‘youth association,’ ‘women’s association,’ and ‘workers’ association’ are no more than franchises of the ruling party that advance the slogans of the ruling party.” The words of this panelist summarize well the reasons why this Objective scored so low and why the first three indicators, covering trade associations, professional associations, and support from NGOs, each received scores of 0. In addition to the situation as described by the panelist, 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. One of the panelists relayed the message given to the first graduating class by the minister of information in September 2007:

“...the ministry will step up its endeavors to achieve the goal of serving as a bridge towards promoting the Eritrean government’s objective of building a responsible media with strong and extensive coverage that would provide nationals with balanced, accurate, and timely information, as well as enabling citizens inside the country and abroad get acquainted with the vision, policy, and work program of the nation’s leadership and ensuring active popular participation....”

Given past trends of media development in Eritrea, this would appear to be another indication that the government will only invest in reinforcing its own media to further its agenda.

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

PANEL PARTICIPANTS

While not all panelists asked to remain anonymous, because of the political situation in Eritrea IREX decided not to publish their names.