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ERITREA

The outlook for the media in Eritrea is too bleak to even provide the most rudimentary indicators of sustainability. In previous MSI studies, Eritrea scored the lowest of all countries studied, and it seemed hard to imagine how the situation could get any worse. Yet again in 2009, Eritrea has been blighted by more negative developments.

State-run media—the only existing media for the past nine years—dispenses only entertainment programs and news that flatters the government. Coverage of events or news that questions or criticizes the government is censored as a threat to national security. Some foreign-based radio broadcasts and websites are blocked, and the government's active network of secret services monitors e-mail and other communications. Government-sponsored newspapers, magazines, or websites largely restrict coverage to issues of Eritrea's sovereignty, national unity, self-reliance, and development projects.

Yet in 2009, so much more has happened in Eritrea, such as UN sanctions on Eritrea for its role in arming anti-government forces in Somalia and its military incursion into Djibouti. Also, an international conference on the role of US and EU policy on Eritrea, organized by the European External Panel of Advisors (EEPA) in Brussels, drew participation from a number of Eritreans and officials from Europe, the United States, and Africa. Topics included in the discussions were the Eritrea-Ethiopia border, the need to strengthen Eritrean civil society, and gross violations of human rights being committed in Eritrea. Both events stirred debate among Eritreans while highlighting the gravity of the increasingly intractable Eritrean predicament.

In the face of relentless government control on literally all sectors of social activity, news critical of the government or events such as the EEPA conference can only be reported from sources based outside Eritrea. Despite the shutdown of independent media inside Eritrea in September 2001, diaspora media have gradually risen over the past 10 years. Eritreans living abroad—individuals, civic and religious organizations, activists, political groups, entrepreneurs, writers, and poets—use the Internet for blogging, radio, video, music, chat rooms, polling, campaigning, information sharing, and organizing events and demonstrations in "democratic" countries. The Internet has become the main hub to communicate, raise, and debate issues.

However, a free Internet is unavailable to most within Eritrea.

Overall, Eritrea has no sustainable independent media infrastructure and does not exhibit any intention to set up, invite, and improve the conditions for establishing and encouraging a culture of independent media.

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

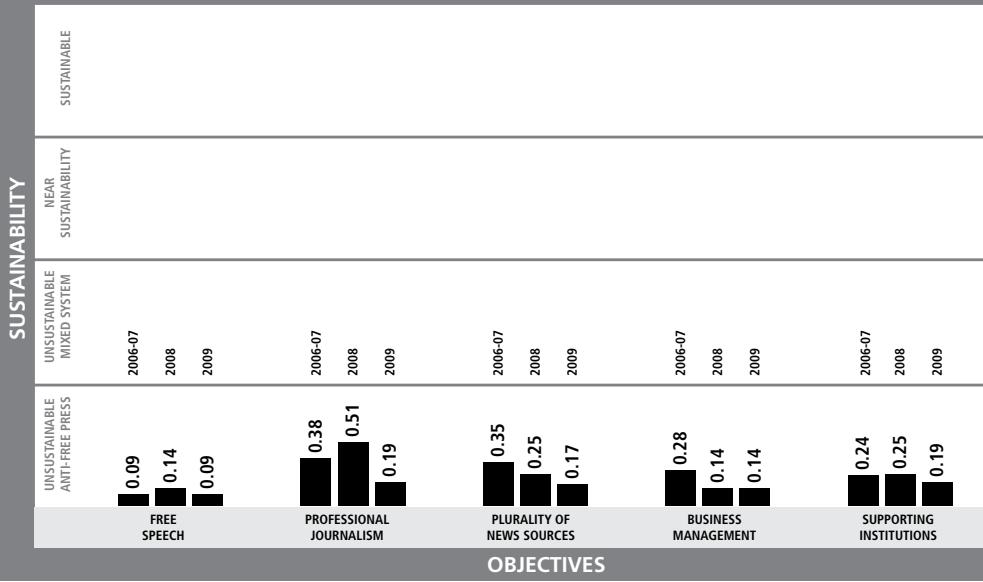
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 5,792,984 (July 2010 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **Capital city:** Asmara
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Tigrinya 50%, Tigre and Kunama 40%, Afar 4%, Saho (Red Sea coast dwellers) 3%, other 3% (CIA World Factbook)
- > **Religions:** Muslim, Coptic Christian, Roman Catholic, Protestant (CIA World Factbook)
- > **Languages:** Afar, Arabic, Tigre and Kunama, Tigrinya, other Cushitic languages (CIA World Factbook)
- > **GNI (2009-Atlas):** \$1.492 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2010)
- > **GNI per capita (2009-PPP):** \$660 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2010)
- > **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; there are some radio and television stations. All are state-owned.
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** N/A
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** None
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 200,000 (2008 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: 0.09

Legal and social norms to protect and promote free speech and access to public information do not exist in Eritrea. The state of media in Eritrea is no different, if not worse, from what has been going on since September 2001—when the previous, relatively tolerable press law was rendered invalid. As one panelist put it, “The president [Isaias Afworki] has, on many occasions, repeatedly made it clear that there is no need for private media and freedom of speech.”

Article 4 of Eritrea’s 1996 press law gives the government plenty of reach to limit press freedom. For example, it prohibits censorship—“except under the provisions of this proclamation or with the approval of the competent court.” The press law also outlines circumstances for the government to censor the mass media when national security is threatened—an excuse it regularly cites by pointing to the still-unresolved border issue with Ethiopia.

Although the Eritrean constitution (ratified, but never implemented) provides for the freedom of speech and the freedom of the press, the government has strictly restricted the establishment and practice of independent media and freedom of speech. As a panelist from last year’s MSI study noted, “In a nation where any congregation of more than seven people has been outlawed, minority religions banned, the only university in the nation closed for good, and the

Although libel laws provide for the criminal punishment of offenders, these provisions are not generally used against journalists. Generally, if the government questions a journalist’s loyalty, the journalist is simply arrested and taken to prison.

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.”

Also reported in last year’s MSI, there is no broadcast licensing; the government is the sole owner of radio and television. Similarly, market entry is closed; in the current setting it is impossible to open a nongovernmental broadcasting outlet or publication.

There are no public or legal institutions to speak of. According to one participant, literally anything that veers from the government’s message is punishable by imprisonment, torture, or disappearance. Most violence against journalists can be traced to the government. In its 2009 *Freedom of the Press* country report on Eritrea, Freedom House noted, “The country remained one of the worst jailers of journalists in the world, with 13 journalists in prison as of December 1, 2008, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Torture and unsanitary conditions are the norm in prisons where journalists are being held.” All prisoners are held incommunicado in closed locations. It is known that several journalists arrested in September 2001, when the government shut down the private press, died in detention. One of the journalists arrested at the time, a reporter named Dawit Isaac with Swedish citizenship, remains in jail, and international organizations have been denied access to him or information about his condition, despite reports of his failing health.¹

Many government journalists also opt to leave the country when opportunities arise. A significant number have left the country, others died or were killed attempting to cross the border into Sudan—while others were captured and sent to prison.

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.

¹ “Eritrea: Dawit Isaac hospitalized, denied visits.” February 23, 2009. International PEN website: <http://www.internationalpen.org.uk/index.cfm?objectid=A355E9F3-3048-676E-26F588DE206C1429> (Accessed October 29, 2010)

The government media policy, under the title "Challenges for Preserving Media Sovereignty," focuses on global economic inequality as a pretext to justify control of national media.

As reported last year, as a monopoly, the state media enjoy legal advantages. There is no legal guarantee or expectation of editorial independence.

Although libel laws provide for the criminal punishment of offenders, these provisions are not generally used against journalists. Generally, if the government questions a journalist's loyalty, the journalist is simply arrested and taken to prison.

According to one panelist, the government controls access to information that should be available to the public. Furthermore, it has curbed public access to information by spreading a substantial number of security agents across the capital, Asmara, and other small towns to spy on anyone who follows external news that contradicts or criticizes government views or policies.

Although journalists are not forbidden from accessing international news sources, they cannot freely relay information from foreign sources, especially if it relates at all to Eritrea.

As explained in last year's MSI, while the government does not have licensing procedures for journalists, as they are the only employer of media professional, by default the government defines who is, and who is not, a journalist.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Eritrea Objective Score: 0.19

As independent media are nonexistent, all that can be reported for the objective covering professional standards and ethics revolves around the state-run media establishment. In the state's system, a panelist explained, "Whether they [the journalists] are qualified or want the job or not, journalists are not recruited on the basis of accepted recruitment standards but assigned to the position on national-service basis by the government."

It is not clear what kind of qualifications such journalists bring to the job. According to the panelist, they are employed after a short training period. However, those who fall under

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).

the national-service category work without proper payment, while those with monthly wages are paid well below the amount required for decent living standards.

Editorial independence is nonexistent. Perusing through government-sponsored media offerings, it is not very surprising that there is an endless list of reports and articles that propagate only "good news" about events in Eritrea. In a way, these actually serve as indicators of the total absence of independent media: realistic and balanced reporting of news and events requires a variety of sources to provide and promote responsible and accountable reporting. That is entirely lacking in Eritrea's media.

Similarly, journalism ethics and self-censorship are not matters of professional choice—journalists must follow the directions of their editors, who take their orders from the authorities. In general, reporters employed by the government have no alternative other than to exercise self-censorship to keep their jobs and their safety. In other words, critical reporting is prohibited by default; upholding professional journalism standards is out of the question when journalists are forced to serve the government and promote its propaganda. Deviation from this results in jail for the journalist.

Government-sponsored news projects the sense that all is well inside Eritrea, and what is being reported from outside is just a threat against or attack on Eritrean sovereignty or national security. An editorial statement from the Eritrean Ministry of Information, posted on its website in October 2009, is telling. The government media policy, under the title "Challenges for Preserving Media Sovereignty," focuses on global economic inequality as a pretext to justify control of national media. It claims that free press is fraudulent and

is used as a disguise to control resources; that those who control global media are based in western countries and are set up to protect the interests of the few; that even non-western media sources have allowed themselves to serve as tools against the interest of the wider public; that such a global media domination has hampered the development of local and national media, and; that Eritrean "government-controlled" media are geared to protect the Eritrean public from western-biased media influences. The editorial concludes with the following statement, "The responsible and free Eritrean media that is budding free of such influences could be taken as one worthy reference." In other words, the likelihood that the government of Eritrea will open up spaces for the development of independent and critical free press is far from likely.

Government-sponsored media outlets provide further evidence of the government's commitment to practice its "no free press" media policy. They focus on the national progress Eritrea is making in education, health, construction, and resource development; fight presumed western "conspiracies" that undermine Eritrea's national security; highlight "bad news" from Ethiopia, and; underplay or not report on the unfavorable events in Eritrea and/or blame these on "unpatriotic" elements. Media reports on potentially disturbing issues, like malnutrition, the rapidly increasing number of young people fleeing Eritrea, slave labor, or Eritrea's performance on the global stage, are discouraged or even forbidden.

In short, while working hard to silence, shut down, or discourage independent news sources based outside Eritrea, the government of Eritrea has made it clear that it is against the establishment of independent media inside Eritrea.

Many, if not most, journalists are not paid at all. Some of the recruits work under the terms and conditions of national service (their work is considered a contribution toward time spent in mandatory military service). Most are looking for an opportunity to abandon the media—or, like most Eritreans, to flee the country when they get the chance.

Last year's MSI panelists said that on the surface, it appears that there is a respectable balance between news and entertainment content. However, this cannot be taken as a great strength considering the lack of objectivity in the government-sponsored news.

In terms of facilities and equipment, in 2007 the government invested heavily in a new media center that includes modern equipment.

What little niche reporting exists is typically tainted by political influence, and investigative reporting is not possible.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Eritrea Objective Score: 0.17

With the absolute absence of critical reporting, and state control over all news sources, it is a foregone conclusion that reliable or objective news is not possible. While print, radio, television, and online news sources exist, they all project the government's viewpoint.

Moreover, access to critical sources of media is strictly followed. The quality and content of news to citizens is divided along languages, income, and urban/rural lines. Furthermore, most Eritreans have extremely limited access even to the government media's slim offerings. According to one panelist, there are only three Internet cafés (in the capital of Asmara), with no more than 10 computers in service and with very slow Internet connections. Internet service is available in the capital and other small towns; however, the expense, slow connection speeds, and ever-present security agents severely curtail the Internet's utility as a news source for Eritreans. Only an extremely low percentage of the population accesses the Internet for news. Mobile phones, though available on the market, are registered to a government agency. Moreover, most residents do not have disposable income to use these services.

Given the inefficient distribution systems, the circulation of government-sponsored print media is more or less confined within the city of Asmara and other small towns. On top of the limited circulation and high illiteracy, the majority cannot afford to buy the papers.

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.

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Nationwide, the same is true for broadcast media—a television set would be well beyond the reach of most. Although access to international television broadcasts (again limited to the capital and small towns) is not strictly prohibited, subscribers exercise caution in their selection of channels—just in case they might raise suspicion in being identified as unpatriotic or anti-government sympathizers. Spreading poverty is also placing radios out of reach for many; the expense of replacing batteries would be an extra burden. Those who do own a radio can access radio transmissions from outside Eritrea, and, as reported in last year's MSI, foreign broadcasts are helping to raise awareness. Reporters sans Frontières, in addition to its continuous and tireless follow-up on the injustices committed by the Eritrean government on journalists, set up ERENA—a satellite radio station that is managed by Eritrean professionals. However, radio broadcasts transmitted by Eritrean dissidents from abroad are frequently blocked. For example, in 2007 the government attempted to jam the Voice of Meselina Delina, a South Africa-based satellite radio run by Eritreans.

Overall, although there are no official restrictions on access to news or information, the strict boundaries are nonetheless understood as part of the all-encompassing atmosphere of fear that blankets Eritrea. Regarding foreign sources, one panelist wrote that the majority of Eritreans inside Eritrea have practically no access to external sources of independent media of any format. However, the frequency of print news coverage on Eritrean affairs by international papers, television broadcasts, or websites like AFP, Reuters, BBC, and Al Jazeera has shown a significant rise in 2009. For example, *L'Espresso*, an Italian paper, conducted investigative journalism into the involvement and collaboration of Italian government officials and Italian businesses with the government of Eritrea, raising allegations of corruption. Whether Eritrean media in the diaspora are effective in informing or influencing national, regional, or international opinion on Eritrea is an area that demands further research.

As noted above, there is no leeway for state media to deviate from serving as a messenger for the state. There are no independent news agencies. And, while the ownership of

media is entirely transparent—it is all government owned—it is also entirely a monopoly.

It cannot be said that a broad spectrum of social interests and minority-language information sources are reflected in the media. Tigrinya, Arabic, Tigre, and English are the main four languages used in broadcast media. Those who cannot speak or understand these languages are at a disadvantage to follow the news; furthermore, these minorities often have lower income levels and live in more rural or remote locations.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Eritrea Objective Score: 0.14

As there are no independent media, the objective measuring how well-managed the media are must only be applied to the state media. One panelist described the shortcomings in managing the state-run media.

State media are neither efficient, nor a business-generating enterprise. They run on state-funded subsidies to serve as a political tool and promote government propaganda with no planning, transparency, or accountability. As reported last year, it is difficult to gain specific insights about management practices in state media, but poor financial accountability plagues all government ministries.

Advertising agencies do not exist, but there is a limited advertising market centered on the local catering and travel industries; primarily, though, advertising sections of newspapers are dominated by government postings of a legal nature. Media in Eritrea are essentially a government

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.

department run by an ad hoc strategy that takes no account of logistical challenges or professional qualifications.

Furthermore, the extreme poverty confronting Eritreans severely limits the supply and likely impact of advertising—a weakness that would make it very difficult to revive the independent press even if the political climate improved.

As in last year's MSI, the panelists were not aware of any efforts at conducting serious market research or measurement of circulation or broadcast audience.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Eritrea Objective Score: 0.19

This objective is also hard to apply to Eritrean media. There are no independent media outlets, and the only supporting public institutions (educational or otherwise) are run by the Ministry of Information to promote government policy and propaganda.

Training establishments for journalists proceed under the watchful eyes of the authorities and fail to impart the basic minimum standards to produce professional journalists or to provide an atmosphere that promotes critical reporting skills. Although some state media staffers are given the opportunity to study abroad, quite a few have failed to return after completing their studies. This phenomenon is not confined to the media sector; it occurs across all the government departments.

External groups, such as NGOs or other international institutions, which could potentially or indirectly contribute toward the development of independent media, have, over

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.

External groups, such as NGOs or other international institutions, which could potentially or indirectly contribute toward the development of independent media, have, over the years, been expelled, or their operations have been severely restricted.

the years, been expelled, or their operations have been severely restricted. From abroad, international organizations, including Reporters Without Borders, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Freedom House, and the Economist Intelligence Unit, have produced reports that portray the Eritrean government as one of the world's most oppressive because of its severe restrictions on media, human rights, and political, economic, and religious freedoms.

The government controls all printing presses and channels of distribution for both print and broadcast media. Freedom House's *Freedom of the Press 2009* report on Eritrea detailed the government's control over the Internet: "The government requires all Internet service providers to use government-controlled Internet infrastructure and owns a large percentage of them. Authorities are believed to monitor e-mail communication, although Internet use is extremely limited, with just over 2 percent of the population able to access this medium in 2008." Unconfirmed reports allege that Eritrea uses Internet control systems provided by Chinese companies to spy on users.

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.