

Two editors given jail terms in CAR

NEW YORK: The convictions of two journalists in the Central African Republic over their critical coverage of a top official constitute political censorship, the Committee to Protect Journalists said on Tuesday, 31 January 2012.



On Friday, 27 January, a judge in the capital, Bangui, convicted Ferdinand Samba, editor of the private weekly *Le Démocrate*, on charges of defamation, insult, and incitement to hatred over a series of opinion articles dating back to September 2011 that were critical of finance minister Sylvain Ndjoutingaï, according to news reports. Only the incitement charge carried a prison sentence under the country's 2005 press law, the journalist's defense lawyer, Nicolas Tiangaye, told CPJ.

Samba, who has been imprisoned since mid-January based on a complaint filed by Ndjoutingaï, was sentenced to 10 months' imprisonment and a fine of 1 million CFA francs (US\$1,976), news reports said. The judge also ordered the journalist to pay 10 million CFA francs (US\$19,762) in damages to Ndjoutingaï and imposed a one-year suspension on *Le Démocrate*. Tiangaye told CPJ that although he immediately filed an appeal upon hearing the verdict, authorities had already sealed the newspaper's offices and returned the journalist to Ngaragba Central Prison in Bangui.

Another newspaper editor, Patrick Agoundou of the pro-government *La Plume*, was convicted in absentia on similar charges, according to news reports. The journalist had written articles criticising Ndjoutingaï's management of public finances and had reported on allegations of abuse of power and embezzlement, local journalists told CPJ. Fearing arrest, Agoundou fled the country a few weeks ago, local journalists said.

"The judge's decision to suspend *Le Démocrate* for one year and the prison sentences given to Ferdinand Samba and Patrick Agoundou were politically motivated in order to silence critical voices," said CPJ Africa advocacy coordinator Mohamed Keita. "We call on the appeals court to reverse Samba's jail sentence and urge authorities to free Samba immediately."

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