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FESQJ Databas

FROM BAD TO WORSE – PRESS FREEDOM IN SOMALIA CONTINUES TO DECLINE

ABSTRACT
FESQJ Annual Press Freedom Report
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FESQJ Secretary General

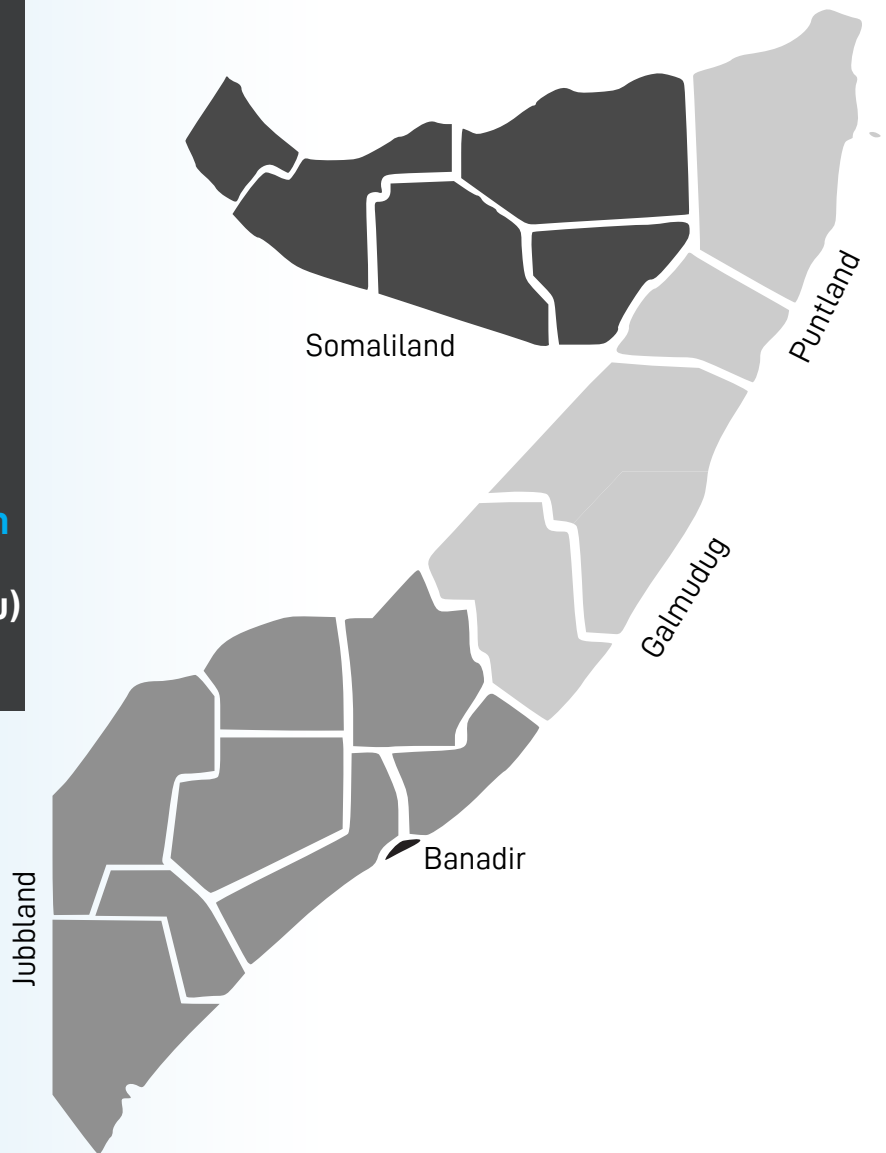
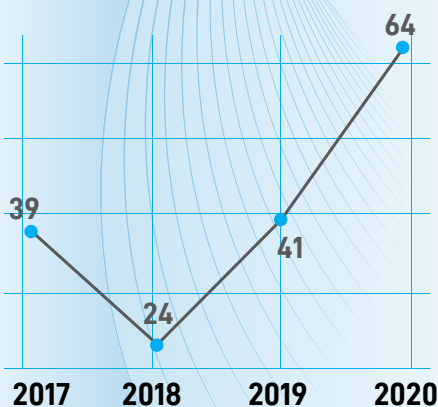
Press freedom situation

- Serious
- Difficult
- Problematic

Lowest Rank:

6. Somaliland
5. Banadir
4. Jubbaland

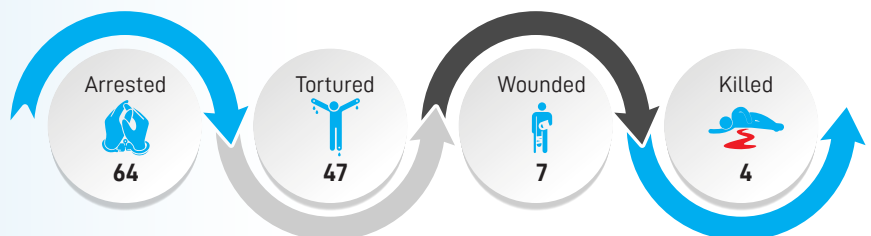
Increasing Number of Arbitrary Arrests



State of Press Freedom in Somalia

Somalia experienced a sharp deterioration in 2019/2020

Since May 2019, the number of journalists:





INTRODUCTION

This annual report released by the Federation of Somali Journalists (FESoj) is based on recorded serious violations and abuses against journalists working in Somalia and in general the trend of press freedom situation in the country between May 2019 and May 2020.

Somalia remains one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists as they continue to be targeted with unremitting levels of brutal violence, harassment and intimidation in spite of long struggle from the many voices still pushing for press freedom. The situation of press freedom in Somalia over the past year has dramatically worsened. The trends show increasing number of arbitrary arrests, constant intimidation, threats to journalists and media workers that are steadily putting the media's work in jeopardy. Even though Somali government leaders have committed to campaign pledges that were aimed at protecting journalists and guarantees to ensure freedom of speech, so far none of these promises materialized. In fact, abuses against journalists have doubled dramatically in the past year.

In this year, FESoj recorded at-least one incident of attacks or harassment targeting journalists or media outlets during each week. In some cases, the frequency of attacks has increased to a daily affair demonstrating the worsening press freedom situation in the country. A particularly concerning issue noted during this year is the large number of journalists who were detained for few hours, for no apparent reason, and then released shortly. Our analysis shows that security forces preferred these types of quick arrest and release approach for convenience purposes. First, these arrests without trial, by nature, receive no major media attention. Second, they serve as part of a systematic intimidation tactics intended to silence journalists or to cow and scuttle ongoing investigative and in-depth reporting efforts.

In response to unprecedented levels of violations against Somali journalists, the Federation of Somali Journalists (FESOJ) and partner media organizations are now engaged in legal process to jointly file a case against the executive branch of the government of Somalia. The coalition of media defenders has already recruited lawyers in order to compel the government to stop violating the country's constitution and to respect the guaranteed rights of freedom of the press and the freedom of expression and to guarantee protection of the media.

SOMALIA'S STATE OF IMPUNITY 2019

According to the CPJ's annual Global Impunity Index in 2019 ¹, Somalia tops the list, for the fifth year in a row, as one of the worst countries in the world at prosecuting murderers of journalists.

Between May 2019 and May 2020, Somali journalists and media workers faced a deadly climate of violence and repression. In total, four journalists were killed, 47 were physically tortured or harassed, 7 wounded, 5 media outlets were attacked while 64 were arbitrarily arrested in different parts of Somalia while carrying out their duties.

JOURNALISTS KILLED IN THE LINE OF DUTY

Two journalists, a prominent Somali Canadian journalist Hodan Nalayeh and Mohamed Sahal Omar a local reporter were among 27 people ² killed in a terrorist attack in Somalia's southern port city of Kismayo on Friday 12 July, 2019.

¹ <https://cpj.org/reports/2019/10/getting-away-with-murder-killed-justice.php>

² <https://allafrica.com/stories/201907150214.html>



Abdinasir Abdulle Gaal a cameraman who worked with Somali National Television and SNA Radio was killed on Aug 14, 2019 during a heavy fighting between Somali national army and Al-Shabab in the village of Awdhiigle, around 45 KM South to the Somali capital Mogadishu. Abdinasir who was embedded with Somali Army, serving in the frontlines, died after several people were killed in suicide blast targeting an army base in the locality.

On February 16, 2020 -Somali broadcast journalist Abdiwali Ali Hassan was shot several times near his home in the town of Afgooye, about 30 km (19 miles) south of the Somalia's capital, Mogadishu. He was confirmed dead on the way to a referral hospital in Mogadishu. Mr. Abdiwali Ali Hassan, aka Abdiwali Online was working as reporter with Universal TV, a London-based Somali TV and Kulmiye-based radio in Mogadishu.



He was attacked by two unidentified gunmen who shot him in the head with three bullets as he was heading to return home from work.

ONLINE HARASSMENT AGAINST JOURNALISTS INCREASING

There is an increasing number of online harassment and attacks targeted at Somali journalists in their day to day business of providing valuable reports to the public. Some journalists had their social media platforms were hacked or suspended in coordinated efforts to unfairly manipulate the reporting systems of Twitter and Facebook against reporters.

Al-Shabaab prohibited companies from providing access to the internet and forced telecommunication companies to shut data services in al-Shabaab-controlled areas.

Some authorities have forced private Internet providers to shut down some news and websites that does not provide favorable reporting. There are journalists who have fled from Somalia due to their security reasons after facing death threats. Federal Government of Somalia, especially intelligence agency NISA launched smear campaigns of reputable VOA journalist, Harun Maruf, based in Washington. This latest attack on Mr. Harun is seen an attempt to muzzle his independent, fact-based and highly popular investigative program, Galka Baarista, which features ground-breaking exclusives that has exposes many corruption scandals, type of reporting local journalists, often shy away from due to imminent security risks.

Bloggers and citizens active on social media expressing views diverging from the position of the Federal Government of Somalia and Federal Member States have been arbitrarily arrested and/or illegally detained by the security agencies. On April 14, police arrested Abdiaziz, an editor and deputy director of the privately owned Goobjoog Media Group and accused of distributing false news and disturbing public order. The accusations stemmed from Facebook posts Abdiaziz made on his personal page and on “Gurbiye Official,” a page that he manages, in the post, he alleged the government had mismanaged the COVID-19 response and criticized President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed Farmaajo. Goobjoog News Editor Abdiaziz Ahmed Gurbiye has been released on bail, but he was ordered that he can’t write or talk publicly on anything related to his case neither criticize the government until a final decision regarding his case is reached.

According to Amnesty international report Facebook accounts of 16 individuals – mostly journalists – were permanently disabled or deleted in 2018 and 2019 alone. All the individuals told Amnesty International that they had posted critical content on their accounts. There were attempts to hack the Facebook accounts of five journalists while the accounts of four more were compromised in the past two years. Many of these journalists depend on their Facebook accounts as journalists, to disseminate critical information to the Somali public. For almost all of them, these shut downs not only impact on their journalistic work but also on their livelihoods.

DECRIMINALISING LIBEL AND ALL FORMS OF DEFAMATION LAWS

Somalia’s Provisional Constitutions guarantees the freedom of expression, media and opinion however, Somali journalists are still prosecuted under Somalia’s 1963 criminal code

The Federation of Somali Journalists (FESoj) continues to oppose all forms of defamation laws that are designed to render the media ineffective or restrict freedom of expression and of the press. FESoj firmly believes that the only way forward for the country in this regard is the total eradication of all defamation and seditious laws. The FESoj is in support of all efforts in the country that are aimed at repealing criminal defamation. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that the role of the media to report and hold governments and civil servants accountable is not eroded by the creation of obnoxious legislations.

With the assistance of Free Press Unlimited, FESoj supports journalists in legal aid by hiring defending lawyers when journalists are violated

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/02/somalia-killings-corruption-and-censorship-besiege-media-freedom/>
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr52/1442/2020/en/>

WORKING CONDITIONS OF JOURNALISTS IN SOMALIA.

The current working conditions of journalists in Somalia represent a major impediment to their capacity to perform in line with professional ethics and professional obligations. Poor conditions of services for journalists, gender inequality, and less salary or no payment remain a major concern in the country.

Most journalists working in Somalia have no job security. They are deprived from any form of social security, health benefits or other forms of social welfare benefits, while some are owed numerous months of salaries. Closely related to this, is the fact that most Somali journalists, especially those in the lower cadre who work as reporters, are poorly paid and ill motivated which partly explains the poor performances of these journalists and most importantly, the continuous disregard of the ethics of the profession.

In the light of these critical issues, there has been a clarion intervention by FESoj and the Finish Foundation for Media Development (VIKES) supported by Delegation of the European Union to Somalia that began launching labor rights advocacy campaigns in the country, for a collective bargaining standard framework that will to some extent determine what journalists are being paid, and the conditions of service in relation to the qualifications that they have and their level of professionalism.

FESoj is in the forefront of this crucial course and is confident that the desired results will come sooner rather than later. Already, there have been great strides in this regard some media outlets have begun to sign contracts with their employees, and many women journalists now receive maternity leave, although they had experienced no salaries at all during the maternity absence.

<https://allafrica.com/stories/201909060207.html>



PHYSICAL THREATS

There are growing concerns about journalists being physically assaulted. A resilient insurgency and a climate of impunity make the country one of the most dangerous places to be a journalist. Statistics compiled by the Federation of Somali Journalists reveal that journalists were either attacked or threatened at least 39 times in the second half of 2019. Journalists who try to expose the wrongdoings of politicians, insurgents or other powerful individuals are threatened, beaten and even attacked, and this limits their ability to conduct in-depth reporting.

Despite the rapid growth of Somalia's media industry, Somali media continues to face many challenges such as attacks on journalists and political interference that threaten to undo the progress made over the past decade.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND THE PRESS

The provisional federal constitution provides for freedom of speech, including for the press, but neither federal government nor federal member states respected this right. Individuals in government-controlled areas or federal member states risked reprisal for criticizing government officials, particularly for alleged official corruption or suggestions that officials were unable to manage security matters. They cite as national security concerns to suppress criticism and prevent press coverage of opposition political figures.

Threats to journalists, however, come not only from the Shabaab and criminals, but also increasingly from government troops. Of particular concern was the growing number of cases where the attacks implicated government officers, including members of the Somali security

forces. FESoj repeatedly calls upon the Somali government leaders to change their positive remarks into actions and end the harassment against journalists and illegal arrests.

NOTABLE PROGRESS MADE IN ENSURING SAFETY AND PROTECTION OF JOURNALISTS

Despite the setbacks registered in the protection and safety of journalists last year in comparison with the violations against journalists recorded. There are some worth-mentioning improvements in some areas made by the federal government of Somalia and these include:

1. Journalists hold their meetings on a regular basis without interference from government. Freedom of assembly is usually guaranteed, even in the face of ongoing challenges.
2. There have been cases of harassment against journalists that the government has resolved and brought to justice to those who were involved.
3. Senior government officials from the ministry of information, the president's communication office expressed solidarity with journalists by publicly condemning abuses against the journalists in number of occasions.

RESTRICTIONS ON PUBLIC'S RIGHT TO ACCESS INFORMATION

Although, article 32 of Somalia's provisional constitution protects the citizens right to access information, in practice, journalists, activists, researchers and citizens routinely face bureaucratic roadblocks in their quest to access even basic information. This is especially common across many ministries and office with the presidency and the prime minister "the least compliant".

In the midst of the coronavirus outbreak, none of the Somali media institutions were accorded the opportunity to engage and ask either President or the Prime Minister questions about the country's plans to combat COVID-19. The lack of opportunities for the press to speak directly with the leaders is a clear demonstration of an administration reluctant to interact with the media and to directly respond matters of public concerns.

Often when journalist make contacts with government officials to ask about an incident or to solicit an interview, it takes ages to get a schedule. In many offices, there are designated officials who are authorized to speak with the media and when granted, officials will demand to alter the scope and dimensions of the interview until it's a watered-down exercise that is not worth the effort, at all.

"The Right of Access to Information law is one of the most important tools citizens have to ensure the openness and transparency of their government and its institutions, and it plays a role in the promotion and protection of democracy, so FESoj with the help of other media organisations in Somalia will prioritize in the coming years for Somalia to have access to information law" said Mohamed Ibrahim Moalimuu Secretary General of Federation of Somali Journalists (FESoj)

FIGHTING MISINFORMATION IN THE AGE OF THE CORONAVIRUS

Journalists covering the coronavirus pandemic in Somalia are facing a variety of challenges such a movement restrictions and lack of access to timely and reliable pandemic information. This has the potential to raise the risk of false information spreading in the country. In spite of assurances from the Somali Prime Minister who announced that journalists will be classified as part of "essential services in the fights against #COVID19" in order to guarantee unhindered media operations during the curfew, still, at-least three journalists who were detained while working on stories about coronavirus.

In April, Government TV correspondent Abdiiaziz Guled better known as Abdiiaziz Africa became COVID-19 positive after he paid visit to another journalist who was hospitalized in Martini Hospital in Mogadishu.

The issue of misinformation related to the outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19) has been rampant in Somalia since the first diagnosis emerged on 16 March,2020 with conspiracy theories and falsities being shared online regarding the origin, scale and various other aspects of the disease. Some of the most

common claims include that the coronavirus doesn't kill Muslims. In other instance, some traditional healers claimed to have treated patients with COVID-1. These kinds of myths may worsen the situation and the media should care such misinformation. Rumors also proliferated that Somalis are immune to the disease and that the virus cannot survive in high-temperature climates like Somalia and so on.

Journalists are working in this period of influx of misinformation over COVID-19 need to refer official figures to the authorized agencies involved in Coronavirus control, such as the Ministry of Health and WHO and so on, otherwise they may write false information which can put danger the lives of many people.

PROBLEMS FACED BY WOMEN JOURNALISTS

Women journalists in Somalia face many seemingly insurmountable challenges such as social and cultural restrictions, sexual harassment, discrimination from male peers, and targeted threats from different hands including Alshabaab militant group, government authorities and unknown groups with the intention to curtail women's participation in public affairs.

The most important problems and constraints faced by women journalists are :

1. The prevalence of customs and traditions which promote a male dominant society.
2. The absence of legislation guaranteeing the rights of women.
3. Sexual harassment and discrimination on the basis of gender.
4. The absence of legal guarantees and official contracts in media institutions which protect women and ensure the right to safely report discrimination.
5. Discriminatory working conditions such as lower wages, lack of benefits such as maternity leave, lack of opportunities for promotion, lack of safety training and in-appropriate safety equipment.
6. Gender-based violence and harassment online.
7. Lack of (or insufficient) gender policies and anti-harassment measures in newsrooms.
8. Lack of (or insufficient) gender sensitivity in safety mechanisms

According to the baseline study "Working conditions of somali women journalists" carried out by Somali Women Journalists (SWJ) in 2018 in partnership with IMS-Fojo Media Programme in Somalia, at-least "13% of the respondents felt comfortable enough to say they had experienced sexual harassment, either in their current or previous jobs. 20% of respondents (28% female) said they would do nothing if exposed to harassment, fearing for their safety as well as their jobs. There are no robust mechanisms in place to respond to sexual harassment in media houses"

In response to the persistently ant-women working environment, FESQJ and VIKES with the support of the European Union trained during the reporting period, a total of 150 female journalists on topics related to, camera skills, ethical reporting, freedom of expression and safety of women journalists. The workshops were facilitated by local and international female journalists including two experts from the UK and Finland.



SOMALI MEDIA LAW

In 2016, President Hassan Sheikh first signed into law the Somalia Media bill which included provisions restricting media freedoms. The bill sailed through the assembly despite appeals to soften the law from local and international media organizations and unions. In 2017, after the new administration of President Mohamed Abdullahi came into power, the new minister of information promised to conduct a fresh review in a bid to incorporate the recommendations of the media fraternity. However, again a similar version was approved by cabinet in July 2017. The draft bill was sent to the Lower House of Parliament and it passed again in July 2019.

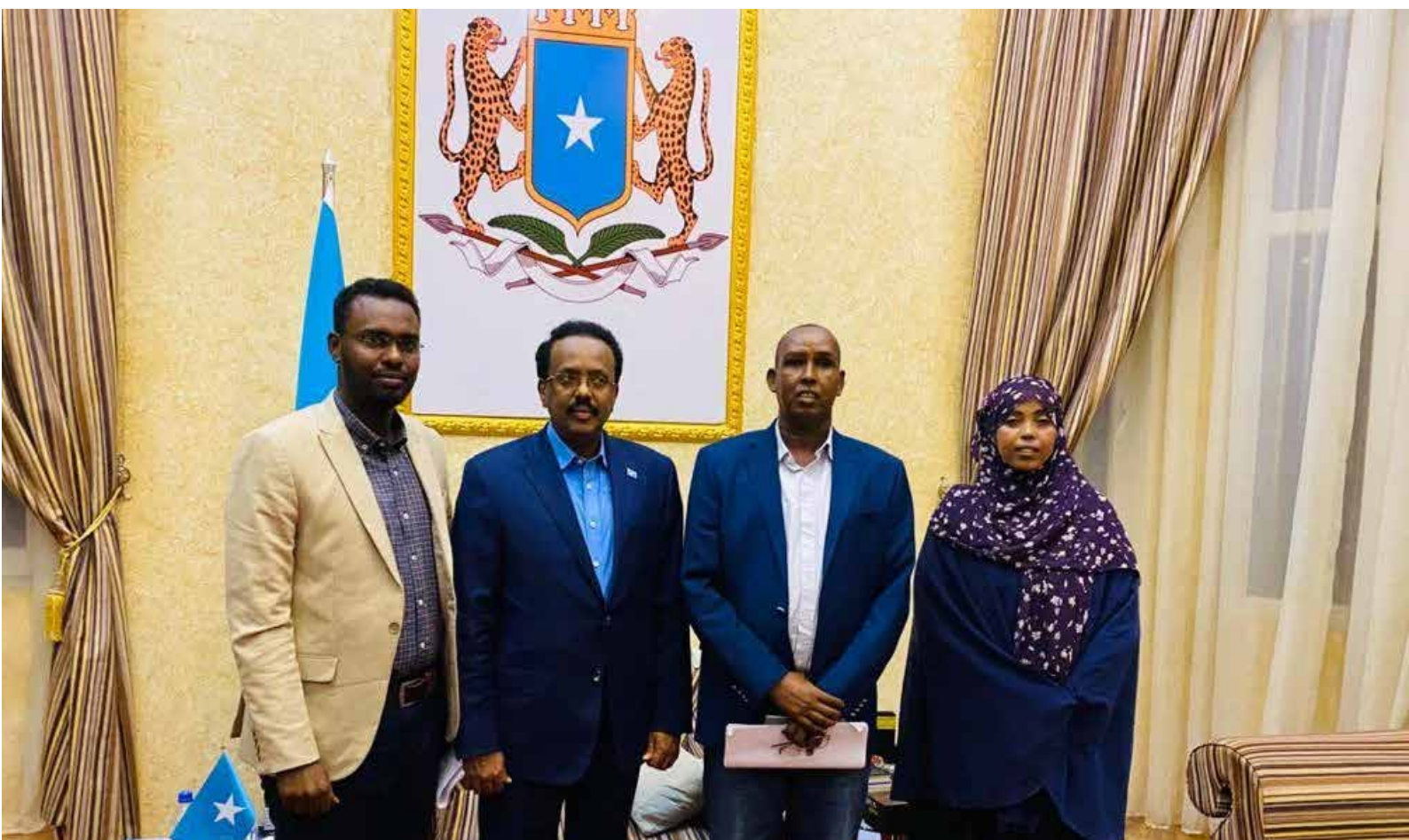
The bill law received the Senate's approval in January 2020. Currently, it's at the office of the president awaiting final assent

https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Somalia-Baseline-Study-on-the-Conditions-of-Women-in-Journalism_ENG.pdf

<https://feso.org/eu-supports-workshop-for-somali-women-journalists-in-mogadishu/>

<https://mareeg.com/puntland-minister-of-women-praises-role-of-women-in-media-women-journalists-are-courageous-and-deserve-to-be-supported/>

<https://allafrica.com/stories/202001280162.html>



FESJO and other media fraternities met with Somali President his Excellency Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo and requested him not to sign the media bill into law since it contains provisions that contradicts the provisional constitution and some that are not in line with the international standards.