

September 2005

AFRICA'S MEDIA PUSH FOR MORE FREEDOM

Although the expansion of democratic practices, greater domestic and international support for human rights and the emergence of a vigorous and independent civil society have combined to improve the media climate in Africa, journalists, broadcasters and publishers are still targeted for less severe forms of harassment.

By Michael Fleshman

In the perennial war between governments and the media over what the public should know, few battles have been fought as stubbornly as the one between the late Nigerian military ruler, Gen. Sani Abacha, and the 'guerrilla journalists' of *Tell* magazine. The popular newsweekly earned the general's ire by criticising his 1993 coup and reporting too closely on his administration's inner workings. In response, the government shuttered the magazine's offices and jailed a senior editor.

At the time, it was an all-too-familiar setback for the press in Africa, where governments frequently reacted to unfavourable news by shooting, jailing or banning the messenger.

In the case of *Tell*, however, the messengers fought back. Rather than fold its tent, the magazine went underground, operating from clandestine 'bush offices' around the country. It kept one step ahead of the police and managed to continue publishing. *Tell's* remarkable story ended happily with the restoration of democracy in 1999 and the magazine's triumphant return to its offices.

Across Africa, such conflicts are being repeated less frequently. The expansion of democratic practices, greater domestic and international support for human rights and the emergence of a vigorous and independent civil society have combined to improve the media climate.

Yet in Africa, as elsewhere across the globe, problems remain. 'For doing their indispensable work, many journalists are persecuted, attacked, imprisoned and murdered,' UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan declared on 3 May, World Press Freedom Day. 'We salute the courage and dedication of journalists struggling against risk and outright brutality to exercise their right to seek and tell the truth.'

In general, says Ms Zoe Titus, a press freedom monitor for the non-government Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), 'The situation of the press in most of Africa has improved to a degree, at least in terms of arbitrary attacks and detentions of journalists and closures of publications and radio stations.'

Fewer attacks, greater independence

The US-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reported that in 2004, the deadliest year for journalists in a decade, 'fewer journalists were killed or imprisoned in Africa than in some other regions'. Two journalists lost their lives in Africa that year, another was missing and feared dead and 19 others spent long periods in jail. Globally, the toll stood at 56 killed, 19 missing and 124 imprisoned for extended periods.

Reports reaching MISA indicate that what the CPJ has described as 'the remarkable gains of recent years' for press freedom in Africa are continuing, albeit slowly and unevenly. The year 2001 remains the only one on record when no media worker was killed on the job in Africa.

Journalists, broadcasters and publishers are still targeted for less severe forms of harassment – from assaults and brief jailings to threats of criminal prosecution and civil lawsuits for offences such as insulting the president or damaging state interests. Advertising boycotts and other forms of financial pressure have also been applied.

Despite such problems, progress has resulted from 'the new democratic dispensations' of the past decade, Ms Titus told *Africa Renewal*. In South Africa and some other countries, 'transitions to democracy were followed by major reforms of the legislation restricting freedom of expression and the free press'. Elsewhere, governments have reduced the worst forms of censorship, but keep repressive laws on the statute books.

Media diversity and independence have also improved. On a continent where state monopolies of print and broadcast media were once common, private and community-owned radio stations and newspapers proliferate. Technological advances, such as the arrival of the Internet, satellite telecommunications and inexpensive broadcasting and printing equipment, have given citizens access to a greater range of views.

Stronger human rights institutions

The emergence of new and more effective regional institutions, including the African Union (AU) and its development plan, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), have also improved the press climate.

Although freedoms of expression and of the press are now recognised as preconditions for democracy and development, those rights are insufficiently protected in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1986 African Charter for Human and Peoples' Rights. While both charters assert a human right to receive and disseminate information, there is no explicit mention of freedom of the press. To Ms Titus, this is not surprising in manifestos drafted by and for governments. 'Governments are not going to be very vocal in terms of freedom of expression.'

To overcome these deficiencies, African journalists and broadcasters met in Windhoek, Namibia in April 1991 under the auspices of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation to adopt a declaration calling for ‘the establishment, maintenance and fostering of an independent, pluralistic and free press’ and ‘the end of monopolies of any kind’.

African initiatives

The Windhoek declaration was followed by a decade of advocacy, protests and organisation throughout the continent. Professional associations and watchdog groups now include MISA, the West African Journalists Association (with chapters in 16 countries) and the East African Journalists Association, among others.

In 2002, African journalists, with the support of many of Africa’s new democracies, made a significant advance with the adoption by the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights of the ‘Banjul Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa’. The declaration, which is legally binding on signatories to the new African Court of Justice, gives statutory force to freedoms of expression and of the press.

Cameroonian journalist Pius Njawe notes that ‘the creation of regional infrastructures to deal with press freedom issues...is helping to establish democracy in Africa. African journalists continue to garner public support at home and abroad.’

Freedom of the press is also enshrined in NEPAD’s Declaration on Democracy, which commits African governments to ‘ensure responsible freedom of expression, inclusive of freedom of the press’. Media freedom and diversity are among the standards considered by NEPAD’s peer review mechanism in assessing a country’s commitment to human rights and good governance.

‘It is a major feat for the African media that the AU and the African Commission have adopted the Banjul Declaration,’ says Ms Titus. ‘It has opened up a new arena for advocacy and enforcement. And it is the initiative of African journalists and governments themselves.’ MISA is among the parties to the first media freedom case brought before the African Court – a challenge to Zimbabwe’s closure of several independent newspapers under the recent Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

Responsibility and solidarity

Ms Titus calls on the UN and the international community to develop a stronger partnership with African media activists and to provide more political and technical support. She adds that certain kinds of external pressures on African governments have sometimes been counterproductive, as in the Western preoccupation with Zimbabwe, which has not only been at cross-purposes with local media campaigns, but has also served to divert attention from violations of media rights in other countries.

Where the international community can be most helpful, she suggests, is in improving the professionalism of the African media through increased training and professional exchanges.

The media's lack of capacity, Ms Titus concludes, is itself a threat to freedom in Africa. She notes that some media outlets were deeply involved in instigating the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, and that similar media abuses have occurred in other countries. 'We accept that the media too has duties and obligations, and that some pre-conditions for the media must be met. But we remind governments that they must help create those conditions. It is no good to withhold information and then complain about bad reporting. I think more and more governments appreciate that.' – Third World Network Features

About the writer: Michael Fleshman is a writer with *Africa Renewal*, in which the above article originally appeared (Vol. 19 No. 2, July 2005).

When reproducing this feature, please credit Third World Network Features and (if applicable) the cooperating magazine or agency involved in the article, and give the byline. Please send us cuttings.

Third World Network is also accessible on the World Wide Web. Please visit our website at <http://www.twinside.org.sg>

2858/05