

Q&A: Average Marks for East African Press Freedom

Joyce Mulama interviews DAVID MAKALI, chairperson of the East Africa Editors' Guild.

NAIROBI, May 2 (IPS) - Four years ago, a furious Lucy Kibaki, Kenya's First Lady, marked World Press Freedom Day by storming the offices of leading independent publisher the Nation Group with her entourage."

She was outraged by the group's portrayal of her dispute with a neighbour and seized phones and laptops in a demonstration of the low respect one powerful figure has for a free press.

Today the situation is little better. In Kenya and Uganda which are considered heavyweights in the region, continued backsliding in press freedom has threatened their democratic gains.

David Makali, chairman of the East Africa Editors' Forum says, conditions in these two states set the pace for how other countries in the region handle press freedom. Hopes for a free press have been deflated with the continued existence of repressive media laws and heightened attacks on media outlets in East Africa.

In a candid interview with IPS, Makali shared his thoughts on trends of press freedom in the region.

IPS: How would you rank press freedom in East Africa?

David Makali: I think East Africa is not very well-ranked in terms of press freedom. On a scale of A to E, probably East Africa is at C; not the worst, but not the best.

I think there is moderate respect for press freedom but that respect is not founded on any solid legal or political foundation. It is dicey and the media is vulnerable to sporadic attacks from predators such as politicians, private gangs as well as commercial forces.

These threats don't seem to be relenting. They are actually getting worse, because the political systems in all these countries are not geared towards protecting press freedom as a fundamental policy.

As a matter of practice, governments in this region do not hold press freedom as one of the cardinal rights or freedoms that they need to guarantee for society.

IPS: What other factors have jeopardised media operations?

DM: I am most worried about the corporate and commercial impact on the freedom and independence of the media. It is not visible but it probably the most dangerous threat that we have. It has taken over the position of government as a threat to press freedom.

Because of competition and the whole struggle for survival by media enterprises, they become susceptible to manipulation by corporate entities, and the integrity of the news can no longer be ascertained. You do not know whether what you are reading is motivated by corporate and commercial interests or the genuine public interest.

Then of course there is the second threat to press freedom which comes from non-state actors; either private citizens working in cahoots [with the state] or [government agents] disguising themselves as private but attacking the press, media houses and individual journalists anonymously.

We see that in Tanzania, for example, the attacks on MwanaHalisi [a weekly publication which was banned for three months in October 2008] which was unprecedented.

Museveni did the same in Uganda when he banned the Monitor just like that. We have seen [private television station] NTV- Uganda being put off-air for indefinite periods; attacks on the Red Pepper, attacks on the New Vision journalists [two independent Ugandan newspapers].

In Kenya we remember the hooded guys who attacked the Standard Group [a media house comprising newspapers and a television station], acting on the guise of private people aggrieved by the content of media houses, but in fact I think they are accomplices of the state.

IPS: What is your take on media laws in the region; is the situation getting better?

DM: No. They are the obvious government threats to press freedom by virtue of their oppressive nature, and are being enforced on the media across the region to protect political interests or to prevent uncomfortable truths from being published.

IPS: The theme of this year's World Press Freedom day is the "Potential of the media in fostering dialogue, mutual understanding and reconciliation". How can the media be effective given the environment under which it operates in the region?

DM: First of all, for people to begin demanding any responsibility from the press either in terms of achieving reconciliation, fostering unity, there has to be regard and respect for press freedom by governments. Governments cannot want to have their cake and eat it or societies for that matter cannot want to have their cake and eat it.

They must first give to the press what is theirs; freedom to practice, and then begin demanding of it certain obligations to serve the society in which they operate. If that can be guaranteed, then I think the media has a significant role to play because as we have noticed when there is conflict, the media cannot thrive.

IPS: Authorities have justified their actions by accusing the media of exercising

irresponsible journalism. What are your thoughts?

DM: There can be no press freedom without responsibility.

It is reciprocal and it is the bare minimum that should be expected of journalists that if you are given certain privileges, you need to reciprocate in terms of how you practice.

And journalists, media owners and practitioners need to give back to society ethical products that promote social harmony, development and peace.

It has come across since the 2007 election in Kenya that radio stations, especially broadcast media, incited ethnic disharmony. The jury is still out because no clear-cut evidence has been provided to link particular broadcasts with particular flare-ups or crimes. But the assumption is that the general conduct of the media encouraged ethnic disharmony.

I think the media in this country, in this region, need to reflect on their role and see how they can become agents of positive change and aggregate conflict rather than maximize on differences.

That calls for responsible editorship. So perhaps it is time to begin asking who are the decision makers within our media outlets, and there has not been sufficient regard of consideration given to qualifications of people who are in that crucial gate-keeping role.

From where I sit, there is clearly need to consider strongly some benchmarks for the gate-keeper role within all stations, all media outlets that are coming up, especially the vernacular stations where people have been appointed more for their ability, knowledge of folk-lore and ability to communicate in their vernacular languages than their capacity for ethical decision-making and editorial judgment.

That is the challenge that faces our media which must be addressed through thematic training and exposure to the code of ethics of journalism, so that we can have a reduction in the number of the incidences of unethical decisions and unethical broadcasts and content going out.
(END/2009)