

Thematic Section

The Curse of Sisyphus: Why democracy isn't necessarily good for press freedom in Africa

CHARLES ONYANGO-
OBBO

ABSTRACT The advent of plural politics in Africa was also accompanied by burgeoning press freedom. It was assumed that a free press would underpin the democratic gains and allow for multiple ideas to flourish. Yet the record seems to suggest that things are different. The press is increasingly under attack from governments on the one hand who seek to weaken its capacity to be an effective message bearer, and on the other, the press itself is also adapting to and effectively exploiting regional differences in order to maximize its own profits, perhaps at the expense of national unity.

KEYWORDS media; press freedom; Africa; democracy; political parties

Things are kind of looking up for freedom in Africa

More Africans are today under elected governments than at any other time in recent history. And at first glance press freedom, where Africa used to score notoriously badly, seems to be in relatively good health.

The Arab Spring, which overthrew dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, has unleashed long pent-up energies among the media there. And there are bright spots elsewhere on the continent, too. The 2012 Freedom House report on world press freedom, which was quite gloomy about other parts of the world, offered a surprising number of positive stories about Africa's independent media.

A second look, however, reveals a different story. Take Tanzania, for example, one of the African countries that received a fairly positive rating from Freedom House on its general freedom record. Tanzania is supposed to be on the march. Every big-time world leader who comes to Africa, as US President Barack Obama did in July 2013, must drop in on Dar es Salaam, otherwise the Africa tour would be incomplete. Yet that isn't the whole story (as Freedom House noted).

In September 2012, Tanzanian police killed TV journalist Daudi Mwangosi as he covered opposition protests. In March 2013, journalist Absalom Kibanda was attacked by unknown assailants, who chopped off one of his fingers, gouged his eye, and broke most of his teeth.

In October 2013, the International Press Institute expressed growing concern about press freedom in Tanzania following a government order suspending two newspapers in the country.

The government had recently slapped a 2-week publication suspension on *Mwananchi*, the country's leading Kiswahili daily. It also prohibited the *Mtanzania* from publishing for 90 days, thus taking it off the streets until through to the end of December 2013.

In July 2012, the Dar es Salaam government also invoked sedition allegations against the *MwanaHalisi* newspaper, ordering its indefinite suspension.

Surely these sorts of things aren't supposed to be happening in a flourishing democracy. However, they are. Why then are they happening?

In the days when Africa was tormented by one-party and military dictatorships, the dividing lines were clearer. The bad guys were on one side, and the good guys on the other. Most people were against the dictatorships, and one of the key rallying points was the campaign for a free press. A free press was seen at that time as part of the wider democratic bargain.

But the arrival of the so-called 'second wave' of democracy in Africa beginning in the 1990s has muddied the waters. One reason for the reversal in media freedoms has to do with the way African parties cultivate political support and seek votes. Most of them mobilize along ethnic, religious, and regional lines.

Societies that were once united against military tyrants are now divided along these partisan lines. And groups that vote for parties for parochial reasons tend to rally behind them while they are in power, even when they crack down on the media.

Consider the paradox of Uganda. From 1986 to 2001, the Ugandan government banned political party activities in the country. That was a bad deal for opposition politicians, who had to confront the hegemony of the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) without any organizations of their own behind them. The regime of President Yoweri Museveni called this arrangement where opposition politicians had freedom to make noise and agitate, but actual parties were banned, the 'no-party system'.

Yet that 'no-party' period was also one of freest periods for the Ugandan media. Eager to prove that the 'no-party democracy' it practiced then was actually democracy, the Museveni government gave the media greater space for independence. Why? Because it argued that the more important thing about democracy was the freedom to air

divergent views, but it was wrong to organize a 'sectarian' party to turn those views into practical politics. Therefore, opposition parties and groups were free to have newspapers and radios, but they could not field candidates against the NRM!

To be sure, two publications were banned, and journalists were sometimes arrested and exiled. But by and large reporters managed to get their stories out. If for nothing else but to keep up that lie, the Uganda government had to allow free media to flourish.

In 2006, Uganda formally adopted a multi-party system. Almost immediately, press freedom took a dive. Now that it could point to opposition parties that were organizing freely, it no longer needed independent media as proof that it was democratic, so it started to stick knives into it.

Not surprisingly, according to a report by the Kampala-based African Centre for Media Excellence¹, since 1986 at least one journalist has been charged with sedition or a related offence by the government every year. As a result, between 1986 and 2010 at least 49 journalists were dragged before courts and charged for various offences including sedition, criminal libel and publication of false news. The worst period seems to have been between 2007 (after a return to multipartyism) and 2010 when 34 journalists were summoned by police and 25 of them charged.

Perhaps one of the best and most unlikely examples is South Africa, where the political divide and allegiances are also partly racial. The leading media in the country are white-owned. When they criticize the corruption and failures of the Africa National Congress, and particularly President Jacob Zuma, ANC often hits back with accusations that the critical reporting is rearguard action by people with an 'apartheid mentality'.

Many South African black journalists and intellectuals agree with this media criticism of the Zuma government's failures, but are reluctant to side with them openly out of the fear that they'll be seen as betraying the anti-apartheid cause.

When the ANC introduced the Protection of Information Bill in 2010, it became controversial because it was seen as an attempt to shield government actions from scrutiny by citizens and media. However, there was ambivalence among

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black journalists and activists, who saw it a justified attempt to control 'racist' media. That opened a door for Zuma to play hero when in September 2013 he rejected the bill and sent it back to Parliament because it failed the constitutional test.

It can be puzzling why the wave of political reforms of the last 20 years brought to power in Africa governments that have carried out economic and social reforms, but remain hostile to free media.

Perhaps the most far-reaching root of this animosity to independent media has to do with how political parties and political debate have evolved in most of the continent over the last 50 years. The independence parties in Africa were quite ideological and issue-based movements that brought together trade unions, traders, teachers, and farmers. They had to be; there were big issues like how to redistribute the post-colonial bounty, and assets like lands and farms that were being vacated by European settlers.

That now seems very long ago. Many of today's parties are either regional, or based on single issues. This is one reason as to why we have had the rise of coalitions.

National newspapers and TV are virtually the only independent media able to speak to the entire country. Muzzling them leaves the government as the sole institution that messages nationally, and hands regional ruling coalitions an advantage that they lacked organizationally to dominate opinion shaping. It is efficient and low cost.

If rogue democrats and official censors were the only threat to free-wheeling media freedom in much of Africa then one could hope that matters will improve where reformists leaders come to power.

However, there are structural changes in the entertainment and news markets that the media has to contend with. For decades, what most Africans heard on their radios and watched on their TVs were stories of politicians ranting against imperialists, or perhaps planting trees at funerals or attending Sunday mass.

When space started opening up in the late 1980s, the urban elite, designer democrats, celebrities and foreign soap operas dominated the news. The regular folks still didn't see themselves on TV or hear their kind on radio.

The first group of people to understand the demand for 'local content' were the Nigerians, who started rather crude films full of venal polygamists, evil stepmothers, scary witchdoctors and crooked pastors. Eventually they became a continental sensation known today as Nollywood (by some reckoning the world's largest producers of film).

This craving for cultural representation and authenticity has given birth to dozens of local FM stations, TV, and even newspapers that don't broadcast nationally in English, French, or Portuguese, the official colonial-era languages of many African countries.

Thus, from Kenya to Nigeria, the number one soaps and dramas on TV in most countries are locally produced. Nearly all the top radio stations broadcast in local languages. This is understandable, and indeed elsewhere in the world the winning content is usually local – until ones looks deeper. In countries like Kenya, which has one of Africa's most mature newspaper markets, for the last 30 years newspapers have responded to this with regional editions.

Something is changing for the worse, though. The dozens of regional FM stations, and extremist bloggers and social media warriors have worked up political prejudices against national media that are viewed as critical of local politicians. Some media houses that have several radio stations around the country broadcasting in different vernaculars have resolved this problem by adopting the 'correct' political tone for the area they are broadcasting to.

Newspapers have started to go the same way. In Kenya's last government that lapsed in March 2013 after the general elections, the President was Mwai Kibaki from Central Kenya, and the Prime Minister was Raila Odinga from the west. Some newspapers would bury a story considered unfavourable to Kibaki in the copies they distributed in the Central region, but give it bigger play in the western areas. They would also downplay stories that portrayed Odinga in bad light in the western edition, but give them prominence in the editions for Central.

It is good for business, but it is a very slippery road when a newspaper or radio station takes different positions on the same issue in a country, depending on which region it is being read or listened in. In countries where voters don't have

to worry about re-electing their home-boy or home-girl, this kind of pressure will not be brought to bear on the media.

However, it happens in Africa because, even with the growth of democracy, since government is patronage-fuelled, the loss of power by a leader from a region could see that part of the country marginalized if the next Big Man is from another region.

Because political office comes with a lot of spoils, and losing it is punitive, to the extent that in this

'democratic age' media scrutiny can shape victory or defeat, African politicians are not about to spare the rod in dealing with journalists. And they can depend on many of their supporters to understand, if not approve, the crackdown.

When it comes to media freedom, Africa is suffering the fate of Sisyphus, cursed by the gods push the rock up to the top of the hill, only for it to roll to the bottom of the hill, and he is forced to repeat the futile exercise in eternity.

Note

1 www.acme-ug.org.