



March 13<sup>th</sup> 2015

**Press Statement: For immediate release.**

***‘Muzzling of Press freedom at the Ugandan Parliament’***

On March 9th 2015, the Clerk to Parliament, Ms Jane Kibirige, reportedly wrote to news editors a letter titled: ***‘Replacement of Parliamentary Reporters’***, in which she stated that, “The purpose of this letter is to inform you that the Parliamentary Commission has in the interest of balanced media coverage of Parliament, made a decision to the effect that all reporters who have been covering Parliament for more than five years be replaced with effect from May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015”, adding that, “This is therefore to request that you arrange for a replacement for all parliamentary reporters from your organisation who have been covering Parliament since year 2009.” Over 50 journalists with vast experience in Parliamentary reporting are being targeted under this scheme.

This ridiculous document was later plainly denied by all the commissioners at Parliament, prompting the Deputy Speaker of the House, Hon. Jacob Oulaunyah to declare it null and void, thanks to spirited resistance from the Uganda Parliamentary Press Association (UPPA).

We have witnessed a pattern of events aimed at suppressing the media and closing down the space for civil society organizations to operate efficiently and effectively. Such moves are very retrogressive and an affront to media freedom and other fundamental freedoms and rights of Ugandans.

Human Rights Network for Journalists-Uganda (HRNJ-Uganda) and the National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders Uganda (NCHRDU) would like to caution the Parliamentary Commission against deviating from its administrative mandate to meddling into press administration, which is a preserve of the Public Relations office in partnership with the UPPA. Parliament cannot pick who in the media should cover it. Such a decision would be unlawful, unjust, unfair and ridiculous, and therefore subject to court for a judicial review.

This move would rid the August house of seasoned reporters who have a strong institutional memory and the ability to analyze trends and patterns. Parliaments all over the world are covered by experienced journalists, not novices, because they understand the rules of procedure and the politics better. We are wondering exactly what the architects of this insulting move are seeking to hide from public scrutiny.

We know that this is a way of silencing media voices and violating freedom of expression and speech at a time when the country is tending towards critical times where a number of sensitive issues like the budget process, the much anticipated constitutional and electoral reforms and upcoming Bills that will have great impact on the human rights discourse, among others, are to be discussed in Parliament. It is the senior journalists who can articulate them better having followed up the issues progressively over time.

Could these ones be generating fear within the powers that be, and therefore trying to kill off critical analysis from the experienced journalists? Could it be that some MPs feel threatened by the senior scribes?

If there are cases of individual indiscipline, the Parliamentary reporters have an association-UPPA which handles disciplinary matters jointly with the public relations department which should handle such cases at an individual level rather than resorting to blanket administrative sanctions

**Owing to the above arguments, we wish to state as follows;**

1. Demand that the Clerk to Parliament, Ms Jane Kibirige, whose signature appears on the said document be tasked to reveal the architects of the controversial document, failure of which, she should be held to account for authoring a false document.
2. Call on Parliament which is mandated to uphold media freedoms and rights, to desist from meddling directly or indirectly in the operations of the media, since selection of reporters to cover parliamentary proceedings is a prerogative of the respective media houses.
3. We condemn any attempts to muzzle the press at Parliament and we call upon the authorities therein to categorically disassociate themselves from such ridiculous plots.
4. UPPA should move fast to address any such concerns labeled against Parliamentary reporters in a bid to ensure high ethical conduct of its members.

For God and My Country



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