



# HUMAN RIGHTS NETWORK FOR JOURNALISTS - UGANDA

*In Defence & Promotion of Freedom of Expression, Information & Media Freedom*

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HRNJ-Uganda Press Statement: For Immediate Release

***“Blatant abuse of media freedoms by State agencies threatens the watchdog role of the media ahead of the 2016 general elections in Uganda. Perpetrators must be brought to book.” Said HRNJ-Uganda.***

The government should uphold its duty to protect freedom of speech and expression be it information and ideas which are favorable to government or which offends, shocks or disturbs those in power as long as it is of public interest to the general population. This protection is particularly crucial in an election period, when the public relies on the media to provide equitable and factual information regarding the political discourse in the country.

In the last 30 days, HRNJ-Uganda documented three serious abuses to the media by State organs and politicians which have majorly curtailed the enjoyment of the rights enshrined in our Constitution. The first occurred on July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015, when the Uganda Communications Commission issued a threatening statement to all broadcasters warning them against “negative and unprofessional trends” and “unauthorized and unreliable sources of information”.

Another happened on July 21<sup>st</sup> 2015 in Gulu when the police, acting on the orders of the Resident District commissioner of Gulu Andrew Moses Awanyi, arrested and detained a Jal Fresh FM radio talk show host, Payira Bonny, along with his three panalists; Okot Thomas, Oloya a.k.a Toko, a student at Gulu University, Okyak Silva -a former Guild President of Gulu University and Agwen Samuel the Local Councilor for Laroo Division in Gulu Municipality for alleged abusive language against President Museveni when they questioned his commissioning of uncompleted Gulu-Atiak road. On the same day, Baba FM, a local radio station located in Jinja District Eastern Uganda, Switched off the radio about 15 minutes into a one hour talk-show in which an opposition presidential hopeful, Dr. Besigye had been hosted, reportedly on the orders of the station management. The following day, three journalists were suspended from the station as a result.

HRNJ Uganda is extremely concerned by the government’s silence and failure to carry out its responsibilities to protect journalists and the general citizenry Constitutional right to freedom of expression and speech. This silence is an abdication of responsibility.

These incidents are unacceptable and are a breach of Uganda’s domestic laws, regional and international obligations to which Uganda is a party. These actions arbitrarily limit and impede individuals’ rights to express their views freely, and to gain information from thoughts expressed by others. Protection of these rights requires government action against the perpetrators and pro-activeness of mandate bodies like the Uganda Human Rights Commission and Ministry of Information and National Guidance by initiating investigations into the said violation of media rights.

The media owners and broadcasters, in spite of their own political leanings, must understand that the airwaves are a public property entrusted to them, which should not be used to undermine the rights of other Ugandans. Under the Uganda Communications Act, Schedule 4 (d), broadcasters must ensure that ‘where a programme that is broadcast is in respect to a contender for a public office, each contender is given equal opportunity on such a programme.’ UCC therefore has a responsibility to ensure that the airwaves are used responsibly, and that media owners do not deny the public their right to receive, seek and impart information through the media.

All media owners and managers should ensure that during this sensitive political heat in the run up to the general elections, all players are treated fairly and equitably in dire pursuit of free and fair elections which will in turn bleed and entrench the desired democracy which is obligatory for development in the country.

For God and My Country



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