

HRNJ-Uganda statement on President Museveni' political threats to the Ugandan media

Kampala, 10th January 2013; Human Rights Network for Journalists-Uganda is concerned about the escalating attacks on the media by the politicians, and the resultant negative implications on fundamental freedoms and media rights in the country.

The year 2012 witnessed a number of attacks and assaults on independent individual journalists and media houses at the hands of mainly the police and politicians. Over 80 cases were documented by Human Rights Network for Journalists-Uganda. The situation worsened with the mysterious death of the Butaleja Woman MP Cerinah Nebanda which clearly shows that some government official had been unsettled by the media attention Nebanda's death has provoked.

Early this year, the Ugandan police arrested and questioned members of the anti-corruption civil society group who were distributing anti-corruption news bulletins dubbed the 'Black Monday' and other materials at Wampeewo round-about in the country's Capital Kampala. They were questioned for about 2 hours and released without bringing any charges against them. Human Rights activists criticized this as a clear violation of Ugandans' inalienable right to assemble and associate

In his address at the end of year 2012 thanks giving service, hosted at State House Entebbe last month, President Yoweri Museveni vowed to close down radio stations that host undisciplined civilians who he accused of using them to create disharmony and to de-campaign development projects. He threatened the political elite and the media who he accused of "indiscipline, endless lies, and sabotage." The President consequently warned that "Firm steps will be taken to end this indiscipline."

"The pessimism and misinformation spread by liars is totally false and should be rejected," he said, "The Radio and TV stations that peddle these lies should be closed if they are not prepared to fulfill their mandate of entertaining, informing truthfully and educating truthfully."

A fortnight later, two Museveni cabinet ministers warned that media houses that do not operate professionally would have their licenses revoked. Mr. Frank Tumwebaze, the minister in-charge of the Presidency, was quoted in a local newspaper saying that the government was out to monitor and restore sanity within the media. "We are not seeing debate but insults. The media should not be part-and-parcel of political fights. We are trying to sanitise the media, not to curtail it," Tumwebaze is quoted.

Ms Mary Karoro Okurut, the Minister for Information, is quoted to have said that government would revoke licenses of media houses that did not act within the law, "...the media houses must act within the law, if they act outside it, their licenses will be withdrawn."

This has shown direct negative bearing on the local media with a radio station in Fort portal –Western Uganda, Hits FM suspending all of political its current affairs programmes citing political pressure from the government. They include ‘Orukurato’ and ‘Ekitanganzo’ which started airing in February last year. The shows have been focusing on accountability of public funds and service delivery. Ekitanganzo has been airing every week on Thursday while Orukurato on Saturday.

The radio proprietor Mr. Nuru Byamukama, a Member of Parliament for Kitegwenda County in Kamwenge District on the ruling National Resistance Movement party told Human Rights Network for Journalists that he decided to suspend the talk shows due to immense pressure from the government, “I think we should do away with politics because that’s what the government wants. We are not talking politics anymore.” Byamukama said. He also revealed that he was first told to adjust the content of the talk shows and broadcast government developmental projects instead of airing controversial political issues.

The threats from the president and government officials come at a time when local journalists and human rights activists have faced immense pressure, intimidation, physical assaults, arrests and charges with various cases in the courts of law as a result of their work.

This situation is indicative of the persecution and harassment of journalists and the media for their professional activities. It is worth noting that there is total impunity for illegal actions against journalists, despite of the fact that all cases are reported to police authorities. It is common for police to attack journalists wearing Press Jackets and carrying their tools of work including press identity cards.

HRNJ-Uganda learnt that the Resident District Commissioner (RDC) Abdul Nimuhimbwa the district local council chairperson Richard Rwabuhinga warned two Fort Portal-based radio station managers against employing staff who insult government officials.

The Uganda Communications Commission (UCC), a statutory body charged with regulating the broadcast media in the country seems to have fallen out of trust by the media proprietors who accuse it of being used by the politicians. “I don’t know what they are accusing my radio of. UCC is being used by politicians to fight his radio. I don’t know how they work; in fact I don’t know what is happening. There is nothing in the programmes they are talking about.” Said Hits FM proprietor, Mr. Byamukama who accuses UCC of being used by politicians

UCC is however not bothered by negative claims directed towards it. It’s Executive Director, Eng. Godfrey Mutabazi brushes off the criticism as mere intimidation, “We have over 250 stations, we can’t say all of them are perfect. So we investigate some when necessary. We are under obligation to do our work; whether the politicians complain or not, we are not intimidated.”

Last year, UCC suspended staging of a stage play, 'State of the Nation -Ku Ggirikiti' on grounds that it was inciting the public. The right procedures were not followed, which led to defying of the suspension by the directors of the drama groups who went ahead to stage the play.

There is a lot of intimidation from security and government whenever the media report or discuss some sensitive issues. This contradicts the constitutional provisions which provide that human rights and freedoms are inherent and not granted by the State and that they shall be respected, upheld and promoted by all and at all times.

We would therefore like to remind the president that while it's the work of the media to mandate of entertain, inform truthfully and educate truthfully, it is also theirs to hold public official accountable and promote good and democratic governance.

In case the president and other politicians are aggrieved by the work of the media, they should resort legal redress.

Politicians should also desist from making statements that are directed at causing fear into the media from carrying out their full mandate of informing, educating and entertaining the citizens and full enjoyment of media freedoms and rights as provided for by national and international laws.

We would like to encourage the media to emphasize professionalism while doing their work, but should also stand firm against threats and intimidations that are politically motivated.

The State should investigate all report cases of attacks and assaults against the media and prosecute the perpatrators.