



# HUMAN RIGHTS NETWORK FOR JOURNALISTS - UGANDA

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

05<sup>th</sup> October 2016

**PRESS STATEMENT: *For Immediate release***

***‘Quizzing of News Editors by Parliament presents grave challenges to freedom of expression and democracy’***

Human Rights Network for journalists-Uganda (HRNJ-Uganda) is deeply concerned by the conduct of Parliament of Uganda resorting to the offence of “Contempt of Parliament” and invoking “Parliamentary privilege” as weapons or threats to discourage positive constructive criticism from the Media.

We note that in resorting to this regressive legal inheritance of the offence of contempt of Parliament and parliamentary privileges is a very deliberate and calculated attempt to stifle democratic enjoyment of constitutional liberties, but also ring-fence Parliament from public scrutiny through the media.

Historically, this privilege stemmed from the anxiety of members of the House of Commons to protect themselves from the sovereign (State). This was a very wide, catch all privilege, always susceptible to serious abuse. However, Parliamentary privilege and contempt of Parliament are limited to protecting the legislative function expressly granted by the Constitution and therefore the present conduct of Parliament is a clear abuse of this power. It’s worth noting that Britain where this offence was inherited from last used this said law against the press in 1948 as it poses grave challenges to freedom of expression and democracy.

HRNJ-Uganda further notes that the underlying consequence of such developments is to further entrench self-censorship and choke free expression in Uganda. This tool is being used by Parliament to manipulate communication. The August house is drawing boundaries for the media on how and what to write or not. This trend of operation is very unfortunate; we denounce it in the strongest terms.

The independence of the media from State control or government interference is fundamental in a democratic society that values freedom of expression and freedom of information. The role of the media in Parliament is communicating parliamentary activities to citizens. This is essential in empowering the public and the media provides the conduit through which public opinions are communicated to members of Parliament.

The concept of public interest lies at the heart of the debate surrounding the relationship between Parliament and the media; be it over legislation for the media sector or over conflict between the two institutions. A democratic society is one where citizens are exposed to all shades of opinion, regardless of whether this offends the sensibilities of some.

**We therefore call upon the noble August house to;**

- 1) Respect the media as a legitimate reflection of public opinion, public concerns and social problems and reactions to policies and programmes.
- 2) Be accessible and honest in all dealings including explaining fully all policies to the news media rather than remaining detached and secretive, or attempting to manipulate or overly influence media coverage.
- 3) Facilitate more coverage of Parliament by opening the proceedings of select and other committees to the media.
- 4) Recognize the value of an independent media in contributing towards the development of a well-informed society through its exposure to a wide range of well-articulated views.
- 5) Appreciate that the media are also responsive to the people, serving as their watchdog in reporting the actions of Parliaments and governments.
- 6) Accept that lack of some privacy is a necessary price which public office holders must pay if a free media is to remain a bedrock of democracy.

For God and My Country



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**Robert Ssempala**  
**NATIONAL COORDINATOR**