

South Sudan Media Freedom in Dilemma

By Joseph Oduha

As a journalist, it is becoming very difficult to make choice on whether to report realities surrounding the peace implementation now and inform citizens rightly whether the current messy peace will last long, simply because the moment you report these realities, then you will definitely be get wrong and your name will be place on the death row.

It is very unfortunate that quality newspapers are now force to practice self-censorship in order to survive in the Christian dominated war ton country of South Sudan, where in recent years after the conflict, scores of publications have been shut down.

Journalists and editors have to decide between risks publishing the controversial beats but always become necessary to censor because of the repressive atmosphere and the pressure on the press and journalists themselves.

Imagine just what the minister of information said early last week, where he threatened media and journalists that “if you don't know what to write don't waste the printing press ink on rubbish, and you should not pretend to be a Journalist on collecting wrong information otherwise you will pay for it.” What does the Media going to pay?

Michael Makuei also said in his own words that “some journalists will go before he leaves the Ministry or go with him.”

The threats by the government official mouth-piece have already tarnished the image of the country and that of the government as well not only at the regional level but also internationally because South Sudan is a member of the UN, the world's leading body.

South Sudan has also ratified multiple International Human Rights Treaties and the threats by government's information ministry against journalists have completely contradicted South Sudan promises to observed human rights.

The warnings towards media fraternity in South Sudan intensified especially after the burst of 2013 December crisis and within the period of the conflict, seven journalists were murdered in what can be seen as a state policy to silenced critical reporting.

Unspecified numbers of journalists now are forced to quit the profession and others fled the country to seek safety and protection in foreign nations.

Because of the threats now, one of the things that needed to be monitored now is for example, comments made by top political leaders...meaning that journalists would make sure to publish only direct quotes from them. Indirectly quoting their comments could get journalists into trouble.

Current threats indicate that there are no legal aspects dealing with the press in this country anymore regardless of whether the institutions exist or not.

Recently, rights agencies cautioned government to use the right procedures and table any inaccuracies committed by the media to the legally mandated bodies that are set by law to regulate the work of the media. Their reaction was flamed by government threats issued recently against journalists.

Edmund Yakani, an activist also recently said media and journalists should be given the space for fighting the culture of rumors mongering in the society by getting involve in balancing story or information.

“Implementation of peace agreement is political process that requires provision of space for expression of information in balance and professional manner,” Yakani stressed in response to Makuei’s threats.

Journalism in South Sudan is like walking on the busy road blindly and finds you knocked down by a car or a motorbike.

Reporting on real issues affecting the majority poor always lands a journalist in inferno or life forcefully taken by power-holders.

The trends have force newspapers to engaging in self-censorship in order to extend the life of their publications. The depth of the tragedy the media is facing in South Sudan is more to do with authorities.

Media to some extent accused of crossing the red lines when media questioned very directly the issues that are sensitive. Journalists who questioned the sensitive issues are in most cases are blacklisted and hunted for killing, torture and jailing. This act of torture, beating, harassment, arbitrary arrest and killing is an insult to the justice system in the country which is still run by transitional inherited laws of former Sudan.

So, people forget that press freedom and quality journalism are vital for empowering citizens to participate in social and political life.

Doha Center for Media Freedom 2013 July report cites that more than 450 journalists worldwide are living kilometers away from their families, friends and colleagues for the sole reason that they produce and shared information with public. Since 2008, at least 150 journalists from Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan and South Sudan were forced into exile due to work-related persecution, according to DCMF report.

In South Sudan, the need for safety and protection of journalists are very high. Attacks, death threats, torture, arbitrary detention in addition to the campaign of violence against journalists in the young nation is nowhere close to the end.

It is crucial to note that Journalists are bound by duty and passion to take the lead in the exercise of the freedom of expression to serve the public and maintain the health of their country’s democracy unfortunately democracy has been defiled in South Sudan.

Although journalists continue to face persecution and repression in the form of the death threats, kidnapping, arbitrary, detention, harassment and censorship globally, the situation in South Sudan much alarming and can only be equated to that of Syria in terms of freedom of the press.

Despite the experience of national and international legislation protecting press freedom, journalists still find themselves in danger as a result of the information they produce and publish while perpetrators of violence against media professionals go unpunished.

This has been the case in South Sudan, where no single person has been held accountable for the death of all the eight journalists who have lost their lives in service of the nation. This doesn't mean, the killers are not known but simply mean it is planned game by power-holders.

Media deserved great respect by all sectors simply because it is the cross-cutting sector that none of the sectors can't operate without media.

South Sudan government and individuals who hold power should come back to their sense that waging war against media is a great crime many writers refer to as an "act of terrorism."

South Sudan leaders who are threatening media and journalists should be held accountable of their words in case any journalist is killed because by their threats, it indicate that they are responsible for any killing of a South Sudanese journalist.

There is no doubt if any cases of killing happen to a journalist in South Sudan, individuals who have issued threats recently are responsible for the killing and media must keep this record.

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