

'Troubling' erosion of press freedom in certain SADC states

The Committee to Protect Journalists has noted "a deeply troubling erosion of press freedom in several member states, including attacks on individual journalists, media suspensions, internet shutdowns, and restrictive legislation.



Image source: Gallo/Getty.

To this end, CPJ wrote to the Southern African Development Community ahead of the 39th Ordinary SADC Summit, calling on all SADC heads of state to prioritise press freedom and the safety of journalists.

In a letter addressed to Dr Stergomena Tax, SADC executive secretary at SADC House in Botswana, CPJ deputy executive director, Robert Mahoney, writes that despite these commitments, CPJ has documented a deeply troubling erosion of press freedom in several member states, including attacks on individual journalists, media suspensions, internet shutdowns, and restrictive legislation.

Many of these threats intensify ahead of and during elections. More than half of the SADC member states are expected to [hold local and national elections](#) by the end of 2020. SADC's [principles and guidelines](#) for democratic elections require governments to "foster transparency, freedom of the media" and "access to information by all citizens". Therefore, member states must ensure a free press so that journalists can work freely and safely, and citizens can access reliable information and make informed decisions.

The letter continues: "The SADC [treaty](#) commits member states to the principles of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. In addition, the SADC [Protocol on Culture, Information and Sport](#) provides that member states should "take necessary measures to ensure the development of media that are editorially independent."

Here is a summary of CPJ's priority issues within the region:

1. Attacks on journalists

CPJ is particularly concerned with Tanzania, whose president, John Magufuli, is the incoming chair of the SADC, and where journalists operate in a very hostile environment. Freelance journalist [Azory Gwanda](#) has been missing since 2017, and the government's failure to provide accountability in his case has had a chilling effect on the local media. Just last month, [Erick Kabendera](#) was arrested and charged with economic crimes in retaliation for his critical journalism. He

remains behind bars.

However, attacks on journalists in the region extend beyond Tanzania:

- In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), journalists have [endured](#) assaults and arrests, especially while covering protests and elections or [reporting](#) on powerful individuals.
- In Zambia, journalist Derrick Sinjela is [serving 18 months](#) in prison for contempt of court in connection with his reporting on the country's Supreme Court.
- In Mozambique, journalist Amade Abubacar remains in legal limbo after his [arrest](#) in January; he spent 108 days in [pre-trial](#) detention in connection with his reporting on the insurgency in Cabo Delgado before he was provisionally released, and has yet to hear whether he will be formally indicted despite his pre-trial investigation concluding in July.
- In Lesotho, a military spokesperson in late 2018 [threatened](#) an investigative journalist for articles she wrote on demands for compensation by soldiers.
- During the South African elections in May, journalists faced [online harassment and cyber-bullying](#).
- In the run-up to the Comorian elections in March, and in the crisis that followed, [journalists were arrested](#) and [newspapers were censored](#).

2. Media suspensions and shutdowns

In [Tanzania](#) and [Zambia](#), authorities have used media suspensions to pull critical media outlets from the newsstands and the airwaves. During elections in late December 2018, authorities in the DRC [blocked](#) the signals of at least two broadcasters. Partial and complete internet shutdowns in the [DRC](#) and in [Zimbabwe](#) have strangled the flow of information during politically tense periods.

3. Restrictive legislation

Criminal defamation, sedition, and secrecy laws—many of them [vestiges of the colonial and apartheid eras](#)—have been used to target critical journalists and media outlets in Namibia, [Zambia](#), [Botswana](#), and the [DRC](#). [Zimbabwe](#) and [Lesotho](#) have recently struck down criminal defamation laws and CPJ urges member states to follow this example. Through new [regulations](#), Tanzania has also set impossibly [high barriers for bloggers](#) to operate while seeking greater control of what citizens can say online.

Says Mahoney: “These are difficult but not intractable challenges. In fact, SADC member states have been catalysts for the development of press freedom in Africa, and around the world. Consider that May 3, the date of the 1991 [Declaration of Windhoek](#)—in which African journalists affirmed that the ‘free press is essential to the development and maintenance of democracy in a nation, and for economic development’—later became the day on which the global media community commemorates World Press Freedom Day.

“Press freedom is essential to ensuring sustainable development, peace, and the enjoyment of human rights, and SADC can and should be at the forefront of protecting and promoting press freedom in Africa and the world. But in order to do so,

it must hold its member states to account on press freedom violations.”

The 39th Ordinary Summit of Heads of State and Government is a prime opportunity for SADC members to raise the issues CPJ has documented with relevant states; and CPJ urges SADC member states at the Summit to recommit to press freedom, and call for the release of all imprisoned journalists and the protection of free and independent media in the region.

CPJ welcomes an opportunity to discuss this further with the SADC secretariat, as well as representatives of member states.

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