

Tanzania: Media march for press freedom

Tanzania's journalists took to the streets of Dar es Salaam last week to protest against the three-month banning of a newspaper that exposed official corruption. According to the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), it was the first time in Tanzania's history that journalists marched against the government, accusing it of trying to stifle media freedom.

Editors and reporters from various media organisations staged the protest on 28 October, 2008 against the government's recent three-month ban slapped on the weekly *MwanaHALISI* newspaper, allegedly for publishing seditious material, report MISA and the Media Institute of Kenya.

Reporters sealed their mouths with tape while denouncing the state's "disrespect of media freedom" on their placards. They marched to the headquarters of the Ministry of Information, Culture and Sports - the ministry that announced the ban on 13 October - to present a petition demanding that the government reverse its decision.

IFEX members also condemned the ban. "Shutting down a paper for publishing news of interest to the public is completely unacceptable. We call on Tanzanian authorities to immediately reverse the ban, and to refrain from pursuing legal charges against the paper and its staff," said the International Press Institute (IPI).

"The suspension is a death sentence to the newspaper as it will lose revenue and affect the livelihoods of all workers; tens of families of those working for the newspaper are affected," said MISA-Tanzania.

The story, published in the 8 - 14 October edition of the paper, alleged that senior government officials were plotting to unseat President Jakaya Kikwete in the 2010 election. The article said former Prime Minister Edward Lowasa and one of the President's own sons, Ridhwani, were involved in the plot to ensure Kikwete becomes the first Tanzanian president to serve only one term in office.

Only days after the publication of the story, Information, Culture and Sports Minister George Mkuchika banned the tabloid for three months for repeatedly published "seditious" stories. He added that the suspension was designed to send strong signals to other newspapers with similar intentions of violating "ethical reporting" under the guise of exercising their right to freedom of expression.

Police detained and interrogated Saed Kubenea, the paper's managing editor and the author of the story, for several hours, and charged both him and the paper's editor, Jabir Idrissa, with sedition.

In response, Tanzanian journalists, editors and media associations resolved to boycott publishing all news concerning Mkuchika.

Meanwhile, some ruling senior party officials are threatening to file libel suits against *MwanaHALISI* claiming billions of shillings in damages.

MwanaHALISI, launched in mid-2006, has faced "a pattern of harassment" because of its investigative pieces, says MISA. The publication has been repeatedly threatened by the Department of Information, a subset of the Ministry of Information, Culture and Sports. In January, Kubenea and his colleague Ndimara Tegambwage were attacked and beaten by three assailants wielding machetes in the paper's offices. The two were disfigured when the perpetrators poured acid on their faces. The attacks were followed by incidences of harassment in which the police searched the offices of the newspaper and home of Kubenea in July 2008.

While the jailing and harassment of journalists is frequently used in East African Community partner states - Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi - banning newspapers is less common, and never for as long as three months, said an editorial in the Kenyan paper, *Daily Nation*.

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>