

Disrupters gather in Joburg on behalf of freedom

Opening the [Oslo Freedom Forum](#) (OFF) in Johannesburg, [Thor Halvorssen](#), the forum's founder and CEO of the [Human Rights Foundation](#) (HRF), described the event as much more than a conference for human rights.

 By [Danette Breitenbach](#) 29 Mar 2018



Speakers included Zimbabwean civil rights activist and #ThisFlag movement leader Evan Mawarire, former Maldivian president Mohamed Nasheed, Moroccan-born French free expression advocate and journalist Zineb El Rhazoui, Arab Spring writer and journalist Iyad el-Baghdadi, Chinese-Canadian actress and human rights activist Anastasia Lin, Angolan investigative journalist Rafael Marques de Morais, and Eritrean information activist and refugee rescuer Meron Estefanos, and Egyptian actor and LGBT rights activist Omar Sharif Jr., among others.

“This is a gathering of people who are disrupting ... disrupting on behalf of freedom. We have all kinds of disrupters in the audience. This event is about the state of freedom and human dignity across the world. We seek to humanise human suffering, to encourage civil society’s involvement.”

Mandela Centenary

The forum was held in collaboration with the [Nelson Mandela Foundation](#) and the [Nelson Mandela Centenary](#).

“Nelson Mandela was an inspiration to activists across the world, whether it was North Korea defectors or women’s rights’ advocates in Saudi Arabia. It is an incredible honour for us at OFF to work alongside those who are tasked to be the guardians of Mandela’s legacy,” says Halvorssen.

Sello Hatang, chief executive of the Nelson Mandela Foundation called the event “a critical moment where South Africa will be looking back and forward, with Mandela’s Centenary”, and asked how do we reimagine South Africa that cares about the vulnerable in our society and live up to Madiba’s values, and building a values-based society?

If we go back to why Madiba established the foundation, he continued, it was with three ideas in mind. “Democracy building, peace building and ensuring that we build a culture of human rights. If these three can be achieved in a day of reimagining human rights culture, a day where people put their own lives on the line to ensure there is no vulnerability around the world, then we will get somewhere.”

He added: “Today is a day to shake the narratives that need shaking and for people to rethink democracy. It is for citizens to say what can I do to help others.”

A platform for the ignored

Today, half the world’s population lives under authoritarian regimes, whether these are dictatorships or competitive authoritarian states. OFF is here to address that problem, Halvorsen said. “It was created as a platform to provide a voice to those who are ignored, or whose struggles have been ignored. The media is an important component of the forum.”



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Sadly, the world’s democracies have failed at addressing the issue of tyranny across the world, so it is up to private individuals to help other individuals. “Engineers helping engineers, artists helping artists, veterans helping veterans, we gather here today in collaboration with the Nelson Mandela Foundation because we cannot depend on the governments of the free world to safeguard and promote human rights. It is up to civil society. The OFF extends a cordial invitation to any South African to join our movement.”

The speakers we have brought here are here to speak with you and to share their experiences, and to learn about yours, he adds.

Hatang also alluded to this event being a teaser for many more and a bigger forum next year.

ABOUT DANETTE BREITENBACH

Danette Breitenbach is a marketing & media editor at Bizcommunity.com. Previously she freelanced in the marketing and media sector, including for Bizcommunity. She was editor and publisher of AdVantage, the publication that served the marketing, media and advertising industry in southern Africa. She has worked extensively in print media, mainly B2B. She has a Masters in Financial Journalism from Wits.
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