

Freedom of the Press in Uganda

The paradoxical contrast in Uganda between a vocal and diverse press and the regular arrests and prosecutions of leading media figures results in part from the draconian press laws which remain on the books, despite the constitutionally guaranteed right to freedom of the press. Some of the laws used to prosecute journalists, such as the law on seditious libel, date back to the colonial era. **The sedition statutes give the government draconian powers to arrest and prosecute journalists who raise the government's ire, as demonstrated in the cases outlined below.**

In 1995, the Press and Journalists Law came in effect after its adoption by the non-elected National Resistance Council. The law requires all journalists to be licenced, and provides for a media council which monitors and disciplines journalists and editors. While the media council is empowered to arbitrate disputes between the media and the State, to discipline journalists, and "to regulate the conduct and promote good ethical standards and discipline of journalists," the government rarely resorts to the Council for the resolution of disputes with the media, preferring to rely on more severe criminal sanctions instead.(P)

The Press and Journalists Law of 1995 and the various criminal statutes such as sedition and criminal libel which are used against journalists are vigorously opposed by journalists as a limit on the freedom of the press. **In June 1997, the Uganda Journalists Safety Committee brought two petitions in the constitutional court, one challenging the press and journalists law and another challenging the sedition and criminal libel sections of the criminal code. The petitions were dismissed in December 1997.**

The situation deteriorated in 2002. The government allowed little room for free expression and diversity of views. There was a generalised resistance to change, and the authorities targeted news media believed to support the opposition.

The national assembly passed a new anti-terrorism bill on 20 March 2002 providing for sentences of up to 10 years in prison for publishing news "likely to promote terrorism." Signed into law a few weeks later by President Museveni, it also established the death penalty for acts of terrorism or financial support for terrorist organisations. **The authorities said Uganda was just implementing UN Security Council resolution 1373 on terrorism.** But The Monitor said it would "bury the truth" because journalists would no longer be able to report clashes between government forces and rebel groups without risking a prison sentence. Also, by discouraging the victims or witnesses of clashes from talking, it weakened the depth and quality of news reporting in Uganda, the newspaper said. The government said it wanted to ban radio stations from interviewing members of the public in mid-August after impassioned criticism of the authorities were voiced on the air by people interviewed on the street.

The Monitor, the country's only independent daily newspaper, was the regime's leading target. Its articles, sometime very critical of the authorities, were a source of the utmost irritation to the civilian and military leaders.

P: Press and Journalist Statute (no. 6 of 1995), section 10.