



## MEDIA FREEDOM REVIEW-DECEMBER 2021

The monthly 'Media Freedom Review' is a publication of the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) produced from the monitoring and reporting on freedom of expression and of the press, internet freedom, digital and online rights, and safety and security of journalists in Sierra Leone.

In December 2021, the MRCG followed incidents and activities of the physical assault and detention of a journalist; a newspaper's letter of complaint of threats and verbal attacks against it; follow up on court matters between an editor and a lawyer and between a media house and the Electricity Distribution and Supply Authority (EDSA); the status of a complaint before the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone (HRCSL), the invitation of Chairman of the National Grand Coalition (NGC) party and the arrest and detention of Unity Party leader for critical comments on the mid-term census; the arrest and detention of a Pastor for allegedly using obscene and insulting words against President Bio; digital attacks, and insults and intimidations on Facebook against Asmaa James, Hawanatu Konneh Fofanah and an ethnic group.

The Sierra Leone Police (SLP) alleged to have physically assaulted and detained Ransford Wright, a staff (camera operator) of the *Africa Young Voice (AYV Media) Empire* on 13 December 2021. According to the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), the staff had gone to the Central Police Station to get the other side of a story he had filmed earlier on the same day of an accident involving an SLP motorcycle, a commercial motorbike (Okada), and a child victim. SLAJ and AYV in their releases condemned the attack and urged the leadership of the SLP to take appropriate action against the alleged perpetrators. The SLP Management in a press release dated 14 December 2021 acknowledged the severity of the allegations and instructed an investigation to be conducted.

The *Salone Compass Newspaper* in a letter dated 14 December 2021 brought to the notice of SLAJ and MRCG 'scathing verbal attacks and threats to the entire editorial team of *Salone Compass* from unknown members of the general public through phone calls.' It pointed that the attacks and threats started on 13 December 2021 after they had published a story with the banner headline "POLICE PLANS MASSIVE ARRETS" which was news reported at the SLP presser on 9 December 2021 at the Police Headquarters. The newspaper said it was also accused of inciting the public to boycott the mid-term census and that some of the anonymous callers identified themselves as police officers.

In a follow-up on the court matter between the editor of *Voice of Salone Newspaper*, David Johnson and Sydney Campbell Esq. at the Ross Road Magistrate Court, the matter was resolved in an out of court settlement. Campbell Esq. said, based on the advice of his family, they have peacefully resolved and settled the matter out of court on 2 December 2021. The matter was in connection with a complaint Campbell Esq. had filed in November against the editor on the grounds of 'insulting statements' via WhatsApp.

In a follow up on the court matter between *Star Radio's Media One Center* and EDSA in connection with an alleged illegal electricity connection by Star Radio, the matter is still in court. The station manager, Abdurahman Kamara, said the matter had received three court hearings and that the police had stopped the frequent unwarranted visits around the media house after he had reported the issue to SLAJ.

In a follow up of the complaint at the Human Rights Commission for Sierra Leone (HRCSL) made by journalist Osman Hardy Jalloh against Magistrate Joseph Toby of Magistrate Court Number 2 in Kenema on his arrest and detention, Deputy Director, Regional Service East of HRCSL, Sylvester Kallon, said they had done the admissibility letter and that they were now looking at the legal instrument that qualifies the matter into human rights violation.



The Inspector General (IG) of Police on 7 December 2021 invited the National Chairman and Leader of the NGC Party, Dr. Dennis Bright to report at the Police Headquarters, Freetown due to an interview he granted **Radio Democracy 98.1 FM** in connection with the proposed 2021 Mid- term Census which the NGC and the Coalition of Progressive Political Parties (CoPP) objected to. The IG said they were concerned as to the way Dr. Bright put out his messages to the public. The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) in a closed door, interviewed Dr. Bright in the presence of his lawyers for close to two hours and was later released on the same day.

The 2018 presidential aspirant for the Unity Party, Femi Claudius-Cole on 13 December 2021 was arrested and detained at the CID by police for an alleged negative comment she made on **Radio Democracy 98.1 FM** in relation to the 2021 mid-term housing and population census. The matter is still at the CID.

The Sierra Leone Police arrested and detained Pastor Septimus Yambasu on 14 December 2021 for allegedly using obscene and insulting words against President Julius Maada Bio. Pastor Yambasu who is a driver of a commercial vehicle reportedly made the statement in his vehicle along the Jui Wilberforce axis and one of his passengers reported the matter to the police. He was charged for insulting conduct contrary to section 3 (1) of the Public Order Act of 1965. The matter is at the Pademba Road Magistrate Court No 1 in Freetown. Pastor Yambasu was initially refused bail, but was later granted bail during the second court sitting. The matter is still in court.

Alhaji Amadu Bah, a popular artist known as LAJ in a Facebook live video circulated on social media platforms verbally attacked and insulted Asmaa James, station manager of **Radio Democracy 98.1 FM** on 13 December 2021, as a result of a report aired by **Radio Democracy** on a bench warrant ordered by a magistrate for LAJ. SLAJ on 13 December 2021 accompanied Asmaa James to the Cyber Unit of the SLP and filed a formal complaint against LAJ for verbally attacking and insulting her personality. SLAJ, MRCG, Women in the Media Sierra Leone (WIMSAL) and other groups condemned the actions of LAJ. In an open letter on Facebook dated 13 December 2021, LAJ apologised to Asmaa James and the women of Sierra Leone as he expressed regrets and took full responsibility for his actions. On 22 December 2021, Asmaa James in her Facebook post said she had forgiven LAJ and let go of the matter after some moments of prayers and fasting.

Hawanatu Konneh Fofanah in a Facebook post on 25 December 2021 said she and her husband had made an official complaint at the CID against an anonymous individual who attacked her personality on Facebook stating that they would stop the bullying of women on the internet. On 30 December 2021, she again posted

on her Facebook page that she had suffered too much of cyber-attack and bullying on social media. She said she had been insulted alongside her parents and that her life had been threatened.

The SLP arrested and detained Tazmo Sliz, an entertainer in Makeni, Northern Sierra Leone on 18 December 2021 for allegedly insulting and attacking the Fullah Ethnic group in a Facebook live video. The matter is under police investigation.

The details of the cases and issues will be published in the MRCG Bi-Annual Press Freedom Report for December 2021 to May 2022

The MRCG's freedom of expression and of the press, internet freedom, digital and online rights, and safety and security of journalists in Sierra Leone initiative is funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in the United States of America. The MRCG seeks to strengthen democratic dialogue and accountability, consolidate peace and ensure development through professional, independent and sustainable media, based on the right to freedom of expression and of the press.