



MEDIA FREEDOM REVIEW- MAY 2022

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 May 2022, the MRCG followed and monitored the arrest and detention of a journalist; followed up on the alleged 'assassination attempt' on a journalist; the matter between a journalist and a magistrate in Kenema, a court matter of a man reportedly suffering from 'mental illness' and a businesswoman for allegedly insulting President Bio, and the Independent Media Commission (IMC) Complaint Committee's ruling against *Justice FM Radio*. The MRCG also followed and monitored Sierra Leone 2022 Press Freedom Index ranking, the IMC's Professional Ethics Seminar and a symposium for reporters on the theme '**Media Poverty and the Future of Reporters in Sierra Leone**'.

Journalist Sorie Saio Sesay, who works for *Okentuhun Radio, FM94.0 in Karene, North-West Region of Sierra Leone*, was arrested and detained by police in Makeni on 26 May 2022 for allegedly 'publishing false information' on social media about an incident between the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) and commercial bike riders in Makeni. A press alert from SLAJ Northern Region indicated that the journalist, 'Sorie said he mistakenly forwarded the said information from one WhatsApp forum to his own WhatsApp group' which has 'high ranking officials of the SLP.' SLAJ President, Ahmed Sahid Nasralla, urged the police 'to stop arresting journalists for what they publish whether the information is false or true' and asked for them 'to refer such cases to the IMC or SLAJ Disciplinary Committee for appropriate action.' (<https://www.facebook.com/100001182651239/posts/5112954542087250/?app=fbl>). SLAJ's press alert of 28 May 2022 said it was 'worried about the health and well-being' of the journalist who was refused bail and spent two nights in police custody in Makeni before he was escorted to Freetown and detained at the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). Police say the matter is under investigation.



In a follow up on the alleged 'assassination attempt' on journalist Gibril Gottor and his family in Kambia, Gibril said the police were yet to provide him and his family security and to institute investigation into the matter. "The police told me to return home saying they will do a patrol at my house. But I refused because I did not see any evidence of their patrol. My family and I are still sleeping somewhere else for our safety," the journalist said. Police said that they had deployed personnel to patrol Gibril's house, but cannot provide him with personal security as they do not have enough manpower to do so.

In a follow up on 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, the new Deputy Director, HRCSL Regional Service East, Tom Sandi, said the complainant was still yet to sign and send the admissibility study to the Commission. Mr. Jalloh acknowledged receipt of a copy of the admissibility study. The owner of TV-News24, who was the lead complainant on the matter, told the MRCG that “Hardy is no longer affiliated with Tv-News24, so I can’t speak on his intentions on this matter.” Journalist Osman Hardy Jalloh told MRCG that “my former boss, owner of TV-News24, was pursuing the matter on my behalf; but I am no longer affiliated with the organization. I don’t have the finance to pursue the matter on my own. So, if my former boss said he was no longer pursuing it, then so be it.”

In a follow up on the matter of Mohamed Mansaray, popularly known as ‘Blacker’, who reportedly suffers from mental illness, and Kadiatu Yankaday Kamara a trader, who were both sent on remand to the Freetown Correctional Centre for allegedly insulting President Bio, the matter had been discharged from the Pademba Road Magistrate Court No. 4 presided by Magistrate Rashid Jalloh. No evidence was proffered against the accused. Legal Link, a human rights organisation, helped to secure the discharge verdict for ‘Blacker’.

In a follow up on the temporal shut down of the operations of *Justice Radio* in Freetown for 10 hours by the IMC in connection with its program titled; “**The Justice Show**”, the IMC’s Complaint Committee findings showed that the station manager was aware that what was aired on the program was unprofessional and a breach of some of the provisions in the IMC Media Code of Practice and the IMC Act of 2020, and posed a threat to public order and security. The Complaints Committee recommended that a fine of Le1, 000,000 (One Million Leones) be levied on *Justice FM Radio* for breach of the accuracy, truth and impartiality provision in Section 3, Principle 6 of the IMC Media Code of Practice, and that the station should temporarily suspend the ‘Justice Show’ until IMC conducts a monitoring and inspection visit to assess their editorial and technical capacities to manage such a program professionally. The IMC Board at its meeting held on 4 May 2022 endorsed the recommendations.

In the 2022 World Press Freedom Index published on 3 May 2022 by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Sierra Leone made significant progress moving 29 places higher in the Index ranking, from 75th in 2021 to 46th out of 180 countries in 2022. The improvement according to the report was due to the repeal of Part V of the 1965 Public Order Act by the government. (<https://rsf.org/en/country/sierra-leone>). The MRCG in its press release said it believed that its numerous media campaigns, publications and alerts greatly contributed to the feat. SLAJ President in commemorating World Press Freedom Day on 3 May 2022 gave an update on the status of press freedom in Sierra Leone, threat to free media and free speech and called for responsible practice stating thus: “Freedom of the press is freedom of expression for all citizens, not just journalists.” (<https://www.facebook.com/100001182651239/posts/5043830745666297/?app=fbl>). The MRCG commends the government and people of Sierra Leone for the improvement and hopes that the country will continue to guarantee freedom of expression and of the press.



The IMC, with support from the Chinese Embassy on 18 May 2022 organized a ‘Professional Ethics Seminar’ for station managers and newspaper editors in Freetown on the theme ‘**Interrogating Media Operations in Sierra Leone: Engaging the Media on Professional Ethics and Standards.**’ SLAJ President at the event

underscored that the “**training programs targeting media practitioners are very important and must be continuous because they serve as reminders of the do’s and don’ts in journalism.**”
<https://www.facebook.com/855818757931788/posts/2098910133622638/>.

The Sierra Leone Reporters Union (SLRU) with support from National Endowment for Democracy (NED), through MRCG, on 18 May 2022 organized a symposium for reporters on the theme ‘**Media Poverty and the Future of Reporters in Sierra Leone.**’ The symposium addressed the future of reporters in the current economic situation of the country, including salaries, NASSIT and other welfare concerns of reporters.
<https://a-zsl.com/slr-organizes-symposium-on-media-poverty/>.

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 will like to restate that while the country is making progress in press freedom rankings, the general climate for freedom of expression for everybody should be guaranteed.

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.

MRCG is the coordinating Secretariat for media reform, research and capacity building. It comprises Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), Independent Radio Network (IRN), Guild of Editors (GoE), Women in the Media Sierra Leone (WIMSAL), Sierra Leone Reporters Union (SLRU), Sport Writers Association of Sierra Leone (SWASAL), Mass Communication (Fourah Bay College), Ministry of Information and Communications (MIC), Independent Media Commission (IMC) and the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC).