

# **Attack on Press Freedom and Freedom of Expression: Sierra Leone's Struggle for a Free Press**

By Zainab Sunkary Koroma

In the aftermath of Sierra Leone's brutal 11-year civil war, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established under the Lome Peace Accord to promote healing and reconciliation. Among its many recommendations was a call for press freedom, enshrined in Section 75 of Volume 2, Chapter 3 of the 2004 TRC report. The report emphasized that freedom of expression is the lifeblood of democracy and that restrictions on it represent an abysmal state of affairs.

Two decades later, Sierra Leone's press freedom landscape remains a mixed bag. While the country's 1991 Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, and international treaties such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) further reinforce this right, journalists continue to face significant challenges. From physical attacks and harassment to economic hardships, the media environment is fraught with obstacles that undermine the democratic ideals the TRC sought to uphold.

## **A Fragile Progress**

In 2020, Sierra Leone took a significant step forward by repealing the draconian Public Order Act of 1965, which had allowed for prison terms of up to three years for criminal libel and up to one year for publishing false news. The repeal was hailed as a victory for press freedom, but the establishment of the Independent Media Commission (IMC) to regulate the media has raised concerns. Although the IMC is intended to operate free of government control, its commissioners are appointed by the president, casting doubt on its independence.

Despite these reforms, journalists in Sierra Leone remain vulnerable. The country's ranking in the World Press Freedom Index has fluctuated, reaching 64 out of 180 countries in 2024. While this represents an improvement, it also highlights the persistent threats faced by media professionals. Journalists are frequently subjected to physical attacks, threats, and intimidation by government officials and institutions, creating a climate of fear and self-censorship.

## **A Journalist's Ordeal**

Thomas Dixon, Chief Editor of the Salone Times Newspaper and publisher of New Age Newspaper, has experienced these challenges firsthand. Reflecting on the era of the criminal libel law, Dixon recalls a time when truth was not a defense against prosecution. He recounts an incident in which he was summoned to the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) after publishing an opinion piece critical of a former presidential aide. Only an intervention from State House spared him from imprisonment.

More recently, Dixon faced a barrage of attacks on social media and in person after criticizing a statement made by the First Lady. His office was targeted, and a bag containing important documents mysteriously disappeared. Despite reporting the incident to the police, no resolution has been reached.

Dixon also described a chilling encounter with the Inspector General of Police, who sent him a threatening message after he criticized the arbitrary use of bail. Fearing arrest, Dixon went into hiding, an experience that left him psychologically traumatized and reluctant to appear on national media.

Dixon's story underscores the broader issue of intimidation and harassment faced by journalists in Sierra Leone. Such incidents, he argues, instill fear and discourage critical reporting, ultimately shrinking the space for free expression in a democratic society.

### **The Road Ahead**

Ahmed Sahid Nasralla, President of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), acknowledges the progress made since the repeal of the criminal libel law. The number of cases involving journalists being detained or harassed has declined significantly, and legal frameworks now provide clearer channels for addressing grievances. However, challenges remain.

The Cyber Security and Crime Act, which replaced certain provisions of the repealed libel law, has been criticized for threatening press freedom. Additionally, media poverty and the influence of politically aligned media owners continue to undermine the independence of the press. To address these issues, SLAJ has focused on training journalists, promoting ethical reporting, and establishing mechanisms to ensure their safety and security.

One notable initiative is the National Fund for Public Interest Media, set to launch in March 2024. Supported by international partners and the Sierra Leonean government, the fund aims to promote independent journalism and address the financial challenges faced by media organizations. This, along with efforts to improve journalists' welfare and ensure compliance with minimum wage standards, represents a step forward in strengthening the media landscape.

### **A Call for Accountability**

While Sierra Leone has made strides in advancing press freedom, the journey is far from over. The threats faced by journalists like Thomas Dixon highlight the need for greater accountability and protection for media professionals. As Nasralla emphasizes, the media plays a crucial role in holding power to account and fostering democratic governance. Ensuring its independence and safety is not just a matter of principle but a prerequisite for a thriving democracy.

As Sierra Leone continues to navigate its post-war recovery, the lessons of the TRC remain as relevant as ever. Freedom of expression, as the commission noted, is indeed the lifeblood of democracy. Without it, the promise of reconciliation and progress remains unfulfilled.

### **The Press in Peril: A Struggle for Freedom and Justice in Sierra Leone**

Sierra Leone's media landscape faces formidable challenges, with media poverty standing tall among them. In a country with a small economy, yet hundreds of registered media houses, most are run as one-man enterprises, a precarious existence, save for a few exceptions. This fragile ecosystem is further

destabilized by persistent threats to safety and security, despite the repeal of the criminal libel law and numerous awareness campaigns and training initiatives.

The promise of press freedom, though enshrined in law, remains fragile. Government officials, theoretically aware of legal avenues for addressing grievances, have increasingly resorted to harassment, intimidation, and threats against journalists critical of the status quo. This climate of fear inevitably stifles reporting, forcing journalists to think twice before holding power to account, a dangerous trend for any democracy.

One leading voice in this ongoing struggle is Rashid Dumbuya Esq., a human rights lawyer and CEO of Legal Link Sierra Leone. Speaking candidly, he acknowledged that press freedom in Sierra Leone is, at best, embattled, a reality starkly reflected in global press freedom rankings. Journalists, he noted, continue to endure attacks, threats, and censorship, prompting Legal Link to intervene as defenders of press freedom. Dumbuya emphasized that when journalists are silenced, it is their duty to advocate, represent, and defend them, free of charge.

A striking case is that of Melvin Tejan Mansaray, a parliamentary journalist who found himself banned from the very halls of Parliament after raising concerns about the conduct of parliamentarians. The decision, made without due process, was troubling not only for Melvin but for the principles of free expression and accountability. In response, Legal Link has written to the Speaker of Parliament, urging that the matter be handled by the Independent Media Commission (IMC) rather than through unilateral parliamentary sanctions.

Dumbuya rightly pointed out that while Sierra Leone has made legal and institutional progress, with the abolition of Part 5 of the criminal libel law and the establishment of the IMC Act, these frameworks mean little if their implementation lags behind. The disconnect between legal guarantees and the reality of press freedom is glaring. What's needed now is not just policy but the political will to respect institutional frameworks and ensure accountability, even when the powerful are inconvenienced.

The absence of this accountability was evident in the handling of Melvin's case. As Dumbuya remarked, the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) could, and perhaps should have taken a tougher stance, including seeking a court declaration to reverse the unlawful parliamentary ban. Engaging with parliamentary authorities is commendable, but sometimes, justice demands more assertive legal action.

These challenges are not mere inconveniences, they are dangerous fault lines in Sierra Leone's democratic foundation. As Dumbuya passionately noted, the nation has seen the consequences of suppressing free speech before. The wounds of the 11-year civil war are still fresh, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) recommendations were clear: journalists must be given the space to do their work, with redress mechanisms rooted in civil law, not criminal persecution. Yet today, troublingly, journalists are increasingly charged under the Cybercrime Act for their publications, a development that threatens to reverse hard-won gains.

This raises a profound question: What is a journalist without their right to press freedom? Without it, they are stripped of their ability to hold power accountable, expose the truth, and serve the public good.

The chilling effect of censorship extends far beyond the individual journalist, it undermines democracy, transparency, and human rights.

Melvin Tejan Mansaray's story illustrates this stark reality. Banned from Parliament, he believes his crime was speaking uncomfortable truths, about the removal of the Auditor General, the absenteeism of opposition Members of Parliament, and the Speaker's interpretation of the Constitution. For this, he was cast as Parliament's "single most vocal opponent." His experience, he says, is that of a victim of conscience and expression, living in fear simply for doing his job.

The life of a journalist in Sierra Leone, he adds, is a delicate balancing act. Praise, warnings, and threats come with the territory, and the burden of choosing between truth-telling and self-preservation is heavy. "Journalism is not for the faint-hearted," he says, acknowledging the very real costs: sanctions, detention, prison, or worse. The recent killing of a journalist in Waterloo serves as a chilling reminder that in Sierra Leone, critical journalism is often a dangerous endeavor.

In reflecting on his experience, Melvin warns of a fragile democracy where attacks on press freedom persist. Transparency and accountability, he asserts, are built on freedom of speech, and when the media is muzzled, democracy suffers. The troubling paradox is clear: Sierra Leone is ranked highly for media freedom, yet incidents of censorship, intimidation, and legal harassment are on the rise. Without a firm commitment to protecting journalists, these gains will erode, and with them, the democratic values they uphold.

Ultimately, the press is not the enemy of the state, if anything, it is its conscience. The ongoing challenges facing Sierra Leone's media must be met with courage, political will, and an unwavering commitment to human rights. The memory of the civil war and the conditions that led to it demand nothing less. The nation's hard-earned peace and democratic progress hinge on the freedom of its press and the time to safeguard that freedom is now.

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