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Africa - DRC

Tension

Journalists and media outlets hounded as tension mounts

14 August 2015

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and Journalists in Danger (JED) are worried about a decline in the environment for journalists as Democratic Republic of Congo holds local elections, starts early campaigning for national elections, and overhauls its system of government.

The country's journalists and media outlets, whether state-owned, opposition or independent, are being subjected to all kinds of political pressure including threats, arbitrary arrest, seizure of equipment and draconian internal directives. At the start of August, many politicians and civil society representatives accused state-owned national radio and TV broadcaster *RTNC* of waging a campaign to prepare for a possible third term for President Joseph Kabila, whose current term expires in November 2016. As it stands, the constitution forbids a third term.

According to the information obtained by RSF, *RTNC* has been establishing local branches in all of the country's cities and its journalists have been subjected to internal and external pressures to promote the government's activities, to refrain from criticizing the government officials and to give no air-time to the opposition.

RSF has managed to interview several *RTNC* journalists in the capital and provinces, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they fear reprisals.

"We were recently instructed to always begin by highlighting the government's slogans and never criticize the authorities," one said. "If you dare to do otherwise, you are liable to be punished. But either way, there is no chance that the editorial board will approve a story that criticizes the government. This affects my independence and I've decided to no longer pitch stories to my editors."

Another *RTNC* journalist told RSF: *"All you need is for a message from the province's governor to arrive on the desk and everyone has to start working on the story even if there are more important ones. The directives from his office are clear. Either you help to keep his government in power or you go down with it."*

It is clear from these comments that *RTNC*'s journalists are being forced to censor themselves and must obey directives from above for fear of losing their jobs.

This pressure has compounded an overall media climate of tension and self-censorship as the ruling party embarks on early national election campaigning amid local elections at the end of August and end of October and implementation of a [law adopted in January](#) decentralizing the government and changing administrative boundaries.

Harassment of opposition journalists

According to information obtained by JED, **François Mada**, the editor of the newspaper *La Manchette*, was summoned before prosecutors in Kinshasa/Kalamu on 6 August and was lectured about an article accusing a university of mismanagement. At the end of meeting, he was placed under arrest and was only released after paying 150 US dollars.

The management of the newspaper *C-News* reported that armed men seized copies of the latest issue in various places in the capital on 10 August. This act of censorship follows many other acts of harassment targeting the newspaper in recent months, including *C-News* vendor **Dido Zamangwana**'s arrest by the National Intelligence Agency (ANR) while selling copies in Kinshasa's Place Victoire on 13 July.

In a 14 July letter to Evariste Boshab, the deputy prime minister responsible for internal affairs and security, JED demanded an explanation for this grave violation of freedom of information and the punishment of those responsible.

In the absence of any attempt by the government to justify this flagrant attack on the media – one unworthy of a government that claims to respect the rule of law – JED condemns this barbaric behaviour and insists that it must not go unpunished and must not recur.

C-News' lawyer has voiced concern about the illegality of Zamangwana's continuing detention, has pressed the authorities to publicly explain why they are holding him, and has asked to be allowed to talk to him. As a newspaper distributor, Zamangwana cannot be prosecuted under the press law.

C-News publisher [Mike Mukebaye](#) was released in July after being held for 11 months without any legally admissible complaint in his case file. Managing editor **Yves Buya**'s office has meanwhile been placed under seal and he is reportedly wanted.

Simon Mulowa, the manager of *Full Contact Radio*, a station based in Kananga (in the central province of Kasai Central), was arrested on 21 July after responding to a summons from a judge about a programme listing problems related to the new province's creation.

After being held in a cell attached to the prosecutor's office, he was transferred to Kananga's main prison and was finally released at around 6 p.m. after being held for 10 hours, but not before being ordered to report back the prosecutor's office the next day.

"We call for Dido Zamangwana's release and we point out that it is intolerable that this newspaper distributor is being denied access to his lawyers, as allowed under the DRC's constitution," Reporters Without Borders editor in chief Virginie Dangles said.

"We also condemn the harassment of C-News. In the current environment, such harassment just increases the fear of the DRC's journalist and media, which already tend to censor themselves. We are particularly concerned about the situation of the media in the coming months in the run-up to elections."

JED calls on the DRC authorities to put a stop to these flagrant violations of freedom of information and to create an environment that reassures the country's journalists about the important elections due to be held during the coming months.

"Free, transparent and peaceful elections are impossible if journalists are not free to cover the major electoral developments and to criticize problems with the electoral process without being harassed or arrested," JED secretary-general Tshivis Tshivuadi said.

RSF and JED have also noted worrying violations of freedom of information in the provinces.

In Kisangani, the ANR removed equipment from *Canal Orient TV* in the course of three days from 1 to 3 August without any official explanation being given. The station is owned by John Ilongo Tokole, who opposed the province's governor during the 2013 election.

TV reporter **Brinal Nundu** was arrested by ANR officers while working in Uvira, a town located 120 km south of Bukavu, the capital of Sud-Kivu province, on 8 August and was held for three days in an ANR cell before being released conditionally on the evening of 11 August.

Nundu, who works for *Canal 7*, a privately-owned TV station based in Kinshasa, had gone to Uvira to do a series of reports on the situation of Burundian refugees in the region and was arrested while interviewing the staff of the NGO Action Ku Saïdia.

The ANR confiscated his ID papers and his equipment and, when releasing him, ordered him to report back to the local ANR office this morning in order to be questioned about the real reason for his visit to the Action Ku Saïdia office. Nundu told JED he had been accused of doing a report at the NGO without the ANR's prior permission.

This kind of harassment must be taken very seriously in a country where, in 2013 and 2014, [a total of 82 journalists were arrested and 60 were beaten or threatened with complete impunity](#).

In a report published on International Day to End Impunity in 2014, JED said that nearly 50 percent of media freedom violations in the DRC were carried out by individuals identified as members of the army, police or security services, who had nothing to fear from the judicial authorities.

During the 2006 and 2011 elections, the state-owned media focused on the campaigns of pro-government candidates, while journalists who provided alternative coverage were subjected to harassment designed to silence them.

RSF and JED were appalled by radio journalist **Soleil Balanga**'s murder in Monkoto, in the northern province of Equateur, on 16 April by the son of Monkoto hospital's supervisor because of a report about the appointment of a new doctor to replace his father. In the four months since then, no progress has been made with the case against the murderer.

[The RDC is ranked 150th out of 180 countries in the 2015 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index.](#)
