

NEW BUT NARROW

free expression in South Sudan

By Tom Rhodes

Since Africa's newest country gained independence in 2011 the space for free expression has remained narrow and appears, with 2015 elections creeping closer, to be diminishing further. The former rebels, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) fought a 22-year civil war for greater autonomy and civil rights culminating in South Sudan's independence but a war mentality appears to prevail. "We are still recovering from a war culture," Oliver Modi, chairman of the Union of Journalists of South Sudan¹, told me. "There is just too much ignorance towards the press. We are not used to systems, structures, even the media."

Accustomed to blanket support by fellow South Sudanese during the war, replete with a highly-supportive, fledgling South Sudanese press; the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) simply is not accustomed to public disapproval. Many in the new government expect the media to simply support their efforts. "Some in the [Sudan People's Liberation Movement] want the press to become part of the government," said journalist Alfred Taban, who started an English daily, *Khartoum Monitor*², in North Sudan's capital in 2000 and now runs *Juba Monitor* in Juba.

"The [South Sudanese] press is partly to blame. During the war, the southern press acted almost entirely as an opposing voice to the Khartoum government." The government-controlled press of northern Sudan always portrayed South Sudan in a negative light during the civil war, while in turn; the fledgling southern press defended the southern rebel movement. The result of this war of words has led to a southern press unfamiliar with critical reporting and a highly defensive new government intolerant of any disapproval.

Politically-sensitive issues such as corruption, inter-ethnic and inter-clan rivalries, along with security issues linked to their northern neighbours in Sudan, have become "no-go" areas for the press, according to local journalists. Security agents arbitrarily detained and questioned Citizen TV station manager Cosmas Mundu over articles published in the station's sister paper, chief editor Nhial Bol said. He believes this is linked to an incident a week earlier where a security officer threatened Mundu at gunpoint, ordering him not to publish anything related to the vice president, Riek Machar. Local journalists covering the growing rivalry between President Salva Kiir and his deputy Riek Machar ahead of the 2015 elections, both representing the largest and second largest tribes in the country, respectively, is the latest issue security services have forcefully censored.

Past topics have proved even more deadly. In

December, unknown gunmen shot³ online commentator Isaiah Diing Abraham dead outside his home in the capital Juba. A former veteran and outspoken critic of the government, relatives and colleagues fear he was targeted for his critical columns. Diing was threatened several times prior to his killing through emails and anonymous phone calls warning him to stop writing, local journalists said. His last article,⁴ published on 27 November 2012 in the *Sudan Tribune*,⁵ urged authorities to foster a better relationship with Sudan and refrain from supporting Sudanese rebel groups. Despite claims in May by government spokesman Barnaba Marial that suspects had been arrested, nothing more is known about who the suspects are.

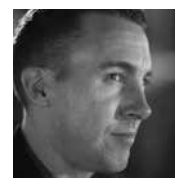
When two other critical columnists, Zechariah Manyang and John Penn, questioned the incident and criticised the lack of transparent investigation, both writers felt compelled to flee the country a month later. "The idea was for security to kill one of us, and if we got afraid, they would stop," Manyang said. "But I continued writing after the assassination and then I was on top of their list." The Committee to Protect Journalists⁶ has monitored 14 cases of attacks against the press since December 2012, averaging two a month, and all but two of these cases involved harassment and illegal detentions by security personnel. The organisation wrote a public letter⁷ to the president urging him to ensure security personnel are held accountable for unwarranted threats and detentions of the press.

Some journalists are hoping that three media bills, set up to launch a media ombudsman, a public broadcaster and access to information, will improve press conditions. But the original drafts were designed in 2007 and although tabled in parliament, none are yet passed into law. Amendments to the original drafts are also of concern. Under the current draft the media regulator's board would be appointed and supervised by the information minister, for instance, derailing its original intentions for an independent ombudsman.

As the ruling party's control and support of the public wanes ahead of 2015 elections with corruption⁸ cases and economic insecurity fostered by seemingly endless oil production disputes with Sudan over oil production, local journalists fear reporting freely will diminish further. "The authorities are getting increasingly nervous amid growing public unpopularity," *Juba Monitor* Managing Editor Michael Koma said. "We have not resorted to grave self-censorship yet, but it is likely."

Endnotes

1. <http://infoasaid.org/guide/south-sudan/organisation/union-journalists-southern-sudan-ujoss>
2. <http://cpj.org/2005/06/khartoum-monitors-license-canceled.php>
3. <http://cpj.org/2012/12/south-sudan-should-investigate-columnists-murder.php>
4. http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?iframe&page=imprimable&id_article=44657
5. <http://www.sudantribune.com/index.php>
6. <http://www.cpj.org/>
7. <http://cpj.org/2013/05/press-must-be-able-to-work-freely-in-south-sudan.php>
8. <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/insidestory/2012/06/20126664714931231.html>



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