

# Championing Press Freedom: African Journalists Push Back Against Repression

BY MARY MYERS

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When many people think of Africa, they conjure an often atrocious record on press freedom: Eritrea is at the very bottom of Reporters Without Borders' (RSF in its French initials) 2014 World Press Freedom Index. Somalia is the second worst country in the world, after Iraq, for its high numbers of unsolved murders of journalists and ranks as the fifth-deadliest country in the world overall (56 journalists have been killed in Somalia since 1992). Sudan, Djibouti, and Equatorial Guinea are also near the bottom.<sup>1</sup> Ethiopia, Rwanda and Gambia rank near the top of all countries from which journalists flee, worldwide.<sup>2</sup> Two other forbidding spots on the African map are Swaziland and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).



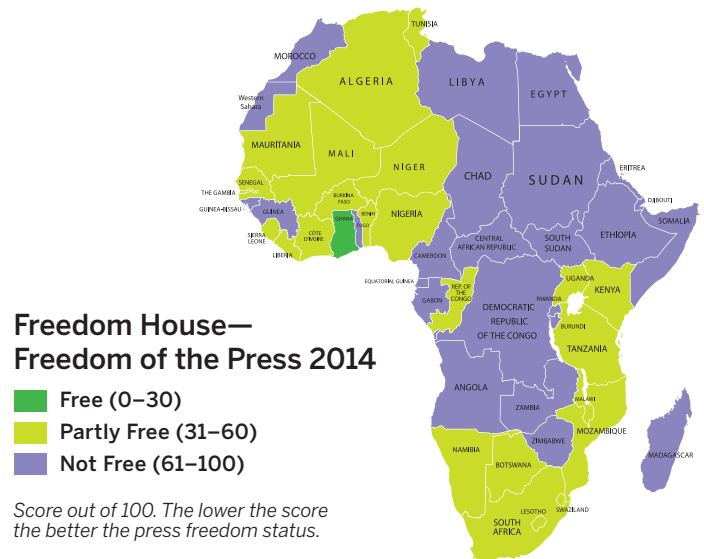
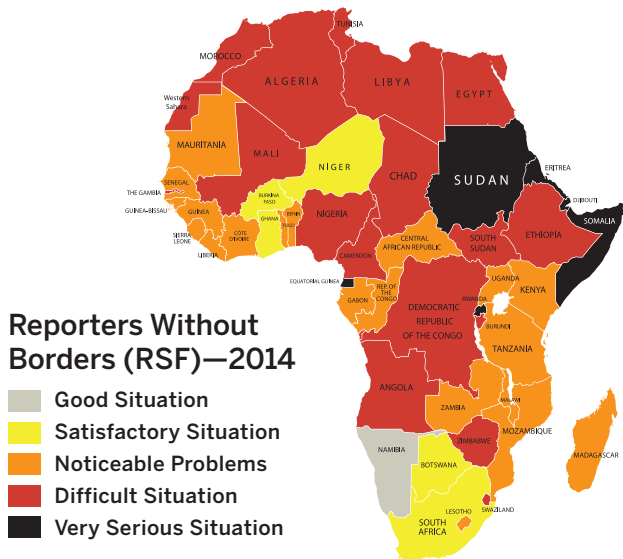
**Mary Myers** is a veteran media consultant with extensive experience in Africa. She has written five other papers for CIMA.

In all these countries and more, journalists—particularly those who investigate corruption and state-sponsored violence or give a voice to opposition politics—live in fear of arbitrary arrest, receive death threats from politicians and armed groups, and are regularly harassed along with their families.

But think again about Africa: In fact it is not the worst continent in the world to be a journalist. Sub-Saharan Africa ranks better than Asia, the former Soviet bloc and the Middle East, according to both RSF and Freedom House, though the two differ in the way they score some individual countries.<sup>3</sup> The bright spots include Cape Verde, Ghana, Sao Tome

and Principe, Mauritius, and Namibia, according to the two organizations. For many years, Francophone countries in West Africa, such as Mali and Senegal, produced a record of free expression that was the envy of other parts of the continent and indeed the world.

Such countries rank relatively well because their constitutions guarantee freedom of expression, they have many vibrant and diverse media outlets, their media-complaints bodies generally act independently of government, private newspapers and broadcasters generally operate without official intervention, there is little or no official surveillance, and there are few specific government restrictions on the Internet.



Score out of 100. The lower the score the better the press freedom status.

SOURCE: <http://rsf.org/index2014/en-index2014.php> and <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2014#.VR1RU2fwuM8>

## Brave Individuals

While there is no ignoring the terrible fates of those who are murdered, tortured, and incarcerated many brave African journalists and media personnel continue to write, broadcast, and blog every day, despite the threats. These men and women are important role models for other journalists as they uphold hard-won freedoms and resist repression, censorship, and threats. “There are so many examples of courageous African journalists,” says Professor Marie-Soleil Frère, a specialist on media in Francophone Africa. “I believe that single individuals can make a difference and show their audiences that it is still possible to think independently and refuse authoritarianism.”

- In **Angola**, **Rafael Marques de Morais** continues to head the anti-corruption watchdog *Maka Angola*, despite having been jailed by the regime several times and currently facing a libel trial for exposing wrongdoing. He has received numerous international awards for his reporting on conflict diamonds and government corruption.
- In the **DRC**, **Jolly Kamuntu** continues to head up *Radio Maendeleo*, a community station in a country where at least a dozen journalists have been killed since 1992. Jolly is a brave woman in a man’s world and is constantly being threatened by the security services and armed groups.
- In **Zimbabwe**, **Stanley Gama** continues as group editor of Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe and editor of the independent *Daily News*, which has been bombed and forced to close in the past. Gama was cleared and freed in early 2015 after serving a jail term for defamation.
- In **Uganda**, **Sam Lawino** reports for the independent *Daily Monitor* and WBS TV. Almost all his family members have been killed, but he continues to fight for justice for the victims of war in northern Uganda.
- In **South Africa**, **Ferial Haffajee** won the 2014 prize for International Press Freedom awarded by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and continues as editor-in-chief of the weekly investigative paper the *Mail and Guardian*, despite threats of violence against herself and her staff for controversial coverage of politics and corruption.
- In **Niger**, **Moussa Kaka** continues to run his independent radio station, Saraounia FM, as well as reporting regularly for France’s Radio France Internationale. He was jailed for a year in 2007 for interviewing Tuareg rebels and was freed only after an international campaign and outcry.
- In **Burkina Faso**, **Newton Ahmed Barry** continues to edit the newspaper *l’Événement*, despite having survived many threats on his life. His car has been vandalized and his offices ransacked. *L’Événement* is one of few investigative papers in Burkina Faso.
- In the **Republic of Congo**, **Christian Mounzeo** continues as an activist and a human rights defender with the Association for Peace and Human Rights and the Publish What You Pay Campaign. Detained several times and continually harassed by the authorities, Mounzeo regards himself as a journalist, campaigning against state impunity and for transparency in oil and mining.
- **Rwandan** journalist, **Ally Yusuf Mugenzi**, continues to broadcast from London as editor of the BBC’s Great Lakes service, despite threats and jamming by the Rwandan regime. This radio service reaches millions with news and information which would be banned if it were broadcast from inside Rwanda.
- In the **Central African Republic**, the team at Radio Ndeke Luka has kept its station on the air since 1998 and during the current conflict despite harassment and lootings. Technician **Ceraphin Ganmo-Missipande** and announcer-producer **Pascal-Isidore Boutene** have continued since it first went on air—two military coups ago.



Satirical cartoon from 2008 by Plantu depicting Moussa Kaka

Credit: Radio France Internationale/Free Moussa Kaka campaign/YouTube



## Three Case Studies

The following are a small selection of how individual African journalists are currently overcoming the restrictions they face.

### ALLY YUSUF MUGENZI — RWANDA/UK

**A**lly Yusuf Mugenzi's voice is so popular in Rwanda and the Great Lakes regions that there are Rwandan children in refugee camps in eastern Congo named after him. Yet this well-loved journalist cannot go back home and must broadcast remotely into Rwanda on the BBC from London. Mugenzi says, "I've become immune to threats, they've become something normal." At present his programs are jammed on the FM frequency in Rwanda and his broadcasts can only be heard on shortwave radio or through SoundCloud on Facebook. Before the ban, his weekly current affairs debate program, *Imvo n'imvano* (The Heart of the Matter), was thought to be Rwanda's most popular radio program. The Rwanda government also blocked the BBC Gahuza website in Rwanda in retaliation for a BBC TV documentary in October 2014 that was critical of President Paul Kagame.

"There is a smear campaign against the BBC, and they punish my name and accuse me of changing the history of the genocide," Mugenzi says, following an interview he did with a controversial historian. "The government has also tried to get me sacked from my job with the BBC," he adds. "Most of the brave journalists have left Rwanda now or they are lying low... There are no real pressure groups in Rwanda these days; civil society is just by name only."



Staff at BBC Great Lakes Service: Mugenzi is seated in the middle.

### SAM LAWINO — UGANDA

**S**am Lawino lost most of his family during the conflict in Northern Uganda, when Kony's Lords Resistance Army (LRA) and Ugandan government troops fought a terrifying war in which thousands of civilians were killed. Lawino covered the conflict extensively before the LRA was flushed out of Uganda in 2006. Now that a fragile peace has returned, Lawino is continuing to report from the northern town of Gulu for NTV, a Kampala-based outlet.



Sam Lawino

Credit: Oily Steeds/Channel 4

Often covering opposition events, he still suffers regular threats and intimidation. He says "sometimes there are verbal attacks against me by the security apparatus, especially the police and the intelligent services over stories they deem critical against the state." Lawino is currently facing legal proceedings in the High Court for a story investigating Resident District Commissioner Odongo Milton. Lawino says that Milton ordered the beating and eviction of school pupils and their teachers to force them out of a community school located on land that the government wants to hand over to an Indian investor, Madhvani Companies, for growing sugar cane. In 2009 the same official said at a public event that "people like this journalist [meaning Lawino] must be eliminated."<sup>4</sup> Despite such threats, Lawino says, "My favorite is covering stories of political corruption, poverty, human rights abuses, poor governance, and rule of law to mention but a few."

"Today Uganda is sliding backward in terms of media freedom," he says, but, on a more optimistic note he adds, "Other journalists/writers see me as a model for them because of the courage and passion I have towards reporting for my community."

### RAFAEL MARQUES DE MORAIS — ANGOLA

"I've been thrown in jail by the regime several times," says Angolan journalist and anti-corruption activist **Rafael Marques de Morais**. "The first time I was interrogated and harassed by police was during the war [Angola's civil war: 1975–2002] essentially

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Rafael Marques de Morais

### Three Case Studies, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

because I wrote against the process of conscripting the youth. It was an anti-war piece and I paid for it. And the second time I wrote...that the president was a dictator and corrupt, and I was thrown in jail for that... [I was in] solitary confinement for 11 days in a special Stasi-designed cell...it was just concrete there was absolutely nothing...all dark."

Marques was denied food and water until he was able to get a message out to a radio station saying that he was on hunger strike. He was allowed liquids but had to pay \$1,500 for his family to provide the water to ensure that it wasn't poisoned. "That was the most expensive water I have ever drunk in my life."<sup>5</sup>

Between 1999 and 2002, Marques wrote a series of articles about the trade in diamonds from the conflict zones and oil-related corruption. In 2006, he received the Train Foundation's Civil Courage Prize for his "unvarnished criticisms of the Angolan army's brutality and the malfeasance of the government and foreign oil interests [which] put him at extreme personal risk." In his 2011 book *Blood Diamonds: Corruption and Torture in Angola*, he described the killing and terrorizing of villagers in the name of protecting mining operations. Most recently he has exposed the corruption behind the super riches of the Angolan president's daughter, Isabel Dos Santos, in an award-winning article with Kerry A. Dolan for *Forbes* magazine. About this Loeb award for International reporting in December 2014, Marques says, "this award will reverberate in the country because corruption is no longer going to be cool."

## African Civil Society

Journalists like Lawino and Marques are supported in their struggles with legal and material help from local and international advocacy groups. Organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, RSF, CPJ and African organizations such as *Journaliste en Danger* in the DRC or the Human Rights Network for Journalists in Uganda, help them materially and legally and are constantly lobbying for their rights and changes to legislation. Financial support from international donors—often channeled through African NGOs and civil society groups—is also crucial. It helps counteract some of the hidden censorship provoked by exorbitant taxes levied on media outlets and of corrupt practices that effectively either silence journalists or buy their loyalty. Other home-grown African bodies such as the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights are important, too. Earlier this year, this court handed down a powerful first judgment on press freedom by ruling that criminal defamation laws cannot include custodial sentences or sanctions that are disproportionate, such as excessive fines. Human Rights Watch recently declared this ruling a victory for press freedom in Africa.<sup>6</sup>

In summary, the history of the press-freedom struggle in Africa over recent decades shows that change comes from a mix of factors. Conflict and political changes are often backward steps but can also sometimes be positive opportunities. African civil society is growing gradually stronger, helped by world bodies and pressure groups both on the continent and beyond. International aid and diplomatic pressure for journalists' rights can have influence too. Finally, it is the kinds of brave individuals profiled here who are helping to make a difference in Africa's negative image when it comes to press freedom. As Rafael Marques from Angola says, "When we do good investigation it gets international attention and it can be a game-changer."

### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Sudan, Djibouti and Equatorial Guinea rank 172nd, 169th and 168th respectively out of 180 (the bottom place being held by Eritrea) in RSF's index.
- <sup>2</sup> Cases assisted by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) from June 1, 2009, through May 31, 2014.
- <sup>3</sup> "Like last year, the European Union and Balkans obtained the best score (17.6), followed by the Americas (30.3), Africa (35.6), Asia-Pacific (42.2), Eastern Europe and Central Asia (45.5) and finally Middle East and North Africa (48.7)." RSF 2014 report.
- <sup>4</sup> Human Rights Watch <http://www.hrw.org/es/node/90062/section/7%20-%20ftn153>
- <sup>5</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/sites/kerryadolan/2014/06/26/getting-the-story-in-angola-jail-time-and-all/>
- <sup>6</sup> <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/12/08/dispatches-victory-press-freedom-africa>

## ABOUT CIMA

The **Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA)**, at the National Endowment for Democracy, works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of independent media development throughout the world. The center provides information, builds networks, conducts research, and highlights the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development.

CIMA convenes working groups, discussions, and panels on a variety of topics in the field of media development and assistance. The center also issues reports and recommendations based on working group discussions and other investigations. These reports aim to provide policymakers, as well as donors and practitioners, with ideas for bolstering the effectiveness of media assistance.

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