

Commentaries:

Make Tanzania a champion of transparency

By Staffan Herrström

TODAY, Tanzania is joining other democratic countries in the world to commemorate the World Press Freedom Day. I believe this is a day to celebrate the concept of free media and the efforts by independent journalists to serve their public every single day.

Give a moment of thought to where we would be without free media. State monopoly of information suffocates all efforts to question the power. It gives government the possibility to arbitrarily decide what is allowed to be known, revealed and debated – if anything. Its aim is nothing more than to secure the power of the ruling elite over the citizens.

This is a day when we all should show our solidarity with the countries and people around the world that still suffer from oppression of this kind.

Media also contribute to a deeper joint understanding of the society they mirror. Free media join individuals - not by

giving voice just to one side, one point of view or one structure of power - but through the progress made when different views are both freely and peacefully voiced and can contribute to new levels of shared understanding.

First and foremost, free media play a crucial role in fighting mismanagement, waste of taxpayers' money, abuse of power and downright corruption.

Tanzania has in my opinion benefited immensely from the contributions of investigative journalism in the cases of revealed grand corruption over the last years. As a foreigner in this country, I have the feeling that media in general sometimes are getting too limited appreciation for what has been done by brave, dedicated and professional journalists in comparison to the criticism pronounced against their certainly existing remaining shortcomings.

Still, the media are a sector in development - and in the need of further development. Measures in three areas would do a lot of difference. Some of them should be taken by the

state – such as securing the right to information. Some of them should not be taken by the state but preferably by the media themselves – such as securing editorial independence and reacting against bad journalistic ethics.

The first area is legislative reform. The Constitution of Tanzania recognises information as a fundamental right that every person is entitled to have, seek and impart. It further states that the media in whatever form shall be free and shall have the right to seek, access and impart news and information held by public and private bodies.

But this right to information is not made operational. The reality is sometimes plain secrecy without any urgent reasons whatsoever, sometimes just unavailability of the information that the public should have the right to access.

There is a qualified draft to a right to information act, presented by the stakeholders a couple of years ago. Together with a decision to abolish the restrictive and outdated laws like the 1976

Newspaper Act, the tabling of such modern transparency legislation could make Tanzania take a huge leap forward towards true, good governance. In addition it would be a clear signal to Tanzanians as well as partners around the world that repressive measures like suspension of newspapers, which are still taking place, will belong to the past.

Could there be a better way of celebrating World Press Freedom Day than in this way of making Tanzania a champion of transparency? The opportunity is certainly there.

The second area is media ethics. Mudslinging, gossip, mistreatment of vulnerable individuals and even lies are challenges not only in Tanzanian newspapers. These are problems existing also in developed countries, including my own. Progress might be there but it is certainly too slow.

The main challenge is to find a way to promote good and fight bad ethics in a way that encourages the media to act responsibly and not letting the existence of misbehaviour

become a pretext for state control – that easily could be misused.

The obvious solution is an organised system for self-regulation within the media sector combined with competence development as well as a continuous and vibrant debate among media professionals on ethical standards and how to apply them better.

Here Tanzania has made a good start through the Media Council (MCT) having shown that disputes can be resolved quickly and without having to go to court. An overwhelming majority of the cases handled by MCT have thus been resolved through mutual understanding from the parties involved.

It is in the interest of everybody, not least the media themselves, that more is done along these lines rather than getting restrictive measures imposed from above.

The third area is editorial independence – a crucial element for pluralistic and free media in any society. In practice this should, not least, mean a clear division of responsibilities between

media owners and media editors, with a huge space for the professionals to do their editorial and journalistic work free from any interference – thus, also separating news and opinions.

The importance of editorial independence is even more obvious in multiparty democracies like Tanzania and Sweden in an election year like 2010. Otherwise, resource-rich parties and politicians could easily get themselves favourable positions to the detriment of impartiality and the focus on issues that are key for voters wanting to make a well informed choice - rather than on personalities.

Press freedom is not a benefit handed out by governments, if it pleases them, to make media owners, editors or journalists happy. It is fundamental in a democracy. Let us keep that constantly in mind – making not only this day but every single day of the year a world press freedom day.

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