

IPI commemorates 'Black Wednesday' in SA

JOHANNESBURG: The International Press Institute (IPI) joined South Africa in commemorating 'Black Wednesday' yesterday, 20 October 2010 by participating in the annual National Media Freedom Day at Wits University. This year's Black Wednesday events holds particular relevance in light of recent debates centering on the government-proposed Media Appeals Tribunal and the Protection of Information Bill.



In the country to lobby against proposed media regulations, IPI acting director Alison Bethel McKenzie said "Today is a day on which we recall a dark day in South Africa's past. It was a day 33 years ago in which, under the brutal apartheid regime, freedom of expression suffered another blow."

Panel discussions

The day-long event at Wits featured three panel discussions, including: 'Freedom of expression is every citizen's business,' co-sponsored by the South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF) and the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism, and 'Media freedom, media reform', sponsored by the Embassy of Sweden in Pretoria, the International School of Transparency, SANEF and the Journalism Program at Wits as well as the Wits School of Law.

IPI highlighted its concern that throughout the southern Africa region, governments are moving towards increased regulation of the media by statute. Last week, an IPI delegation in Zambia urged the government to reconsider its move to establish a statutory "self-regulatory" body, despite the fact that the media community in Zambia has already put in place mechanisms for an entirely voluntary and independent media council, the Zambia Media Council (ZAMEC).

South African media law concerns

As a regional leader, the South African government should recognise the potentially detrimental repercussions any restrictions on the media in South Africa may have throughout the region, says the IPI.

Its concerns in South Africa centre on the Protection of Information Bill currently in Parliament, and the African National Congress' calls for a Media Appeals Tribunal that would supplant the independent voluntary South Africa Press Council. The Protection of Information Bill, which is designed to regulate the classification of state information, also encourages secrecy and contains penalties for whistleblowers that IPI fears would curtail investigative journalism, thereby threatening government transparency.

Citizen's right to know

"The significance is back in 1977 when the apartheid government banned newspapers and individuals and organisations, and it was an illegitimate government and ever since then it has always been commemorated. Since 1994 we have a constitution that cemented media freedom and we celebrate that," said Mondli Makhanya, chairman of the South African National Editors' Forum.

"For the first time since 1994, we see real threats to media freedom and this is happening under a democratic government which is supposed to uphold constitutional values and defend our freedoms but rather seems to be going the other way. That is why South African media and civil society have been working so hard to make sure that this is nipped in the bud.

"The other thing we want to emphasise with this year's event is that media freedom is not just about us journalists. It's about every citizen's right to know."

Right to Know campaign march

Earlier in the day the Right to Know campaign staged a march in Johannesburg in protest of the Freedom of Information Bill. According to Lauren Hutton, of Right to Know, the organisation will present a petition to Parliament next Thursday, 28 October 2010.

Joining Bethel McKenzie at the commemorative event was IPI fellow and chairman of the South African Press Council, Raymond Louw, and IPI press freedom adviser Naomi Hunt and IPI communications officer Nayana Jayarajan.

Panellists at the Wits University event included Professor Kader Asmal, member of the African National Congress (ANC) and a former member of Parliament; Nic Dawes, editor-in-chief of the *Mail & Guardian* newspaper; Mondli Makhanya, chairman of SANEF; former Swedish member of Parliament, former newspaper publisher and deputy finance minister, Olle Waestberg; Swedish ambassador to South Africa, Peter Tejler; and Lumko Mtimde, ANC leader and chief Executive of Media Development and Diversity Agency, amongst several others.

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