

Media threats increase in Kenya

NAIROBI, Kenya - Kenyan authorities have been accused of threatening and abusing journalists and media commentators ahead of the August elections to shut down freedom of expression.



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Authorities in [Kenya](#) have committed a range of abuses against journalists reporting on sensitive issues, threatening freedom of expression ahead of elections slated for August 8, 2017, Human Rights Watch and [ARTICLE 19 Eastern Africa](#) said in a report released this week.

Journalists and bloggers reporting on corruption, disputed land acquisition, counterterrorism operations, and the 2007-2008 post-electoral violence, among other sensitive issues, have faced intimidation, beatings, and job loss.

The 53-page report, [*Not Worth The Risk: Threats To Free Expression Ahead of Kenya's 2017 Elections*](#), documents abuses by government officials, police, county governors, and other government officials against the media. Human Rights Watch and ARTICLE 19 examined government attempts to obstruct critical journalists and bloggers with legal, administrative, and informal measures, including threats, intimidation, harassment, online and phone surveillance, and in some cases, physical assaults.

"We must stem the tide of increased violence and impunity against journalists in Kenya," said Henry Maina, regional director at ARTICLE 19 Eastern Africa. "No policy to address the situation can be successful if measures to prevent aggression against and to protect at-risk journalists are not accompanied with thorough and timely prosecutions of all crimes committed against them."

Threats

Despite receiving formal complaints from journalists, it is claimed that police have rarely investigated the attacks or threats. Since President Uhuru Kenyatta took office in 2013, there is no evidence that any security officer or public official has been held accountable for threatening, intimidating, or physically attacking a member of the media in Kenya, the report says.

Human Rights Watch and ARTICLE 19 interviewed 92 journalists, human rights activists, bloggers, and government officials throughout Kenya and documented 17 incidents in which 23 journalists and bloggers were physically assaulted between 2013 and 2017 by government officials or individuals believed to be aligned with government officials.

At least two died under circumstances that may have been related to their work. The groups also documented 16 incidents of direct death threats against journalists and bloggers across the country in recent years, and cases in which police arbitrarily arrested, detained, and later released without charge at least 14 journalists and bloggers.

One Nairobi-based editor told the two groups: “Whenever we write articles critical of security agencies or exposing corruption in the government, our reporters receive death threats from security and other government officials. This is usually followed up with withdrawal of government advertising or withholding of revenue from advertising. We now have to assess carefully whether such stories are worth the cost.”

Election

With the general election set for August, state security agencies have heightened threats and appear to be using ambiguous legal provisions to carry out increased surveillance, without warrants, on journalists reporting on sensitive issues. As one reporter said, “If you have written about security agencies or corruption-related stories, you have to know that you are being followed or your phone is being listened into.”

“For Kenya’s August elections to be credible and fair, the media needs to be able to report on pressing issues of national interest without fear of reprisals,” said Otsieno Namwaya, Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. “President Kenyatta should publicly underscore the importance of free expression and condemn threats and attacks on journalists and bloggers.

While Kenyan journalists have borne the brunt of government abuse, the foreign media have also faced reprisals for critical reporting. In 2015, Kenyan authorities [threatened to ban](#) two foreign journalists for an international media outlet for reporting on alleged police death squads implicated in extrajudicial killings.

Investigations

Despite receiving formal complaints from journalists, police have very rarely investigated attacks or threats to the media, Human Rights Watch and ARTICLE 19 found. In 2015, an unidentified assailant believed to be a government security officer physically assaulted a human rights and anti-corruption blogger, Florence Wanjeri Nderu, and warned her against continuing with her blog posts on corruption. Despite her detailed report to the police about the attack and the suspect, police have failed to investigate her case.

Timely and thorough investigations and prosecutions for these attacks and threats is crucial in ensuring that the media and bloggers report freely on issues ahead of the 2017 elections, Human Rights Watch and ARTICLE 19 said.

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