

Namibia tops in press freedom

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Namibia is now among the top 20 countries in the world that uphold press freedom, according to the recently released 2013 Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index.

The Reporters Without Borders Index measures the state of media freedom each year globally and reflects the degree of freedom that journalists, news media and citizens enjoy in each country. It also takes into account efforts made by the authorities to respect and ensure respect for this freedom and further measures; the level of self-censorship in each country and the ability of the media to investigate and criticize.



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Namibia in 19th spot

Namibia moved two places up from the 21st place in the 2011/2012 index to the 19th spot, ahead of Belgium, which last year occupied the 20th place. The country beats Western democracies such as Canada, which is in the 20th spot, Belgium (21), United Kingdom (29) and even the United States of America (32). The three European countries that headed the index last year still hold the top three positions this year. For the third year running, Finland has distinguished itself as the country that most respects media freedom followed by the Netherlands and Norway.

Turkmenistan (177), North Korea (178) and Eritrea (179) maintained the three last spots for the third year running. For the second year running, the bottom three countries are immediately preceded by Syria (176), where a deadly information war is being waged and Somalia (175), in which it been a deadly year for journalists and Iran (174) completes the list of the ten countries that respect media freedom the least.

"Although many criteria are considered ranging from legislation to violence against journalists, democratic countries occupy the top of the index, while dictatorial countries occupy the last three positions," according to the index.

Other African countries

Other African countries that maintained their ranks as the highest placed African countries were Cape Verde (25th) and Ghana (30th). South Africa is ranked at 52. The 2013 Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index marked a return to a more usual configuration after the 'Arab springs' and other protest movements that prompted many rises and falls in last year's index.

It said the ranking of most countries was no longer attributable to dramatic political developments and was a better reflection of the attitudes and intentions of governments towards media freedom in the medium- or long-term.

"The Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders does not take direct account of the kind of political system, but it is clear that democracies provide better protection for the freedom to produce and circulate accurate news and information than countries where human rights are flouted," Reporters Without Borders secretary-general Christophe Deloire was quoted saying.

Approached for comment, the Minister of Information, Communication and Technology, Joe Kaapanda, welcomed the news saying Namibia has been doing quite well in terms of press freedom and attributed the gains to the county's shining democracy.

Freedom of expression part of human rights

"We allow freedom of expression as part of human rights, which results in the proliferation of media (outlets)," said the minister of information. He further said because of freedom of speech and no constraints on freedom of the media, a lot of newspapers and magazines have sprung up in the country in recent years. He added that it was a good sign of growth for the media, which the world witnessed, such as that no Namibian journalists has ever been prosecuted by the State even after they wrote unsubstantiated stories. According to Kaapanda, government has allowed a conducive environment where criticism on its affairs is tolerated. "I think the world has noticed and appreciates that," he said, adding that the media has also contributed to political stability in the country.

Graham Hopwood, director of the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), shared the minister's sentiments, saying Namibia's ranking reflects a free and open atmosphere where more media outlets have come up. Credit should be given to government for not seeking to impose controls over the media despite the temptation.

"Namibia is doing quite well," compared to many other countries where there are many restrictions, he said. According to him, despite having a dominant ruling party, the government has not been authoritarian and has also not curtailed freedom of the media.

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