

Right2Know Gauteng launched, civil society ready to do battle



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Considered until recently a model for freedom of expression and access to information in Africa, South Africa is on the verge of becoming a totalitarian and secretive state. This is according to the speakers of the Gauteng launch today, Wednesday, 15 September 2010, of the Right2Know campaign at Wits University in Johannesburg.



The launch, well-attended by the members of the public from all walks of life, looks at strengthening civil society in its battle against the government, whose actions have been interpreted as attempting to suppress freedom of expression and compromise the flow of information by enacting the Protection of Information Bill - a law meant to classify all information deemed 'vital for the security of the state'.

"Deprive all of us of our right to know"

"If this bill is passed in its current form, it will affect not only the media, but all of us and it will deprive all of us of our right to know," Pansy Tlakula, African Union special rapporteur on freedom of expression, said.



Tlakula pointed out that SA has ratified most of the international agreements related to the free access to information and freedom of expression.

"As things stand, some sections of this bill clearly violate the standards of these international best practices and agreements, and my mandate is to ensure that the country actually abides by these rules."

She urged civil society to take the bill to the people on the ground and explain to them in simple language, same as Nigeria has been doing.

"We must protect what we have"

"We must protect what we have. In terms of media freedom, SA is not doing badly. In many countries in this continent, we will all be arrested after this meeting. So, let's protect what we have before it deteriorates into this similar situation," Tlakula said.



Despite the public outrage about the so-called Secrecy Bill, media reports have quoted the minister of state security as saying that the bill was fine, telling civil society, including media analysts and commentators, to shut up and desist making silly comments that are misleading the people.

However, Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) director William Bird said: "It is a sad day that the government is lying to us. We know and understand that this is a classic propaganda technique, but we will not be silenced because South Africans are not stupid."

Gabriella Rozzano, of the SA History Archive, said access to information is not only an elite issue or a media issue, but a fundamental issue for everyone living in society.

Take the battle to community level

Siphiwe Segodi, coordinator of Freedom of Expression Network, a community-based organisation, said Right2Know will soon take the battle to community level to involve all the people, including the rural and the poor, and tell them that SA is on the verge of becoming a secretive state.

"We must keep the fire burning until those who are responsible for the bill back off," Segodi said.

Ayesha Kajee, director of the Freedom of Expression Institute, appealed to everyone to sign the petition, [online](#) and in printed copies, to support the campaign.

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- Bizcommunity Twitterfall: [#ZAmefree](#)
- Right2Know: www.right2know.org.za
- MediaMattersZA: www.Facebook.com/MediaMattersZa and [@MediaMattersZA](#)
- Keep South Africa's Media Free: [Facebook](#) and [@safreemedia](#)
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ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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