

Secrecy Bill's final meetings resume: 'secretive' SA in the making?

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South Africa may be only one month away from turning into a 'secretive' and 'restrictive' society as the ad-hoc parliamentary committee meets today, Tuesday, 24 May 2011, in Cape Town to debate the final destiny of the [Protection of Information Bill](#) - aka [Secrecy Bill](#) - which the ruling ANC wishes to see finalised by 24 June.



However, given the 'extensive' damage the controversial legislation will do to the country's transparency and free flow of, and access to, information, the [Right2Know Campaign](#) has this week firmly objected to what it calls severe time constraints, which it claims will make it impossible for individuals and organisations opposing the bill to submit their inputs.

Right2Know Gauteng spokesperson Dale McKinley told Bizcommunity shortly that the committee will today start debating the last clauses of the bill, and afterwards working towards pushing it through Parliament to be voted on 24 June.

Most shameful, repressive legislation

Critics of the bill allege that the Secrecy Bill is the post-apartheid era's most shameful and repressive legislation that will hurt democracy and 'institutionalise' state corruption and abuse of power.

SA was ranked a distant 54th out of 178 countries listed in the 2010 Transparency International Global Index. No African country has ever made it to the index top 20, raising suspicions that Africa is not only the cradle of humankind, but also the cradle of corruption.

SA's Secrecy Bill will enable officials of any state-run agency at every level of government to classify information as 'secret', and the Right2Know campaign this week argues that this practice will open the door for potentially massive abuse of the classification system and a return to the dark days of a secretive state.

It is also believed that the Secrecy Bill will establish a huge barricade between the people and the corridors of government, where undemocratic and unlawful acts could take place totally unnoticed and unpunished.

Reiterated its opposition

In a statement issued this week, the Right2Know campaign reiterated its opposition to the current form of the bill, urging the ANC-led committee to do the following:

- Limit secrecy to core state bodies in the security sector such as the police, defence and intelligence agencies.
- Limit secrecy to strictly defined national security matters and no more. Officials must give reasons for making information secret.
- To not exempt the intelligence agencies from public scrutiny.
- To not apply penalties for unauthorised disclosure to society at large, only those responsible for keeping secrets.
- An independent body appointed by Parliament, and not the minister of state security, should be the authority of decisions about what may be made secret.
- Do not criminalise the legitimate disclosure of secrets in the public interest in a statement.

Will state heed the call?

However, it remains unclear whether the state will this time around heed this long-overdue call, given the ad-hoc committee's rush to sneak the bill through the parliamentary process, and to see it enacted.

"The bill provides only the narrowest protection for whistleblowers, and will criminalise possession and distribution of classified information, even if it is clearly in the public's interest to know the contents," Right2Know said.

"In such circumstances, journalists, activists and even ordinary citizens stand to face prison sentences, which will not only encourage self-censorship of the media, but also discourage whistle-blowing.

"Such a veil of secrecy stands to prevent meaningful public scrutiny and accountability not only of the intelligence services, but of all organs of the state," Right2Know campaign said, adding that it will continue its struggle to the end.

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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