

AFRICA

EMBATTLED AUTOCRATS ATTEMPT TO KEEP THE MEDIA IN CHECK

BY KIM NOELE BRICE

Associate for Africa

The press is capable of making or destroying governments, given appropriate conditions,” observed Zambia’s President Kenneth Kaunda in 1968. Over the years, many African leaders have, like Kaunda, recognized the threat posed by independent media to the preservation of monolithic rule.

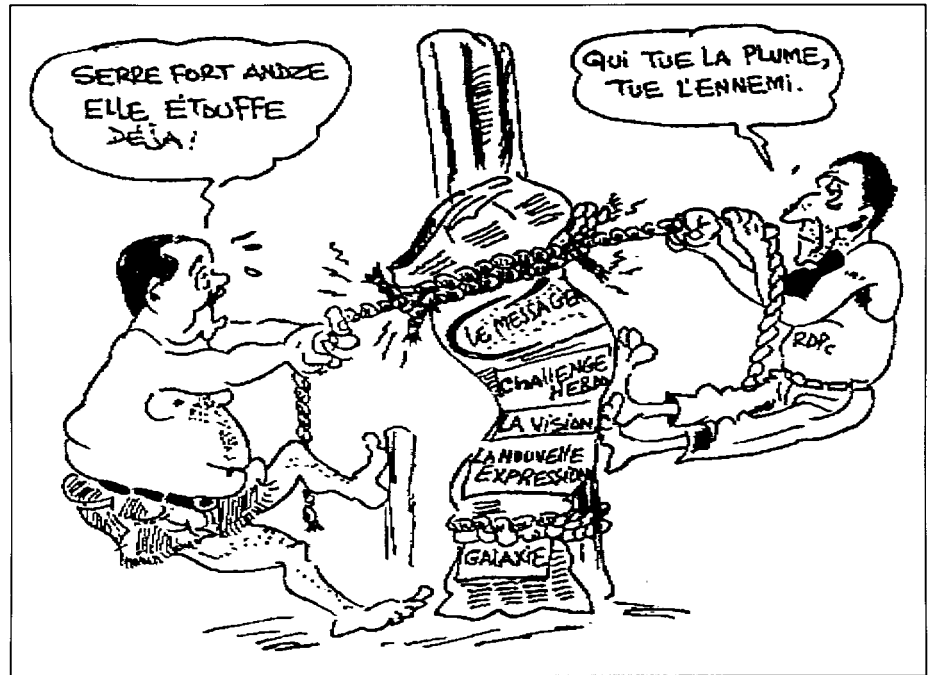
Kaunda’s observation foreshadowed the role of an independent press in the liberalization of governments in many nations throughout Africa. Just last year, former president Mathieu Kerekou of the West African nation of Benin publicly linked the outspokenness of Benin’s press with popular dissent leading to his political demise.

Historically, journalists in Africa have had to clear enormous hurdles. The growth and development of an independent indigenous press was long retarded by supremacist colonial laws and policies. Since independence, many of these laws have remained on the books and government-sponsored intimidation—ranging from arrests and legal prosecution to physical threats—has hindered journalists’ work. A lack of financial and technical resources in Africa also has contributed to the independent press’ vulnerability.

Over the last two years, however, with the decline of one-party rule in more than a dozen African nations, the printed press has experienced a remarkable development. In several West African francophone countries, including the Ivory Coast, Niger, Rwanda and Togo, independent newspapers, virtually non-existent until 1990, now proliferate. In other nations, including Benin and Mali, many restrictions have been relaxed, enabling journalists to enjoy unprecedented freedom.

During the same two-year period, however, CPJ’s documentation of press conditions in Africa indicates that government authorization to publish in most cases has not been unconditional.

In Cameroon, for example, censorship of publications prior to their distribution



“Tighten it some more Andze, she’s already suffocating.” “He who kills the pen, kills the enemy.” From *Le Messager*, Cameroon, August 27, 1991.

remains mandatory, despite President Paul Biya’s stated commitment to freer expression. The preamble to a 1990 press law states: “[P]olitical liberalization and democratization are based above all on the liberalization and democratization of thought.” Yet, the law continues, “[S]uch freedom of opinion would . . . constitute a great danger to democracy if the framework and limits were not well-defined.”

Seven of Cameroon’s newspapers have been suspended this year, and several journalists have been detained and physically attacked. In Rwanda, where the printed press has grown from a handful of independent publications to over 40 in the span of a year, at least four journalists have been jailed in 1991 for their writing, and several others threatened with legal prosecution. And in South Africa, despite the lifting of state of emergency regulations that severely restricted journalists, over 100 laws that limit reporting on issues of national interest remain in force.

While progress towards a freer press has been made in many countries, restrictions in others have become more severe. Since a 1989 coup d’état in Sudan about 40 publications have been shut down and a dozen journalists imprisoned. Several have reportedly been tortured. In Kenya, persistent attacks against journalists since the early 1980s have led to widespread self-censorship and fear. Since 1981 five magazines have been banned and several journalists have been detained without charge or trial.

In Ghana, government actions have led to the closure of several independent newspapers and intimidated journalists into silence and forced others into exile.

CPJ’s role in defending African journalists, at this stage of the continent’s history, is crucial. By monitoring attacks against the press and consistently holding African governments accountable for their actions, CPJ can assist journalists now courageously attempting to secure their professional independence. □