

# Secrecy bill endangers SA's position as 'pillar of freedom and democracy'

According to *Business Day*, SA could lose its place in the top quarter of the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index if the Protection of State Information Bill becomes law. The controversial bill is due for public hearings in SA's provinces this week.

State Security Minister Siyabonga Cwele said last week the bill was aimed at stamping out rising espionage cases and also the peddling of state information. In the latest index released last week, SA ranked 42 out of 179 countries. SA fell four places to 42 in 2011 from 38 in 2010.

"Reporters Without Borders is deeply disappointed and very worried by the South African Parliament's approval of the Protection of State Information Bill and urges President Jacob Zuma not to sign it into law," the nonprofit organisation said. "This controversial bill would restrict publication of sensitive documents by the media and expose journalists who divulge them to the possibility of imprisonment." Reporters Without Borders first voiced its worry about the bill in November. "While it is understandable that sensitive documents may be classified, the process should be clearly defined and limited, and should not threaten freedom of information and journalists' freedom," the group said.

Anton Harber, professor of journalism at the University of the Witwatersrand, said: "Of course we should care about how the rest of the world sees us and whether we are still seen as a pillar of freedom and democracy." Harber emphasised that the fact that South Africa's gone down in international rankings reflects "the threats to media freedom we have seen in the last year from the African National Congress, and occasional acts which do tremendous harm, like the arrest last year of Mzilikazi wa Afrika." Johan Rossouw, group economist at Vunani Securities, said the index would have a negative bearing on investment decisions in a country if it was ranked very low consistently.

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