

Uganda: Government pushes ahead with repressive media law

By [Joshua Kyalimpa](#)

13 Apr 2010

KAMPALA: The proposed media law is a monster, says Dr George Lugalambi, chair of a coalition fighting to preserve press freedom in Uganda. Publishers and journalists would have to apply annually for a licence, which could be revoked at will in the interests of "national security, stability and unity," or if coverage was deemed to be "economic sabotage." Professor Fredrick Jjuuko, a media law expert says such provisions violate the constitution.

"The constitution provides for a freedom of expression and media and the presumption is that means for everybody. The new bill is making this freedom exclusive for those with university degrees which is unfair," says Jjuuko.

Lugalambi, who is also head of the Department of Mass Communication at Makerere University, says the Ugandan media is already burdened with repressive laws such as the one that makes it a crime to publish unfavourable information about government activities and public officials. Lugambi's coalition - known as Article 29 after the section of Uganda's constitution that guarantees freedom of expression - calls on the government to support self-regulatory initiatives.

Uganda has more newspapers, and radio and television stations than ever before, and the media have consistently exposed corruption, human rights abuses and impunity for top politicians. The country boasted a vibrant independent press in the earlier years of President Yoweri Museveni - he assumed power in 1986 - but with growing opposition to his regime, those days could be drawing to a close, says Dr Livingstone Sewanyana, executive director of the Foundation for Human Rights Initiative.

Kalundi Serumaga, who was taken off the air on Radio One on the orders of the Broadcasting Council. He was accused of abusing the president while appearing as a panelist on current affairs programme on WBS TV called "Kibazo on Friday."

Jjuuko says the absence of public accountability mechanisms in the Broadcasting Council has stifled the culture of openly discussing public affairs on radio.

"Who is the Broadcasting Council working for?" he asks. "I think they are bound to want to appease the appointing authority who in this case will be government."

But Princess Kabakumba Labwoni Matsiko, Uganda's minister for information, insists she will go ahead with the proposed bill.

"Freedoms go with responsibilities. Do you want a media that does not follow any rules? What we are proposing is to create a responsible media and Ugandans will have chance to contribute when it's finally tabled in parliament."

The minister told a pan-African media conference in Nairobi on March, 19 that media freedom in Uganda has been abused and legislation is necessary to put it back on track.

"They write (about) everything. They draw cartoons of the president and sometimes pornography, like in the *Red Pepper* tabloid," Kabakumba says.

Media activists say government wants to gain the power to deny, revoke or refuse to renew newspaper licenses at will and without recourse to the courts of law. Article 29 has united various media organisations, including the Ugandan Journalists' Association, to resist further encroachment on media freedom.

From a business perspective, newspaper publishers also fear that the proposed amendments will hinder foreign investment into the publishing business; the annual registration introduces an element of uncertainty into any investment. Currently, newspapers and magazines are required by law to register just once, at the General Post Office.

Article published courtesy of [IPS Africa](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>