

Chapter 5

The Media

Media overview

The constitution of Sierra Leone guarantees freedom of speech and this is reflected in a general climate of press freedom in the country. Journalists, however, are poorly trained and adherence to professional standards is lacking. News media is unashamedly politically biased and opinionated, with few independent voices.

All branches of the media are regulated by the Independent Media Commission (IMC). The IMC has a Media Code of Practice outlining professional standards and ethics and includes a section on media conduct during elections. The IMC also provides an alternative complaint mechanism to using the Public Order Act of 1965, under which journalists, editors and publishers can be jailed for criminal libel. Critics say the Act has been used to stifle freedom of expression and therefore contravenes the 1991 constitution. A draft Right to Access Information Bill introduced in 2010 has yet to be approved by Parliament.

Successive governments have exerted considerable influence over the media, especially over the national broadcaster, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC). Much of the media is overtly divided along political party lines and the Media Code of Practice is widely ignored.

Media coverage of the 2012 elections was characterised by attack and counter-attack, predominantly by the two main political parties. The Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) said they had made efforts to ensure that media coverage during the campaign was issues-based. They had organised meetings with editors in an attempt to persuade them to tone down inflammatory rhetoric. Journalists complained that members of their profession who tried to remain neutral stood the risk of being 'attacked' by both sides.

Journalists in Sierra Leone are poorly trained and remuneration is low – they are often not paid at all. As a result, many have other jobs and are deemed susceptible to being manipulated by both political and business interests. Sierra Leone also has one of the lowest advertising rates in the world.

Analysts opined that the government had paid a lot of attention to the media and had sought to bring it under its control. There were allegations that journalists who had been regarded as supportive to the government were rewarded with coveted jobs as diplomats.

There was also an allegation that hate messages had been sent to certain journalists who did not declare support for a specific political party. For most journalists, it was considered

to be more beneficial to support the governing party.

During campaigning, one media analyst commented that the SLBC was disgracing the media, to the extent that some political parties had resolved not to engage further with SLBC. He said this applied to newspapers as well and that pro-SLPP newspapers were as vitriolic as pro-government publications. He said independent radio was the exception by adhering to the media code of conduct. Aside from this, the media's election coverage was denounced as deplorable.

Radio

The low level of literacy coupled with affordability make radio the most popular medium with more than sixty radio stations broadcasting in Sierra Leone. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of community radio stations, but because they are heavily dependent on donor funding, they tend not to be sustainable. The Independent Radio Network (IRN), comprising 25 community and private stations was perceived to be the most impartial and reliable source of news during the election.

Print

There are around sixty newspapers registered with the IMC but circulation is low and confined to large urban areas and the literate population. Political party allegiances are clear. In the run-up to the polls, newspapers regularly ran scurrilous profiles of rival party figures. The material appeared to be accepted as part of the cut and thrust of political debate in the media. Most media organisations do not have the funds to send reporters out of the capital, Freetown. Given the limited audience, there was a perception that newspapers were not expected to have a significant impact on voter intentions.

Television

Television has grown in popularity although it remains a long way behind other branches of the media due to its cost. The UN pumped a considerable amount of money into transforming the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) with the intention of making it more independent. However, it is still viewed as biased in favour of the governing APC. During election coverage, it was alleged that for every 15 minutes allocated to the APC, the SLPP was given two minutes. SLBC was also described as 'his master's voice'. It was only shortly before these elections that the SLPP was given its own programme. SLAJ and the BBC Media Action Trust twice tried and failed to set up a televised presidential debate. Observers were informed that journalists tended to be treated with contempt by government ministers and media organisations had experienced problems persuading politicians to take part in programmes.

A month prior to the election, Africa Independent Television started broadcasting from

Freetown. AIT is a Nigeria-based English language entertainment channel showing news, sports, current affairs, films, dramas and soap operas of African origin. AIT had also attempted – and failed – to set up a presidential debate before the election.

Independent Media Commission (IMC)

The IMC was created in 2000 to regulate print, audio-visual and electronic media and monitor their compliance with the Media Code of Practice. The IMC has the legal authority to enforce fines and to suspend or ban print and electronic media which are seen to be in breach of media regulations. In spite of its efforts, the IMC is regarded as a toothless body. The main leverage it has is to impose fines of a one million Leones and not exceeding five million Leones, sums which were not regarded as an adequate deterrent.

Media code of practice

The Media Code of Practice applies to print, broadcast media and advertising in Sierra Leone. It contains comprehensive regulations covering political party activities, candidates and elections. It stipulates that all parties/candidates should be offered a fair opportunity 'to access the media responsibly in presenting their manifestos to the public'. Another guideline says 'media practitioners must ensure that the main viewpoints and arguments are heard during the course of the election campaign'. Another measure states that 'the media shall endeavour to provide coverage at all levels of political campaigning from the constituency to the national level'.

Guidelines are in place to ensure that the reporting of elections is free and fair, however, they were not observed in practice. The rules and regulations tended to be ignored mainly because the fines are not considered to be high enough to be a deterrent. Courts are seen to undermine the authority of the IMC by failing to rule in its favour if action is taken against a defendant who is pro-government.

Money

It was a widely held belief that vast amounts of money were a factor in these elections, and could have been a deciding factor in who won. Voters were reported to have been wooed with cash and goods. Floating voters were said to follow the money and did not look at issues. Observers were told that the governing party's strategy appeared to working. The opposition party, on the other hand, lacked the money to promote its promise of rural development. It was pointed out, however, that the SLPP acted the same way when it was in power.

The APC insisted that it had agreed to the Code of Conduct and taken steps to educate voters for these elections. It was adamant that it was committed to balanced coverage and maintained that the party had never interfered in the working of the media. A party

spokesman said there had been radio stations in the past run by the APC and SLPP which had been banned because of their coverage which was criticised for being too inflammatory. He said the APC had wished to challenge the decision but chose to abide by the IMC's decision for the sake of peace.

Recommendations

- There should be a clear provision in law about setting a cap on the financing of campaigns including in the media;
- The IMC should be given more authority to ensure that guidelines are observed;
- The Freedom of Information Act must be approved; this has been blocked by MPs;
- Journalist training should be boosted, especially in covering elections;
- Measures should be introduced to protect journalists from being targeted by political groups.