

Media Statement

17 March 2023

CFE condemns assassination threats, intimidation on journalists in Eswatini

The freedom of expression and human rights situation continues to deteriorate in the Kingdom of Eswatini since the June 2021 civil unrest, in the wake of amplified calls for justice and democratic reforms in Africa's last absolute monarchy.

The civil unrest that led to the death of dozens of civilians and the injury of many more, has divided the nation into two contending camps that can be loosely described as pro-establishment conservatives on the one hand and the pro-democracy proponents calling for political reforms and a human rights culture, on the other.

There has been an increase in violence, extra-judicial killings, assassinations, abductions and torture, with each faction blaming the other as the perpetrators of these criminal acts.

Journalists, whose have a crucial role to play in such a situation by providing accurate and balanced information to allow the public to make informed assessments and decisions, are caught in the crossfire.

In recent weeks there have been rising complaints of threats of assassination, violence and general harassment of journalists.

It is disturbing to note that the situation in Eswatini has deteriorated to the extent that such threats are said to be coming from both sides of the political divide - both the state security apparatus and elements within the mass democratic movement.

The Campaign for Free Expression (CFE) condemns these death threats, harassment and interference with the journalists' work, and calls on independent authorities to carry out an exhaustive investigation into these acts of intimidation, and ensure journalists are able to do their jobs.

We call on the authorities to also finalise investigations into the brutal assassination on January 21, 2023 of Thulani Maseko, a prominent human rights lawyer. We believe that his unlawful killing is intrinsically linked to the ongoing freedom of expression and human rights deterioration in Eswatini.

CFE notes with concern reports in the local press of a plot to assassinate two senior journalists of the Times of Eswatini, reports last month that an editor of an independent online news site has had to flee his home to a place of safety after being tailed by security officers, and developments around another editor of an online publication who is exiled in South Africa.

In December 2022, the home and family of a senior editor was attacked by assailants who used a petrol bomb to cause extensive damage. Fortunately, no lives were lost in the incident.

The threats, harassment and intimidation on the lives of senior journalists in the print and online media houses in the Kingdom of Eswatini is a dangerous attempt at censorship. It is also part of a systematic wave of threats and harassment that journalists have to constantly contend work, for simply doing their job, and they must stop.

So serious are the threats that some senior journalists and editors' lives have been gravely disrupted and they have been compelled to skip the country to seek safety in neighbouring States.

The authorities, leaders of the mass democratic movement, with the assistance and watchful eye of human rights groups and the international community, should investigate the ongoing threats against journalists in Eswatini and ensure that all journalists in the country, regardless of their establishment's editorial policy, or the origin of the threats, can perform their job without fear of retaliation or threats, including intimidations of assassination and personal harm.

Reporters Without Borders in its 2022 world press freedom index ranked Eswatini 131 out of 180 countries, stating that the country prevents journalists from working freely and independently by maintaining total control over the broadcast media, infiltrating the newsroom, and spying on, arresting and harassing journalists.

Mbongeni Mbingo, Chairman of Eswatini Editors Forum stated that,

“journalists, editors and the media at large have been operating under a serious cloud of threat to life and intimidation, a trend that emerged way back at the start of the demonstrations and the birth of the civil unrest. The Editors Forum has always noted with concern the narrative being pursued by certain online publications targeting the mainstream media... this culture must be condemned vehemently by all who understood the role and function of the media and their duty to report the facts as they are, and provide accurate and balance information to the public so that it can make informed decisions.”

The Campaign for Free Expressions is a non-partisan, non-profit organisation that defends and promotes free expression for all across southern Africa.

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