KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

Hounded

African Journalists in Exile

Edited by Joseph Odindo

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Table of contents

Foreword

Why Exile is as contemporary as ever

Journalists in Exile — many might think it is a thing of the past. Not so, judging by the distressing stories of writers and editors presented in this book.

Countries like Germany have a long list of fine writers who were forced into exile under fascist rule between 1933 and 1945; Walter Benjamin, Thomas Mann, Berthold Brecht, Hannah Arendt, to name a few.

It's often assumed that the last exiled writers from the African continent belonged to the nationalist generation of South African Lewis Nkosi or Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

That assumption is wrong. Modernisation and liberty are not necessarily companions: Just because you can easily access digital texts in libraries across Africa today does not mean its people are freer than they were in the sixties. Or that its journalists and creative writers can write as they like.

The digital availability of many ideas and thoughts does not always come along with freedom of speech, or even of thought.

KAS Media Africa, the Media Programme of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, had planned to hold a convention of exiled journalists to talk about their "difficult experiences", as one writer from Madagascar puts it in this collection of reports and essays.

Then Covid came and upended life everywhere. Our conference plans were not spared. So we asked ourselves: How about producing a book, instead? We looked and listened, together with our esteemed editor Joseph Odindo, working from Nairobi, and found surprisingly many African creatives living in exile because the powers that be or some greedy businessmen were after their lives.

They came from different countries, Lesotho, Tanzania, Chad, Eritrea, The Gambia, Zimbabwe and Rwanda — men and women who had sought sanctuary abroad and abandoned their work as "gatekeepers" of their societies, journalists who wanted to give guidance but had been shut out.

Their physical and mental agony, not to mention the economic hardships they endure, are difficult to imagine.

We at KAS Media Africa, who work across the continent and encounter media practitioners on an almost daily basis, salute them for their bravery and suffering. They have made personal choices which, hopefully, will pay off when they return home to find their countries freer and more tolerant of criticism and dissent.

Christoph Plate
Director KAS Media Africa
Johannesburg, January 2021

Joseph Odindo,
Editor

Right to publish must be grabbed

When he stepped forward to receive a bravery award at a global conference of news publishers in 1994, Cameroonian newspaper editor Pius Njawe had a word of regret about the persecution he had to endure back home. Whenever he found himself behind bars for his controversial journalism, he said, the ensuing chorus of protest seldom included the voice of fellow Africans.

A hulking figure, Njawe — God bless his soul — had been detained more than 120 times for the sins of his newspaper, *Le Messager*, but his crusading spirit remained undimmed. Each arrest, the delegates heard, drew messages of support from Western diplomats based in Yaoundé and European civil rights groups, but none ever came from his brethren across the borders.

When Njawe spoke, he had only recently been freed from police custody. So why did the travails of a fellow hack fail to strike any cord in the hearts of African editors — who would unfailingly fulminate at the slightest human rights abuse by their own governments? Is injustice any less tolerable when it happens in a far-off land — inflicted on men and women of a different language and culture?

That question was as valid three decades ago, in Njawe's time, as it is today. And it is only partially answered in this compilation of 16 stories from victims of political intolerance and media repression.

Inside *Hounded: African Journalists in Exile* are illuminating accounts of writers and editors who, at one time or another, have found themselves fleeing their homeland because of some unsavoury news or comment published under their name.

Stripped of the names of journalist victims and the countries they come from, the stories are depressingly similar. Whether it's the midnight phone threats to a newspaper editor in Sani Abacha's Nigeria or the volley of bullets fired at a news correspondent's car in Somalia, the willingness to lock up journalists or kill them because of divergent opinion makes Africa a numbingly dangerous place for independent reporting.

Power hates scrutiny. Many of those who rule us will pay any price to be rid of critical voices and the news platforms that amplify them. It's surely tragic — as illustrated in Chapter eight — that some 27 years after Njawe's death, a young broadcast journalist, Mimi Mefo Takambou, should find herself escaping from the same Cameroon, shaken by the death in prison of a widely admired older colleague, Samuel Wazizi.

Mefo and Njawe are generations apart, but both journalists, incredibly, found themselves confronting the same object of fear: President Paul Biya. The man has been in power so long that Cameroonians aged thirty and below have known no other leader.

Not even the cyclical change of occupants at State House guarantees African journalists safety and freedom in their work. Dimunitive and crusty, Tanzania's John Magufuli could soon win the distinction of forcing into exile more news people and politicians than any of his predecessors since Julius Nyerere. He is the reason a former editor of *Tanzania Daima*, Ansbert Ngurumo, now lives in Europe, having escaped the country's thought police by a whisker. Under Magufuli, news platforms have been punished for simply recording a fluctuation in the country's currency.

Because democracy dies in darkness, the fate of journalists is inextricably intertwined with that of politicians. Granted, sloppiness and

irresponsibility on the part of media sometimes invites reprisal from government. But the fact remains that brave editors and writers present as much a threat to political rulers as opposition gadflies. Wilf Mbanga of Zimbabwe tells us why he was declared an enemy of the state for helping to set up an independent newspaper just when Robert Mugabe thought he had the former British colony in a choke-hold. Similarly, Pius Nyamora's strident *Society* magazine — indifferent to libel laws and political sensitivities — cast off the equivocation of Kenya's mainstream media under Daniel arap Moi's one-party dictatorship and gave the nascent opposition movement a voice.

Throughout Africa, the right to publish — like political power — has to be grabbed; it cannot be exercised solely on politicians' goodwill or the strength of a Constitution. Thus, good journalism demands more than an ability to cultivate news sources and generate content. It requires courage. In this lies one of the continent's gravest tragedies — the growing army of talented men and women driven from their homelands for thinking critically and daring to speak out. Their absence may give politicians synthetic comfort, but in reality it leaves their nations intellectually the poorer.

Hounded is both a tribute and a record of history. It's an acknowledgement of the commitment to truth and justice in little-known corners of the continent — the clattered desk of a lone blogger in Ethiopia, bustling newsroom in Burundi and the dimly-lit studio of a Lagos pirate radio — which has kept the flame of hope burning under the most stifling of political rules. The stories are from 16 jurisdictions, including Madagascar, Chad, Rwanda, Uganda and Togo, and cover different calendar periods.

A colleague who helped to edit these pages — a seasoned journalist familiar with world events — was struck by just how little was known about the painful struggles of crusading newspeople in eastern Africa alone. She had worked in a busy Nairobi newsroom for more than two decades but had scarcely heard of the killings of missionaries in Burundi and Bob Rugurika's attempts to expose them.

If *Hounded* opens anyone's eyes to the high price African journalists are paying for unearthing the truth and keeping anti-democratic authorities in check, then it will have struck a blow, however feeble, for independent reporting.

Joseph Odindo

Nairobi, January 2021

1

Dapo Olorunyomi,
Nigeria

Guerrillas in the newsroom

As I walked out of J.F. Kennedy Airport, New York, one cold evening in March 1996, my first thought was not of freedom. I had lived through ruthlessly biting harmattan seasons in Nigeria but nothing had prepared me for such freezing temperatures.

Here I was, clad in a pair of jeans and loose sandals. Just that, in the heart of an American spring. I raced back into the relatively warm embrace of the terminal thinking I was going to die.

Later that night, after connecting on a local flight from New York to Washington, making my way by taxi to Maryland, where my friend lived, I reflected on the true meaning of immigration, displacement and exile. I thought of the family I couldn't say good-bye to, the fate of friends and colleagues in detention, our newspaper's future and Nigeria's growing resistance against military rule. For the first time in three years of "internal exile" I felt a creeping wave of depression.

After the military came to power in Nigeria, one of the most significant periods was the decade from 1985. A year earlier, the soldiers had terminated Nigeria's second Republic, sacked Parliament, introduced a draconian press law — the Decree 4 — which proposed that truth was no defence for a piece of journalism. What mattered was if a public officer felt they had been blemished.

So, when two journalists at the Lagos *Guardian* published a list of diplomatic postings before it was officially announced by the government of Major General Muhammadu Buhari, they were put in jail for one year. Twenty months into his regime, Buhari was overthrown by his wily army chief, Ibrahim Babangida, another general with an insatiable thirst for power.

Babangida, who took charge in August, 1986, promised a new democratic order, respect for human rights and a programme to buoy the flappy veins of the country's economy. After seven years, when his regime had lost steam, he hurriedly retreated, handing power to a rickety contraption called the Interim National Government (ING), in which his long-time friend, General Sani Abacha, was supposed to play second fiddle to a weak civilian president.

So here we were in Maryland, seated by a flickering fire. United by a shared history, we swapped horror tales of arrests, torture, disappearances, media closure and violence. I stole glances at the weary faces of old friends in the room — there was nothing but anxiety.

Many had left Nigeria in the early wave of political exodus, when the military struck and savagely broke the media, trade unions and other civil society institutions. But the economic migrants, mostly professionals, started leaving only when Babangida disrupted the relative stability of their lives with a neoliberal economic programme, which he implemented with bayonets and uniformed force.

As I struggled to settle into an unfamiliar life in the United States, I found myself in a new community of Nigerians who had worked out the meaning and outline of their flight from home. Most had adjusted to the new land and, either through study or a job, were now defining a future and a purpose that matched their aspirations. I had barely made it out of Nigeria with dear life.

My desire in the early months was to split my time campaigning for two causes — freedom for colleagues still in jail and exposing the

deteriorating political and human rights situation back home. Both Amnesty International and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) ensured that my April schedule running into early summer was packed with speaking tours.

Back home, the military was paying attention to my activities through its spy network. Because of my feverish round of lectures, parliamentary testimonies and lobbying of multilateral agencies, I became a branded target. On the anniversary of my escape from Nigeria, they arrested and tortured my journalist wife, Ladi Olorunyomi, for 68 days in an underground military cell.

It had all started on 12 June 1993, when Nigeria held an election to end nearly a decade of military dictatorship. Eleven days after the vote, considered by many as the most transparent and fair in the country's history, the author, General Babangida, annulled it and instituted a patchwork called the Interim National Government, declaring himself military president.

From the outset, it was a turbulent ride for the general and his focus on media as a target for repressions was strategic. Abacha helped make Nigeria the poster child of media repression and persecution in Africa.

Repression came in many ways, including detention without trial, frequent "questioning" of journalists and editors, proscription of critical media, arson against opposition newspapers, assassinations, death threats against investigative journalists or outspoken commentators, newspaper seizures to bankrupt publishers, harassment of vendors selling anti-government newspapers, bugging of media telephones, travel restrictions and counterfeiting opposition newspapers to discredit them.

In 1993 alone, the regime issued four decrees to control the independent press. Seven media houses were shut down in one month. With our magazine, *The News*, now closed by military order, we introduced a tabloid size publication called *Tempo*, which forced us into the discipline of interpretative reporting.

To continue publishing, our production was decentralized and reporting desks took on a cellular structure. A vendor selling *Tempo* was struck and killed by a fast-moving car as he was escaping from police. Revenue from circulation became slow and irregular. Editors were constantly on the move, hopping from one sleeping hole to another every night, travelling in crowded commuter buses to evade arrest.

Most accounts of the collapse of Babangida's regime on August 26, 1993, and the ultimate elimination of ING, attribute it to the efforts of the independent press, particularly publishers who resorted to "guerrilla journalism." Media attracted hostility because it reminded the military of its vulnerability — that in opposition to its "presumptive legitimacy" was a "presumptive parliament" of independent journalism

Towards the end of the first quarter of 1995, the buzz in the army was around a phantom coup d'état. *The News* received a tip about the outcome of a special investigations panel of the army, that all the presumed coup plotters had been cleared, to General Abacha's disappointment. The choice before us seemed oddly clear — Publish and be damned!

Babajide Otitoju, a young bright senior reporter with prodigious historical knowledge, wrote the story assisted by Bagauda Kaltho, an untiring digger of facts who could ferret any information from security sources. Kaltho became a tragic casualty of the Abacha regime. He went missing in mid-1996 and the government made a mess trying to account for him by tying him to a suicide bomber in Kaduna.

It didn't take long for the authorities to respond to our coup suspects' story. Their biggest prize was my friend and colleague, the bookish Kunle Ajibade, who had been given a new assignment but continued to be on the magazine masthead while awaiting the appointment of a new editor.

Ajibade was arrested and thrown into jail for life by a farcical Kangaroo court headed by pretentious and barely literate generals.

I had hardly tucked into bed on the dramatic night of mid-June, a few days after the imprisonment of Ajibade, when the house phone rang. I reached for the receiver and a raspy, stern voice said: “If you want to be alive, my friend, you better get out of that house before 6 am.” The line went dead.

“What happened?” my wife asked. I repeated the message, still unable to make sense of its full implications. “I can’t really say, actually I can’t figure it out” I said when she asked who had called. It was about 2am and we decided that I move to a friend’s house as a precaution.

I grabbed the car keys, picked up a couple of books and pocketed my international passport, furiously driving into the silent, unnerving Lagos night. I headed to the home of my foster mother — a bed was always available there.

This impromptu flight from home — its untidiness, melodrama, the inability to say good bye to my two boys, a dangerous drive through the Lagos night — all these became templates for a new life of internal exile as I played hide-and-seek with security agents until I left Nigeria for exile in the US, where I would stay for 13 years.

Who was the strange man who called at that odd hour of the night? He wasn’t in any way friendly but he was doubtlessly an angel. True to his warning, at exactly 6 am, about half a dozen soldiers burst into my house. Within minutes, they left cursing and hissing — they had missed their target.

Two years earlier, *The News* had published a stinging cover story about an illegal arms shipment that did not end up at the military armoury in the northern city of Kano, Abacha’s home state. Was this a third force set to create internal tension in the land?

Defence intelligence operatives swooped on our editorial office and whisked me to their base on Victoria Island, Lagos. They wanted to know the source of the story and would “not have any of that crap that reporters have obligations to protect their sources”.

They shuttled me from office to office. In one of these joyless stops, I encountered this crazy bully — an officer sporting a heavy, though handsome, Balbo beard, who was probably tipsy.

"The information before me is that you were rude to the Colonel," Balbo shouted, sizing me up, and me sizing him up in return.
"How?" I asked.
"Aha" he bawled. "They said it, they are right."
In our now twitchy contest of will, Balbo barked rapid-fire orders which I noticed he didn't expect me to obey. I picked a few sensible notes. He said, "there is talk now among my people that you are arrogant. You were even trying to show the Colonel that you went to school."

Arrogant? I had tuned off when the colonel was shouting incoherent nonsense and switched to reading a copy of the *Economist* magazine I had hurriedly grabbed during my arrest.

The greatest sin of all, Balbo said, was me asking the colonel if he wanted to sell the desktop computer on his table. Did I think this was an electronic store?

Balbo seemed genuinely curious to know why I asked to buy the colonel's computer. If I didn't know, Balbo went on, he had a Masters' degree in psychology. Dramatically, he lowered his voice and whispered: "If I were you I would write any trash, no one reads it." Then he promptly sat up and resumed his shouting orders.

The scene at the colonel's office had been less dramatic. His dusty, disabled computer screen, oddly, faced the visitor's chair. Computers were just beginning to enter Nigeria and the presence of one on that desk seemed to be more an ego statement than for the equipment's functional value. The Colonel was a conservative middle-aged lawyer with a bald roundish head. His anger flared when he was contradicted.

"Headquarters is very interested in your story so I need you to write a statement laying out details," he said with a half-smile. I tried to extend

the humour by asking if he wanted to sell his computer — the remark which would later agitate Balbo. “Sell, sell, sell,” he muttered and I could sense he was offended.

That’s when the Colonel sent me to Balbo who, presumably, was to supervise my torture. Balbo did not make much of a headway either, so after a shouting match I woke up the next day in a dank cell, my left hand and leg broken.

Ajibade was still undergoing trial in a Kangaroo Court, where justice was not even in the bargain. We tried to keep his spirit alive by doing hard stories weekly, and challenging the moral claims of the illegitimate Abacha regime.

One evening, towards the end of June, 1995, I went to see Dr Beko Ransome-Kuti, one-time Vice President of the Nigeria Medical Association (NMA) and now President of the Campaign for Democracy, the umbrella organisation of civil society groups championing the restoration of democracy.

Highly principled and compassionate, Beko was the kind of person you always wanted on your side. He had an inflexible respect for time, for which we nicknamed him Kant, after the 19th century German philosopher.

I presented Beko with a bulky brown manila envelope which had been secretly passed to me by security agents. They included handwritten letters from the key accused in the ongoing trial arising from Abacha’s phantom coup. There was also a statement by Colonel Lawan Gwadabe, said to be the plotters’ ringleader.

Convinced they would be executed, the men had arranged for the documents to be delivered to me so that the world would hear their side of the story.

As I made to leave, Beko asked his driver to drop me at my hideout in the Ikeja neighbourhood of Lagos. At a road block near the Ikeja Sheraton,

the Volkswagen Beetle was flagged down by police. I swiftly thrust the envelope under the foot mat, but an approaching sergeant noticed my suspicious movement. He demanded to search the car and found the envelope.

I saw his eyes widen as he read the first few pages. This is the end, I thought to myself.

“How much do you have on you?” the policeman inquired, fishing for a bribe to let us off. I spread out my palms and shook my head. As the officer led us to the zonal police headquarters, I felt sad and bitter. Why did I mess up in this spectacular way? This was a case of abject failure.

At the police station, news had gone around that one of the “coup plotters on the run” had been arrested. Officers craned their necks for a glimpse of the wanted man.

The arresting sergeant handed the documents over to a Mr Dapub, Deputy Commissioner of Police, whose reaction was shocking, to say the least. He took the “exhibits” from the policeman, flipped through them and then pulled me aside.

“The police are your friends, we are your friends — we should be working together,” he said, warmly. The sergeant looked nonplussed. Mr Dapub handed the documents back to me and pleaded that I should never mention the incident to anyone.

At our editorial hideout the next day, everyone thought it was time for me to leave the country. These close calls were getting too frequent and could endanger everyone. I moved to Ibadan, the famous university town and Ile-Ife, where I had completed university studies. By now, the Committee to Protect Journalists in New York and Amnesty International were pushing for me to leave the country.

It was Idowu Obasa, the engine of our resistance operations, who shook me awake deep into the night. “Mr Man, it is time to go,” he said in a husky voice.

In that room was Lemi, my bosom friend from university, with whom we had set up a pirate radio in Lagos to deny the military a broadcast monopoly over the news.

Radio Freedom, as it was called, broadcast news challenging the false claims of the military junta. This would later become Radio Kudirat, the voice of the resistance abroad during the heady period of Abacha's rule.

"It is time to go," Lemi echoed. My simple Adidas traveling bag, with a couple shirts and trousers, plus two novels and my travel papers had gone the previous day. They had been ferried by Seidi Mulero, one of the true heroes of the anti-military campaign whose maternal lineage was from the neighbouring Republic of Benin.

He knew all the unofficial routes across the border. The idea was to evade customs and security agents and meet Seidi, who would help me cross to Cotonou, from where I would catch a flight to New York.

The passage across the border was seamless, thanks to Seidi and his elderly aunt. Immigration agents on the Nigerian side handed us a shortlist of demands — liquor of different types and cigarettes — believing that we were regular smugglers who would be back in the evening.

It's hard to imagine what would have been my fate without Seidi, who later also helped to spirit my family through the same route after my wife had been released by the dreaded Nigerian Military Intelligence. He also arranged passage for numerous activists and dissidents who would form part of the Nigerian resistance abroad. Sadly, he died before the country returned to democracy, before he could see the fruits of the political cause for which he had aided countless strangers whom he only knew as his ideological kin.

2

Kiwanuka Lawrence Nsereko, Uganda

Nightmare of news, guns and dollars

My father was obsessed with news. If you made the slightest noise during the prime radio bulletin, you were remorselessly caned. Unusually for his generation, he subscribed to a newspaper, *Munno*, and its monthly magazine stablemate *Musizi*, which were among the oldest titles in Uganda. These two were required reading for us children, who were then called upon to present a summary to the family, each on a chosen day.

The disruptive reality of politics hit home in 1983 when dad suddenly fled to exile in Kenya. He briefly stayed in Rusinga, an island on Lake Victoria, then drifted to Ssese islands on the Uganda side. The cause of his flight was a surreptitious association with Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army, who were then waging a guerrilla war against Milton Obote's second rule.

Government agents forced my family to temporarily abandon our Kampala home.

I reflected on the irony of our political allegiances 13 years later, when, as editor of the controversial newspaper *The Citizen*, I found myself also scurrying to Kenya for political refuge. My father had paid the price for interacting with Museveni's fighters, yet, here I was, more than a decade later, also crossing the border, but for criticising his idol, who was now President (a position he still occupied at the time of writing in 2020).

It is a fate I would never have imagined at the age of 16, when the journalism bug bit me. I had visited the Kampala offices of the opposition Democratic Party, who were the publishers of *Munnansi* and *The Citizen*, two of Uganda's best established newspapers.

I spoke with one of the newsroom staff, who realised that I was surprisingly well-informed about the ongoing civil war. That is why they hired me as a reporter on *The Citizen*, two years short of adulthood. War was the biggest story then. Milton Obote's second government and the Lutwa Okello military regime after it, both found themselves fighting guerrilla armies on two fronts. On one side they faced Museveni's National Resistance Army and on the other Andrew Kayiira's United Freedom Movement.

Childhood curiousity had led me to link up with Kayiira's soldiers in 1984. Through them I had picked up exatraordinary knowledge about military matters. I knew a great deal about Kayiira's enemies, the Ugandan army and Museveni's guerrillas.

When Kenya hosted peace talks between Museveni and Okello's short-lived government, I was already news editor of *The Citizen* and *Munnasi*. As the war raged, *The Citizen* published a cartoon in December 1985, depicting Museveni walking to the seat of power on a staircase of human skulls. It was because of this cartoon that, immediately after Museveni drove Okello out of power, I was summoned for questioning by the Movement's officers. They felt I had betrayed them by publishing the cartoon.

The second test of our relationship came from corruption linked to Luweero Triangle, the forested staging post of Museveni's bush war north of Kampala. I was running a kiosk in Katwe, a suburb of the city, to complement my journalism income. Someone offered to sell me cheap cooking oil to stock the kiosk. After collecting the oil from a Kampala warehouse, I noticed they were marked "not for resale". On enquiry, I was told the oil had originated from the prime minister's office. We published the story, exposing the prime minister for selling oil donated by USAID and the Dutch Government for war victims in Luweero.

The prime minister did not take our story lightly. He struck back with an administrative notice denying *The Citizen* and *Munnansi* advertisement from government ministries. Later in the year, the ban was extended to all parastatals. By 1995, only three private companies dared to risk government harassment and advertise with *The Citizen*. By and large, I was financing the paper from my private businesses. So when I left the country for exile, the newspaper could not survive. My other businesses were also attacked and they eventually collapsed.

A major clash between my paper and the government was over the war in northern Uganda, which pitted Museveni's forces against Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army. Hideous human rights abuses were reportedly being perpetrated by both sides.

For much of the conflict, northern Uganda had been sealed off. No journalist was allowed into the region and media relied on government briefings. However, leaked information reaching our newsroom indicated that serious human rights abuses were going on in Acholi. We decided to investigate. With the help of Catholic Church leaders in Kitgum and local politicians, I sneaked into the area by a circuitous route which took me first to Nairobi, through Lokichoggio, Kenya, and back into Uganda via Lokung.

Disguised as a trader, I went past military roadblocks undetected. My notes were smuggled out in bicycle tubes. *The Citizen*'s story upset government functionaries, prompting them to organise a tour of the region for journalists in order to discredit it.

Reporters — including myself — were airlifted to Lira, where the commanding officer took me to task, demanding to be shown the dead bodies I had written about. The officer had prevented journalists from speaking to local residents, citing security concerns.

Our departure for the northern district of Pader, another war zone, was delayed. Fellow journalists on the trip blamed me for the government's withdrawal of a promise to pay them an allowance and clear their hotel

bills. As a punishment, I was left at Lolim by the helicopter that had brought us and told to travel to Pader by road. The army commander's excuse: the helicopter could not carry all the journalists. My trip came to an abrupt end when a minister who offered me a lift instead had the driver return me to the capital, Kampala.

My newspaper had extensively covered the detention of northern Uganda political leaders, most of whom were members of the opposition Democratic Party. I had connections with many of them, and one, Dr Ojok Mulozi, was a close friend. When I learnt of a plot to fly them to Kitgum, during which they were to be harmed and the incident blamed on rebels, I enlisted the help of BBC's Catherine Bond, who broke the story on *Focus on Africa*.

An exclusive on the torture being carried out in army-run safe houses around Kampala only poisoned our relationship with the government further. I had interviewed a hotelier, Monday Ntananga, who was from my home village of Makindye. He had been detained at Basiima House next to Lubiri barracks.

Ntananga had been so badly tortured that he lost his memory. On being released, he sued the government and the case was settled out of court. To counter the torture claims, journalists were invited to tour Basiima House. I had once been detained there and knew the centre well. Reporters were shown rooms that had obviously been cleaned up. However, I insisted that the soldiers escorting us unlock the door to one of the rooms I knew was used for torture. They reluctantly obliged, and the torture chamber was displayed in all its gory glory — covered in bloodstains.

I had been a news editor of *Munnansi* and *The Citizen* for about four months when Editor-In-Chief Joseph Kiggundu, who had been in and out of prison countless times, was persuaded to quit. It resulted from a story we had published about an altercation between a powerful cabinet minister, Major-General Kahinda Otafiire, and the First Lady Janet Museveni's half-sister at a hotel in Kampala. We had received reports

that Otafiire had drawn a gun and threatened to shoot the woman because she had insulted him.

I wrote the story because I happened to be around the hotel at the time. After it appeared, Otafiire sent the president of the Journalists' Association, James Namakajo, to talk to us. Otafiire was concerned that the follow-up article we were working on would lead to his sacking from the Cabinet. I rejected the messages he sent us. Later, four editors, including the helmsman Kiggundu, mysteriously resigned from the newspaper. That was how I found myself elevated to be the paper's editor-in-chief.

Our reporting of the government's crackdown on its rivals from the previous regimes won us few friends in the corridors of power.

One incident that stood out at that time was what came to be known as the Mukura Massacre. Major Chris Bunyenyezi, who commanded the National Resistance Army's 309 Battalion, had ordered a mop-up operation in the Teso sub-region. The detainees, mostly Acholi and Iteso men, were packed in train waggons.

On July 11, 1989, more than 60 young boys and men died at Okungulo Railway Station in Mukura, Ngora District — 260 kilometres north east of Kampala. The area was familiar to me because I had travelled there a few months earlier to interview Hitler Eregu, the elusive commander of the Uganda People's Army (UPA), another rebel force.

I travelled to Kumi with the help of local opposition politicians. Sources told me that many civilians had been killed. Some were said to have died when fires were lit under the train waggons in which they were locked up. When the story broke, I was arrested and detained at Basiima. At first the government denied the story, but later it apologised and set up a commission of enquiry. The victims' families were promised compensation.

Media investigations touching on African First Ladies tend to end badly. I attracted Museveni's personal attention when I started investigating the

activities of Uganda Women's Efforts to Save Orphans (UWESO), a non-profit which had been formed to help widows and orphans in war zones. Its leader was Janet Museveni, the President's wife.

The organisations had received thousands of dollars from international donors, I was told, but its members — the civil war widows and orphans — were not benefitting at all. I could vouch for that because my home district was part of the infamous Luweero Triangle, theatre of the 1980-1986 civil war.

My newspaper published the story without naming any official. The penalty was instant. I was snatched off the streets on my way home and taken before President Museveni at State House, Nakasero.

The president said I was free to "slander" him, his cabinet and his army, but attacking his family would not be tolerated. After lecturing me for about 40 minutes, he instructed his driver to take me back home.

On another occasion, after the first multiparty rally in Kampala, Museveni summoned me to his home in Nakasero. Like a father to a wayward son, he lectured me about the politics of Uganda and the dangers of being used by colonial agents "who think that multiparty politics is the panacea to Africa's problems". He offered to help me upgrade my small business in Katwe and send me to a university in UK on a government scholarship.

I told him to give me time to think about his proposal. On my way home, I stopped for a while near the independence monument in the capital as I contemplated the offer. I will never know what my decision would have been if Prof Joseph Kakooza, a former judge of the High Court, had not pulled over and offered me a lift. I never had a chance to discuss the matter with Museveni again.

An interview with a rebel leader Herbert Itongwa only served to widen the chasm between me and the Uganda government. Itongwa, a childhood friend, had served in the rebel army which brought Museveni to power.

However, he fell out with his colleagues when he complained that soldiers from some regions were being favoured in promotions and postings, and was arrested. I visited Itongwa several times during his incarceration at Makindye barracks. After serving his jail term, he was released in 1994, but he soon deserted to form his own rebel group, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), to oppose Museveni.

Itongwa came to the limelight when he overran several police stations and killed the Masaka regional police commander, Erusa Kakaire. He kidnapped Health Minister James Makumbi, his girlfriend and her son.

The outlaw then invited me to his bush hideout for an interview. I was taken on a circuitous journey, while blindfolded, to meet him. Available for an interview was the minister, Dr Makumbi, who was being held captive in the vicinity. I persuaded Itongwa not to kill the hostage as it would be a public relations nightmare for his group.

The rebels agreed to release the minister and his family unharmed. They kept their word. On return to Kampala I was hauled before Museveni, who pressed me for information on Itongwa's location and accused me of being used by the Buganda kingdom and "parochial DP leaders". DP was the opposition Democratic Party, whose stronghold was among the Baganda, one of Uganda's major ethnic groups.

I was then taken to Central Police Station for questioning and detained in the cells for another two days. Among my interrogators were top generals and intelligence chiefs. One of them slapped me across the face, leaving me bleeding from the nose. He threatened to kill my parents. At some point in our exchange, I was led to a window facing Kampala City Square. Looking out, I saw my father sitting under a mango tree. He had been trying to see me for three days.

I remained in detention over Easter and was taken to court and charged the following Wednesday. Afraid of being re-arrested after being bailed out, I hid in a friendly judge's car and my business manager, wearing my sweater, took my place in the vehicle which was to take me home from the courts.

Among the places I hid in over the next week to avoid arrest was the military barracks in Kampala. It was eerie listening to radio messages exchanged by security agents looking for me. My host became nervous and asked me to leave the country. I departed from Uganda on May 10, 1995.

My original plan was to settle in Nairobi, Kenya, and set up a monthly news magazine to be distributed back home. But that plan was discarded when Kenyan security arrested Ugandan intelligence officers who had been sent to track me down in Nairobi.

The arrests raised tensions between the two countries, making it difficult for the Kenyans to continue protecting me. I met the then powerful Kenyan minister, Nicholas Biwott, in the suburbs of Nairobi. He advised me to leave as my safety could not be guaranteed.

Apparently, some elements in the Kenya government were considering trading me for 'Brigadier' John Odongo, leader of a shadowy Uganda-based rebel movement, the February Eighteenth Revolutionary Army (FERA), which was working to topple Daniel arap Moi. Biwott suggested that I go to Australia, where he claimed to have relatives. To this day, I have not understood why Biwott was so kind and concerned about me, quite in contrast to his public image as a ruthless politician.

For the three months I was in Kenya, I was shuttled between safe houses and moved from one church facility to another. I would stay in a slum one day, and in the next I would be in a posh mansion in Muthaiga, Nairobi's diplomatic district. Just before my departure I was moved to a location near Garissa, some 360 kiometres east of Nairobi. I finally flew out to the United States on August 22, 1995 to begin a new life as a political exile.

3

Keiso Mohloboli,
Lesotho

A scoop and the general's revenge

The problems that assailed the *Lesotho Times'* newsroom in 2016, leading to the shooting and wounding of my editor and precipitating my flight into exile, did not start with that infamous article I penned in June of that year.

Rather, the chain of events that my story set off was just the latest in a systematic pattern of harassment and threats that journalists in the southern African country, known for its traditional monarchy and majestic mountains, have been subjected to as they seek to do their jobs.

My day had started in the capital, Maseru, on a rather exciting note. My story about the deal on the generous exit package that sources had told me had been negotiated for the head of the Lesotho Defence Force, Lieutenant-General Tlali Kamoli, had made it to the front page of the *Lesotho Times*, on which I had worked for several years. And it looked like my day was about to end on a good note with a well-deserved visit to the salon to have my hair done. But it was not to be.

At about 5 pm, I answered a call from Senior Superintendent Teboho Khesa and innocently told him where I was when he asked my whereabouts. To my surprise, a police vehicle pulled up outside My Vision Salon, only minutes later and two policemen leapt out. When I saw that one of them was Khatleli Khatleli, the head of crime intelligence at

Mabote police station, I realised that whatever they wanted to talk to me about must be serious.

My story had quoted unnamed sources as saying Prime Minister Pakalitha Mosisili and his deputy, Mothetjoa Metsing, had negotiated a deal with Kamoli after a Southern African Development Community (SADC) commission of enquiry recommended in February that the army chief be relieved of his duties.

Kamoli had for several years been a powerful and controversial figure in the Kingdom of Lesotho's political scene. The army wielded strong influence in the land and had a great say in how the country was run. The person controlling the army was powerful indeed. Kamoli exercised this power ruthlessly and was even cited as having played a huge role in the destabilisation of the kingdom since 2012, when then Prime Minister Thomas Motsoahae Thabane took over from Mosisili (who had been at the helm for 14 years). It was recommended that that army boss be removed, if the country was to get back to normalcy.

My story said Kamoli had demanded a 50 million maloti (an equivalent of $3 million at the time) golden handshake but was talked down to 40 million maloti (almost $2.5 million).

Perhaps, seeing that I was scared, Khatleli assured me that I was not being kidnapped. This was a matter of concern, especially in the wake the 2015 arrest of soldiers alleged to have participated in a mutiny. They were spirited away from their homes with no explanation and held for weeks without their families knowing where they were. Despite the assurances, I still sent a text message to my editor, Lloyd Mutungamiri, informing him about what had happened.

I was marched up to the office of Senior Assistant Commissioner Seabata Tutuoane. Two assistant commissioners, Mahapela Loke and a woman I only knew as Putsoane, entered and sat down on chairs along the wall.

Then started five hours of interrogation. During the intimidating questioning, as they asked me where the negotiations between Mosisili

and Kamoli had taken place, I gathered that the officers were only interested in my sources. They wanted me to tell them who had given me the story. They even suggested that I reveal my sources in confidence to an officer I trusted.

When I refused to budge, their tactics changed. The conciliatory note disappeared. I was ordered to turn off my phone and not touch my recorder. I was told that my story had caused trouble in the army. Apparently, the soldiers who had risked much to ensure that Kamoli was not sacked were not happy that he had managed to negotiate such a good deal for himself while they were left with nothing.

Tutuoane tried to apply pressure by dangling the threat of 'the authorities', saying my interrogation was being closely monitored by some very senior people.

I was finally allowed to leave at about 10 pm on condition that I write a letter of apology to Kamoli, copied to Commissioner of Police Molehlehi Letsoepa and published in the *Lesotho Times* and its sister paper, *Sunday Express*. The apology was also to include a retraction of the story.

Although I knew my story was true, I agreed to their demands because I knew they would not release me until I acquiesced. I did not want to spend the night in a police cell because I feared what would happen to me there.

This was not my first encounter with the Lesotho Defence Force (LDF). In January 2014, my story about the harassment of the Maputsoe community during an army operation to help police fight crime did not go down well with the authorities.

LDF spokesperson Brigadier Ntlele Ntoi, then an army Major, not only dismissed the villagers' claims that they were attacked by soldiers as a malicious smear campaign intended to tarnish the good image of the army but also wrote a three-page letter attacking my credibility, professionalism and ethics. He called me a 'half cooked journalist' acting

like a prosecutor. From that time, he set out to make trouble for me. He made it difficult for me to get access to information from the army's Public Affairs Office (LDF-PAO).

Every time I would seek information when writing about the defence force, his officers would harass me. Several video cameras and audio recorders would be set up to capture each word of any interview with Brigadier Ntoi, allegedly as a safeguard against misrepresentation in my reports.

"I will always make sure that you get recorded every time you want any information from the army to avoid misrepresentation," he would say.

The situation became so bad that all *Lesotho Times* reporters were denied access to information relating to the army.

The *Lesotho Times* and its sister publication, *Sunday Express*, have always had a difficult relationship with the government and the army because they have persisted in shining a light on official wrongdoing. The publications are frequently accused of being an opposition front. To punish the company, the government withdrew all its advertising. In 2014, editor Mutungamiri and a reporter were arrested over a story that said top government officials faced treason charges after a coup attempt. They refused to name their sources.

The publisher, Basildon Peta, was repeatedly attacked on radio by Bokang Ramatsella, an executive member of one of the ruling coalition parties, as a CIA agent working to undermine Mosisili's government.

After my ordeal at the police station, I went to the office early the next morning to write the apology. I was in Mutungamiri's office when three police officers arrived and ordered the editor and I to accompany them to Mabote police station. There we were separately interrogated about the article.

This time, senior officers of all Lesotho's intelligence agencies sat on

the interrogation panel: crime intelligence, military intelligence and the National Security Service.

They said that if I did not disclose my source there would be chaos in the Mountain Kingdom and that something dangerous was brewing in the defence forces.

I realised from their exchanges that Kamoli's supporters were unhappy that they had supported him through thick and thin, and that he was now leaving the defence force a rich man while they had nothing.

The officers did not charge me or allow me to see a lawyer, saying this would only happen once I had named my source.

They were also angry about the satirical column *Scrutator* that had appeared alongside my story in the *Lesotho Times*. It also happened to focus on Kamoli. They insisted that I was the one who had written it, although it was someone else's column.

I was told to wait outside. After an hour of sitting on a wooden bench, I was told the police would continue their investigations and was released without charge.

I did not know what had happened to my boss, Mutungamiri, because we had been taken to different rooms for interrogation. When he found me later in the office, he told me that he was released on condition that he, the *Times*' chief operating officer, Tshepo Tlapi, the publisher, Basildon Peta, and the head of production, a man I knew only as Ngoni, report to the police station on 27 June. Mutungamiri's passport was confiscated.

The interrogations were just the start of an escalating campaign against the *Times*.

Government sources told me a 20-person unit had been assigned to tap my phone and monitor my Facebook account. I was scared to go home, so I started staying in hotels. I switched off my mobile phone and made increasingly rare appearances at the office.

On 5 July, Mutungamiri and Peta were interrogated again. Peta was later taken to the Maseru Magistrate's Court and charged under the Lesotho Penal Code of 2010 with *crimen injuria* (wilful injury to someone's dignity) and maliciously defaming Kamoli. He was granted bail of 800 maloti (almost $50 at the time) and surety of 30 000 maloti ($1,800).

Four days later, Mutungamiri — a Zimbabwean citizen — was shot four times by unknown assailants through the open window of his car as he arrived home in the suburb of Ha Thamae after leaving the office. His wife, Tsitsi, found him unconscious. When he came out of a long coma in hospital, he told Tsitsi that there had been two attackers. He was transferred to a South African hospital in Bloemfontein, after undergoing two operations.

Mutungamiri was in and out of hospitals in Bloemfontein and Johannesburg, South Africa. He underwent several operations to reconstruct his face as well as a bone marrow transplant.

He spent a great deal of time in the intensive care unit until mid-2017, when he returned to Zimbabwe. He never returned to the kingdom and has never commented publicly on his ordeal. His lawyer, Attorney Khotso Nthontho, has filed a case for the editor's compensation.

The case is still dragging on in court. Then Prime Minister Motsoahae Thabane's government, in its defence, said the government should not be held responsible because the soldiers who had been arrested and confessed to Mutungamiri's attempted murder were not following the army command's orders when they committed the crime.

After two years of failing to appear in court, Peta's defamation case was, in May 2018, dismissed after the law under which he was charged was declared unconstitutional. The Constitutional Court of Lesotho declared the law on criminal defamation inconsistent with the right to freedom of expression, as provided for in the constitution.

In exile, human rights organisations took care of my security and wellbeing. I stayed in safe homes between the Kingdom of eSwatini

and Johannesburg, South Africa. My ordeal did not end just because I was no longer in Lesotho. In June 2017, I received death threats after I published a post on my Facebook personal timeline. A Facebook account user operating under the name Lawrence Kori commented on the post, threatening me and telling me that I was getting close to my grave, that I would die soon.

Amnesty International investigated the matter and found out that the account was probably operated by Lesotho's National Security Service (NSS) and was used to monitor the posts of people considered to be against the government. My sources confirmed that the account was operated by the NSS and warned me to take the threats seriously.

The new government elected in 2017 was in place. In November of that year, my friends and family told me that Prime Minister Thabane's press attaché had announced on a local radio station that it was safe for me to go back home.

I did not hear the announcement but I trusted the people who gave me the information, so one day in January 2018, I decided to go back home to my family and my son.

With no guarantee of safety, I just cancelled my political asylum, crossed the Lesotho/South Africa boundary through the teeming Maseru Border Gate, and then went to my parents' house. My family wanted me to quit journalism and stay safe, but I could not.

Settling back into my old life was not easy. I had to struggle to re-establish the parental bond with my son. He is autistic and did not understand why I had disappeared from his life.

Even my workplace had changed. I went back to work for the *Lesotho Times* and the *Sunday Express*, but the environment was different. I felt a disconnect, as if I had never worked there before. Trying to establish a relationship with the new editor and new staff just did not seem to be working. I soon realised that my experiences just before I left had deeply

traumatised me. I only lasted two months before I quit. I went to work for MNN Centre for Investigative Journalism, the non-profit investigative centre that I co-founded with three other colleagues.

In July 2016, the publisher and chief executive officer of the *Lesotho Times* and *Sunday Express*, Basildon Peta, was charged with defamation and crimen injuria based on the Criminal Defamation Act of 1967.

I find little consolation in the fact that, for many of the people who caused this suffering, what goes around has finally come around, and, as I write, they are now being called upon to answer for some of their actions. Lt Gen Kamoli has been arrested and is languishing in jail, waiting to answer a litany of charges including multiple murders, attempted murder and treason.

Brigadier Ntlele Ntoi was arrested in 2017 for questioning in connection with the crimes that brought political and security instability to the country in that period. He shared the fate of many other soldiers who were active during that time.

I keep wishing that Lloyd Mutungamiri was okay, that he was not sick and that he was able to work to support his family. I regret ever pitching the story of Kamoli's exit package to him, or even gathering information for it. I feel angry that it ruined my former editor's life.

But Mutungamiri was a true editor to the end, fiercely protective of his reporters. He never blamed me for what happened to him. I know I should be grateful that we are both still alive, but I do not wish any journalist to endure what we did simply for doing our job.

4

Makaila N'Guebla, Chad

Haunted by a political blog

"I bring you neither gold, nor money, but freedom."

These were Idriss Déby's first words as president of Chad soon after deposing Hissène Habré. The words were music to the ears of Chadians, who had suffered 30 years of repression and civil war, first under the rule of independence president François Tombalbaye and, most recently, the murderous reign of Habré, who was later to be convicted of human rights abuses in connection with the killing of 40 000 Chadians and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Idriss Déby's pledge of freedom in 1990 gave the hope of inclusion and prosperity to millions of Chadians. However, this dream was soon dashed as Déby's regime fell into the pattern of exclusion, favouritism, nepotism, and repression set by his predecessors.

Now three decades after those famous words of hope were uttered, they ring hollow. Any casual observer of Chad's history cannot fail to see their irony as journalists and independent-thinking Chadians are increasingly forced into jail or exile simply because of attempting to exercise their constitutional right to freedom of expression.

Years later, when I was stranded in a foreign country, virtually stateless because my own country, Chad, had refused to give me a passport, which was my constitutional right, I found it difficult to reconcile the

reality of the harassment of the regime of Idriss Déby, who was once quoted as saying, “A world without a press is like a body without a soul”.

I have always cherished peace and justice, and I have been thirsty for freedom. That is why I am determined to fight the injustice and inequality in Chad.

I first came to the attention of the Chadian authorities when, in 2000, *Jeune Afrique*, a French-language pan-African weekly, started publishing my articles. My first article, the translated title of which was *‘Exclusion in Chad’*, talked about the corruption and favouritism in the awarding of government scholarships. I had been a victim, so I knew what I was talking about. At that time, I was living in Tunis, Tunisia. I continued writing articles critical of the ills going on in Chad. They were regularly published in the international media. Of course, the Chadian authorities were not pleased.

When my father, a chief, got sick and died in 1980, during the civil war that eventually brought Hissène Habré to power in 1982, I was still just a boy. My mother, a housewife, was left with the unenviable task of raising five children on her own at Bololo in the capital city, N’Djamena. In 1995, I decided to seek a chance to study abroad because Chad’s university education system was regularly interrupted by strikes. I longed for a scholarship to enable me to get an education, but I knew this would be difficult because of the discrimination and favouritism that characterised government services. Only the people who had an influential family member in the public service or political sphere were given government scholarships.

One day, as I waited to present my case at the scholarship department, I met Abdoulaye Abderahim Said, who was studying in Tunisia. He helped me to obtain a pre-registration admission to a university in Tunisia. This enabled me to travel to Niamey, Niger, to apply for a visa at the Tunisian consulate. I travelled through Libya to reach Tunis. Unfortunately, by that time my visa had expired. To avoid deportation, I enrolled in several short courses until 1998.

I soon gave up the short courses to legalise my status. Luck struck when Dr Ali Gadaye, director-general in Chad's Ministry of Planning, came to Tunisia on official business. He helped me to register to study accounting, management, and commercial administration at the Tunisian-Canadian Centre of Gammarth. I completed the three-year course in 2002 and started doing paid internships and odd jobs.

On 5 May 2005, I had an appointment at the police station to collect my residence permit. The agent in charge asked me to wait. He came back a few minutes later to tell me I would be driven to the Home Office to sort out problems with my application. I sensed trouble when police officers insisted on first driving me to my house and ordered me to collect my personal belongings. I sent an SMS to a French friend, Anne Picquart, when the police were not looking, informing her about my arrest.

At the Home Office, my phone was taken away and I was questioned about my articles against the government in Chad. The officers accused me of being involved in politics, contrary to my terms of stay in Tunisia. I could see that a decision had already been made to send me back to Chad. I pleaded with them not to send me back, saying I would be in danger, but no one wanted to listen. They took me to Mornaguia detention centre.

When Anne, the friend I had alerted, went to the Home Office to inquire about my arrest, the Tunisian police told her not to get involved in a case that did not concern her. She went back with a Tunisian lawyer, but the police refused to speak to him. The lawyer advised Anne to get in touch with human rights organisations.

Anne called her sister, Bénédicte Picquart, who lived in Lyon, France, and the Human Rights League (LDH) was informed of my case. The Human Rights League tried to negotiate my release but to no avail; the Tunisian authorities would not budge.

Anne managed to persuade the authorities to allow her to see me and we met on 8 May 2005, at the Ministry of Home Affairs. She told me she

had contacted the Senegalese embassy in Tunis. The following day, I was driven to the embassy to apply for a visa. It was granted and Anne helped me to buy a ticket to Dakar. I left Tunisia on 10 May 2005.

On 6 June 2005, I filed for asylum as a political refugee with Senegal's National Eligibility Committee (CNE). On 23 November 2005, I received a notice that my application had been rejected. I was told that I did not meet the criteria to be declared a refugee. I had nowhere to go, so I slept in the offices of the African Meeting for the Defence of Human Rights (RADDHO), a non-governmental organisation (NGO).

In 2007, I got a job at *Manooré FM* to host a programme. From 2005 to 2006, I was the Dakar correspondent for the *Ialtchad Press*, a Canadian-based website managed by journalists Bello Bakary and Hamid Moussami. I soon became the publishing director of the *Alwihda Info* website, run by Ahmat Yacoub and other Chadian exiles.

In 2007, I created my blog, *makaila.fr*, to comment on the situation in Chad and also publish contributions from readers. The next year I submitted another appeal for political refugee status to the CNE. Again. My application was turned down.

I was in a dilemma. I could not legalise my status as I was not recognised as an asylum seeker, and at the same time I could not get a Chadian passport. I could neither travel abroad nor enter any legal contract without valid identification documents.

I lived on income generated from my blog, help received from the radio station and support from my Chadian compatriots.

During this time, the Chadian authorities made several overtures to try to get me to drop my criticism of the regime in return for travel documents and a good job back home. I once received a call from Hinda Déby, wife of the Chadian president. I had met her in Tunis in 2004, before her marriage to Idriss Déby, when she was doing an internship at the African Development Bank. She called me to suggest that I give

up my fight against the government and return to Chad. I declined her proposal and instead suggested that she use her position to help find a solution to the crisis in the country. I later learned that some of my relatives had been contacted to try to persuade me to return.

In 2011 and 2012, the African Meeting for the Defence of Human Rights (RADDHO) and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) asked Abdoulaye Wade, the Senegalese president, and his successor, Macky Sall, to legalise my status. Both requests were denied.

Then history repeated itself seven years after my ejection from Tunis: I was expelled again, this time from Dakar.

The day before, I had received a call from a Chadian official in Dakar who warned me to be careful, as our minister of justice, Jean Bernard Padaré, was in town. The events that followed led me to conclude that his visit had something to do with the summons I received soon afterwards.

On 6 May 2013, an official of the Territorial Surveillance Directorate (DST), Ndiaye, summoned me to his office. When I got home, a friend, who was a political refugee in France, called to tell me that I could be extradited to Chad.

Some friends I talked to expressed doubt that Senegal, the land of *Téranga* (hospitality), would extradite me, while others advised me to alert the relevant rights organisations.

Amadou Kane, the legal advisor of RADDHO, assured me that extradition was a long process and that Senegal would not want to tarnish its international reputation in terms of human rights and freedom. Mouhamadou Moustapha Diagne of Amnesty International was sent to accompany me for the interview at DST, but once there he was asked to leave the room.

“Do you think that we are intimidated because you came with the manager of an organisation?” Ndiaye asked me.

Two officers searched my bag and removed the batteries from my camera and voice recorder. I was questioned about my email exchanges with Chadian journalist Eric Topona and Chadian opposition politicians Saleh Kebzabo and Ngarléjy Yorongar.

After the interrogation, it was decided that either I be extradited to Chad or deported to Mali. I opposed both options. I knew I would not be safe in Mali. In 2012, Idriss Déby had sent Chadian troops to fight jihadist groups that occupied the north of Mali. I knew Mali was indebted to Déby and would have no interest in keeping me safe from him.

Despite my objections, I was driven back home to pick up my belongings and locked up at Dieupeul police station without food or drink.

When they learnt about my detention, civil society organisations, a network of Senegalese journalists and bloggers, as well as international human rights organisations, arranged to meet the Senegalese authorities to try to stop my extradition or deportation.

When I was marched out of my cell, still handcuffed, and driven to Dakar airport, I was not sure where I was going. I was relieved when police said I was being sent to Guinea. The policeman who escorted me to the plane explained my case to the pilot.

When I switched on my phone, I saw that I had missed two calls from Moukhtar Selane, a Senegalese journalist friend, and Ms Yeya Birama Wane, a Senegalese activist and member of RADDHO. I burst into tears.

Mrs Namba Kaba, a Guinean woman who was sitting beside me, said: “My son, in Africa a man does not cry.” I calmed down and explained my situation to her.

I did not know anybody in Conakry, the capital city of Guinea. I asked the woman to help me find a cheap hotel. Mrs Kaba took me under her wing, telling immigration officers that I was her nephew on vacation. Without her intervention, it would have been impossible for me to leave the

airport because I had no address in Conakry. I stayed with Mrs Namba's family until I left for France two months later.

Mokhtar Bâ, a correspondent for Radio France Internationale (RFI) in Guinea, Souleymane Diallo, a correspondent for Reporters sans frontières (RSF) in Conakry, and Aziz Diop, the executive secretary of the National Council of Civil Society Organisations of Guinea (CNOSCG), accompanied me to meet Khalifa Diaby Gassama, the Guinean minister for human rights and freedoms. The minister assured me of his government's support and then handed me 200 euros and his business card.

Surrounded by members of Guinean civil society, I gave a press conference in Conakry, narrating the circumstances of my arrest and expulsion from Dakar.

During the two months I lived in Conakry, I regularly visited the offices of the CNOSCG, to meet people, run my blog, and make applications to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

The Spanish humanitarian associations in the Canary Islands started a campaign asking the Spanish government to give me political asylum. Senator Jordi Guillot travelled to Madrid to present my case.

In France, Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF), Amnesty International, Internet Sans Frontières (ISF), a former member of the French parliament, Noël Mamère, and his collaborator, Patrick Farbiaz, journalists, researchers, and Tunisian deputies and Senegalese, African, and French civil society organisations, such as Survie, supported my asylum request to the French government.

On 12 July 2013, the French embassy in Guinea granted me a long-term entry visa and the following day I flew out of Conakry to Paris.

Chad has had a dismal record in press freedom since its independence on 11 August 1960. The country has never had a truly free press. In the

first three decades of independence, successive regimes never allowed independent media. And the situation did not improve over the next 30 years, certainly not under Idriss Dèby. It is true that during his reign many media outlets have been established. However, the regime has kept tight control over them, frequently introducing laws meant to curtail their freedom, eventually leading to their deaths.

N'Djaména Hebdo and other newspapers that emerged in the 1990s were pushed into bankruptcy and closure, as authorities withheld subsidies and aid meant for their development and sustainability.

The socio-economic environment in Chad is not conducive to the survival of independent media. Chadian journalist Mikael Didama, the editor of the newspaper *Le Temps*, knows that well. His paper does not benefit from corporate advertising or other financial aid. The editor struggles to do his work.

The government is, however, ready to support newspapers that it can control. Press freedom in Chad is a mockery.

Many journalists have had to flee the country. These include Ahmed Bichara Zeidane, the founder of the site *Regards d'Africains de France*, and Eric Topona. Martin Inoua Doulguet was put in jail for nine months, accused of libel. He was released after the intervention of international human rights organisations. He is still struggling to relaunch his newspaper, *Salam Info*, without any financial assistance in Chad.

My family and I have paid a heavy price for my activism. It has been a long time since I last saw my relatives, who are considered opponents of the government. People avoid visiting my mother because anyone who appears to be close to the family is considered a suspect by the National Security Agency (ANS), the political police of the Idriss Dèby's regime. The Ministry of Urban Planning was once instructed to reduce the size of my family's property without offering any compensation.

My mother died in 2015. I could not attend her funeral and I have not been able to visit her grave.

My life's journey has been filled with tribulations. I have lived through difficult situations and suffered injustice, both in Chad and other African countries. I have faced numerous attempts to force me to return to Chad, where there is no guarantee of my safety. However, I still go on because I am convinced of the importance of my struggle.

I hope my story shines a light on the plight of the many people who are engaged in a similar struggle so that they get the support they need.

5

Soleyana Shimeles Gebremichael, Ethiopia

Nine Zones and a passion for justice

Forced into exile and then charged with terrorism. I had no idea this would be my fate as I helped to lobby support for civil society organisations fighting to improve Ethiopia's human rights situation.

That Friday, April 24, 2014, as I prepared to start the final leg of my journey back home from the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, there was no sign that my life and that of my colleagues on the small Zone9 blogging collective were about to change forever.

I chatted on Google Talk with fellow bloggers as I prepared for my connection flight to Addis Ababa from Nairobi, Kenya. I discussed with Mahlet Fantahun a possible visit to political prisoners to deliver books we had recently bought. Mahi was a data management expert working with the Ministry of Health. She was well known for her humorous blogs about social and political life.

I'd also had a quick email conversation with Befekadu Hailu, another one of our colleagues, on the proposed visit. Befekadu, who worked at St Mary's University in Addis Ababa, was a known Zone9 voice and had written the highest number of articles in our blog's two-year existence. His 2013 novel *Children of their Parents* had won a literary award.

I was looking forward to reuniting with colleagues in Addis Ababa, having been away for almost two months. Then it happened.

A message popped up on the Facebook page we had set up for our blogging collective. It broke the news that police had just taken Mahi from her office. Zelalem, who wrote the message, said he had just received a call from a guy he knew from her office.

The shock hit me. A few minutes later Zelalem sent a message to say that university police had summoned him. I started calling my other friends to check if they were fine. None of them answered their phones.

Later that night, I was informed that their houses had been searched and Abel Wabella, Befekadu, Atnaf Berhane, Natnael Feleke, Mahi, and Zelalem had been arrested. Freelance journalists Tesfalem Waldyes, Edom Kassaye, and Asmamaw Hailegeorgis were also being detained. They were all held at the notorious Meakelawi prison. Only three of the nine Zone9 founders escaped the government dragnet — Jomanex, who joined me in Nairobi the next day, Dr Endakachew Chala, who was out of the country and myself.

Earlier, things had been pretty normal for the Zone9 bloggers, as they went about their regular duties. Abel Wabella worked for Ethiopian Airlines. Natty was an economist at a bank. Zelalem Kibret was a law lecturer at Ambo University. Jomanex ran his own small business in Adama town, some 200km from Addis. Befekadu and Atnaf Berhane, who worked for the Addis Ababa city administration, were together when federal police came for them.

When we started our blog, we had known that one day we might get into trouble with the authorities. We just did not think that the day of reckoning would come so soon.

I had just written an article on the importance of adopting a more international approach to human rights advocacy in Ethiopia. As a lawyer, I had worked on community and human rights initiatives with different civil society organisations (CSOs). I had seen the effects of the government's Charities and Societies Proclamation, passed in 2009.

The law regulated the establishment and running of all charities and societies, defined as "charities and societies that are formed under the laws of Ethiopia, all of whose members are Ethiopians, generate income from Ethiopia, and are wholly controlled by Ethiopians". It limited the mandate of CSOs and their intervention in human rights-related issues.

Zone9 came about as a result of Ethiopia's suppression of media and freedom of expression. The elections of May 2005 were accompanied by vehement protests. For the next two years, the government violently put down demonstrations, killing a number of people.

After quelling the protests and violence, it turned to the communication network which had had been the driving force behind the rallying of people to agitate for democracy and freedom. In June 2005, the SMS network was interrupted. A few months later some of the most vocal Ethiopian journalists who had challenged the results of the election and called for more democracy, among them popular columnist Eskinder Nega, were arrested and their newspapers forced to close down. In May 2006, the government started to block access to blogs and websites, the homes of dissenting voices and opinions. By 2012, there was no free media to speak of, there was no freedom of expression.

The few existing private newspapers were either silent on politics or practised severe self-censorship for fear of upsetting the authorities. They were careful to only publish on topics that were in line with the government narrative of Ethiopia's fast economic growth. There was almost no independent TV or radio station. Internet penetration was at only 1.5 per cent of the population. Social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, were a new platform and with the low connectivity and slow internet speeds in the country, had almost no influence on any political activism.

In the years following the controversial 2005 elections, the government had put in place a number of repressive laws. These included the Mass Media and Freedom of Information Proclamation, the Anti-Terrorism

Proclamation, and the Charities and Societies Proclamation, all enacted between 2008 and 2010.

By 2011, the popularity of social media had increased following the Arab Spring. Even though the then Prime Minister Meles Zenawi said he did not lose any sleep on concerns that the Arab Spring might spread to Ethiopia, his government intensified political prosecutions. Journalists like Reeyot Alemu and Woubishet Taye were sentenced to 14 years in jail while politicians like Andualem Arage were imprisoned for life. These prosecutions had a chilling effect on any journalistic or political activism.

All Zone9 bloggers were active online commentators on Ethiopian political and social freedom, while working their regular jobs. Our first offline engagement started when I suggested a visit to the journalists and political leaders imprisoned at Kality federal. Most of them had been charged or convicted under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation. The idea of visiting prisoners had been on my mind since I learned that journalist Eskinder Nega, who had been jailed seven times, was only allowed visits by his wife and son. I felt the need for solidarity with those imprisoned for fighting for freedom

Our visit came as a surprise to the prisoners, whose contact with people who were not their immediate family members was restricted. None of us had known them before their arrest. It took some time for some of them to trust us because they were afraid the government had sent us to spy on them.

On one of our Sunday visits to Kality, one of the female political prisoners said, “The Zone Niners are here.” When we asked what she meant, she explained that the prisoners called visitors ‘People from Zone Nine’. The prison had eight zones, the last one being reserved for women. The prisoners considered that Ethiopia was one big prison, where everyone’s rights were violated and they risked being imprisoned at any time; the ninth zone. We had been toying with the idea of starting a blogging collective and that day sealed the question of the name; we would call our blog Zone9. So in April 2012 Zone9 was born.

In its two years of operation before the arrests, Zone9 published more than 200 articles focused on the rule of law, constitutionalism, human rights, and governance. It also introduced its first quarterly digital campaign. In its second year, Zone9 ran four campaigns: 'Respect the Constitution'; 'Freedom of Expression Now'; 'Bring Back our Demonstration Rights'; and 'Ethiopian Dream'. The campaigns attracted the attention of many young people who had been using social media only for social purposes. Zone9's aim was to bring about an alternative narrative through the digital platform. Our country was under siege, bombarded by a single narrative — that one of development, as framed by the government, and at the expense of basic rights and freedoms.

Against all expectations, both locally and internationally, Zone9 soon became the new voice of the youth. Even though access to the internet was quite low, tabloid magazines and newspapers, which usually carried little political content, started publishing the online articles of the blog in their print versions. This widened Zone9's reach and made the content available to the public.

With Zone9 becoming more visible, individual members became opinion shapers of the then social media political platform. Zone9 members were asked to offer training and advice for campaigns, new publications of political parties, and civic education. We took part in different human rights and freedom of expression forums internationally.

Zone9's growing visibility had an impact on our personal lives. My father, who had been an activist himself back in the old days of the military regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam, was worried that the government would target me because of my posts on social media. During our many conversations about my role in Zone9, he warned me that Ethiopia's politics had not changed much over the years, and that any sort of expression would be interpreted as dissent.

After I graduated from law school, my first job entailed giving legal advice to vulnerable groups in northern Ethiopia. Because I was born and raised in the capital Addis Ababa, I had never had the chance to

see the destitution among rural Ethiopians, until I started my first job. The assignment brought me face to face with the broken justice system, everyday human rights violations and the lack of dignity among people living just a few kilometres from the capital.

My opportunity to serve the neglected community was cut short when the new Charities and Societies Proclamation was enacted. It restricted funding for projects like legal aid, democracy, rule of law and advocacy. The law came into force in 2010, so I had to leave my job. My critical voice on digital media started to rise.

Even before the arrests of April 2014, we had become aware that the government was monitoring the Zone9 team. We convinced ourselves that we would not face any major problems because we were not supported by any political entity. We decided to halt our activities to show the government that we had no political goals — for six months Zone9 ceased its operations.

The break did not lead to reduced surveillance and harassment. One Zone9 member and many of our friends and colleagues were asked by security officers to explain their role in the blog or their relationship with the bloggers. People recorded us using their phone cameras and took our photographs. We were often followed into restaurants and cafeterias by strangers.

Our foreign travel was scrutinised. I would be kept waiting at the airport immigration window without any explanation. The group decided that it was better to resume writing and face the consequences than continue with silence, which was not helping us escape surveillance and harassment. Just two days after we announced that we were back and the day we published our first blog, the police pounced, arresting six of our colleagues and three friends.

I kept hoping that the government would release them after a few days, that things would change. But after their first court appearance, which came after nine weeks, that hope was dashed. Things looked

even grimmer when the court allowed police to remand them pending investigations. The fact that they were being held at Meakelawi made the situation appear even more hopeless — this is where many high-profile political prisoners were detained. After four months, they were charged with terrorism and inciting violence, specifically, intending to "destabilise the nation, having connections to outlawed organisations, using digital encryption to communicate, and planning to carry out terrorism".

I was charged along with them, in absentia. By then I had moved to Washington DC, from where I would spend a quarter of the next four years advocating and campaigning for the release of my colleagues.

The days that followed were pure torture for the bloggers. Between April 2014 and September 2015, their trial was adjourned more than 30 times. They would be brought to court and spend less than eight minutes in the dock, then get hustled out. They would sometimes have to wait in court for long only for the matter to be deferred.

Then on July 8, 2015, Mahlet and Zelalem and the three journalists were released and all charges against them were dropped. No explanation was given, but there was speculation that the government was under pressure because of an impending visit by US President Barack Obama.

In October, Natnael Feleke, Atnaf Berhane, Abel Wabella, and I were acquitted of the terrorism charges. Befekadu remained in custody, charged with inciting violence.

The prosecutor appealed against the acquittals, but the Supreme Court upheld the lower court's ruling in my case and the one of Abel Wabella. The court said Atnaf Berhane and Natnael Feleke should be tried instead for inciting violence through their writing.

My fulltime job while in exile was to make sure that my colleagues got as much attention as possible. I was their voice. Zone9 was dedicated to writing about the bloggers and covering their court trials. We evaluated the evidence and fought the propaganda of state-affiliated media, which

was accusing us of being foreign agents. I highlighted the torture and suffering of my colleagues at Meakelawi during their first four months there.

After the charges were made official, it became possible to communicate with the prisoners. Family and friends who were allowed access to the detainees helped us to document the torture, which included beatings, late night interrogations, and women being questioned while naked by male investigators. We were able to document all this and make it public on the first year anniversary of the arrests. The story of each member was relatable to many young people's everyday life. This made the Zone9ners the most visited political prisoners.

These efforts got global attention and soon everyone was talking about the plight of the Zone9 bloggers. The hashtag #FreeZone9Bloggers started trending.

I spent the year documenting my colleagues' court trials, translating stories into different languages and organising diaspora events to celebrate the Zone9 bloggers and other political prisoners. I was worried that something might happen to my parents because of my work abroad. My fears were heightened by the fact that soon after the arrest of my colleagues, police had conducted a nine-hour search of my parents' house, where I used to live. I was worried that my activism might make my family a target.

Exile was a combination of fear, worry and dealing with survivor guilt. I spent the 16 months the Zone9ners were in prison advocating their release, documenting their suffering and blogging about freedom of expression — or the lack of it — in Ethiopia.

Campaigns and articles written by my colleague in prison have made Zone9 a famous freedom of expression case, possibly in the same league as the trial of the three Al Jazeera journalists in Egypt in 2014.

Even though I had to remain in exile as the appeal was going on, feeling

anxious and intimidated, it was better than the first 16 months as my colleagues were defending themselves from prison.

Reflecting on Zone9, the main lesson I have learned is that no voice is too small in the fight for freedom. Every piece of writing, every decent opinion expressed peacefully matters. Even though sometimes there is a high price to pay, the truth must be told.

6

Sainey MK Marenah,
The Gambia

Through Gambia's halls of injustice

Gunned down, abducted, tortured and arbitrarily arrested. In the six years of Yahya Jammeh's eccentric rule, journalists in the Gambia were targeted for simply doing their jobs.

When I began working as a journalist in 2008, the media were operating in difficult circumstances. After his ascension to power in a 1994 coup d'état, Jammeh frequently singled out the media and individual journalists for harassment. Free speech was curtailed. The government treated the media as an enemy, not a partner in open government. Restrictive laws were enacted.

The Newspaper Act of 1994 imposed criminal penalties on private publications which failed to pay a yearly registration fee. The National Media Communication Act, 2000 forced journalists to reveal confidential sources to police and the judiciary. The Criminal Code (Amendment) Bill, 2004 prescribed prison terms for defamation and sedition and the Newspaper (Amendment) Bill, 2004 required newspaper proprietors to buy expensive operating licences and register their homes as security.

Journalists who dared voice any opposition to or criticism of the government paid a high price. Several went into exile; some were killed and others simply disappeared, even as many more faced prosecution on spurious charges. Veteran journalist Deydra Hydara, Editor and founder of *The Point* newspaper, who had signalled his intention to

challenge in court the draconian media laws, was shot dead in 2004. Two years later, Ebrima Manneh was arrested for trying to re-publish a BBC report criticising Jammeh. He disappeared and was never seen again.

Besides newspapers, the country relied on one public television broadcaster, GRTS, and a string of radio stations for information. Because of government repression, most of these platforms practised self-censorship and did not address critical national and political issues. Naturally, the state-controlled national broadcaster could not oppose the regime's views. Due to persistent harassment, the *Daily Observer*, one of the country's largest papers, gave in to the state and became a propaganda tool for the president.

This was the situation that welcomed me into journalism. The risks that journalists took everyday as they tried to do their job — the ever-present threat of violence — was enough to dissuade any young Gambian from entering the profession.

I was a correspondent for *The Point*, an independent daily based in the capital Banjul, where I reported on political, legal and diplomatic affairs. I became accustomed to frequent harassment by state agents. In August 2010, Deputy Editor-in-Chief Abba Gibba and I were summoned to appear before a high court judge in Banjul. The judge questioned us about my story on the trial of former police chief Ensa Badjie that had appeared the previous day. The story quoted the defence counsel complaining during the hearing that his client had been tortured. The judge insisted that our headline was wrong. When it was pointed out to him that two other newspapers had carried the same quotes, he had no choice but to let us go.

For slightly over a year, until my arrest in January 2014, I was a correspondent for *The Standard*, a privately owned newspaper. It had a bumpy ride, suffering frequent closure for its journalism. The first attack came only four editions after its launch. The next one, in September 2012, stopped its operations for a year and four months.

As chief correspondent, I headed the political desk of *The Standard*, leading investigations into major national stories. I started off as a judiciary reporter, mainly covering the courts, which were kept busy by the frequent prosecution of critics of the regime.

Officers of the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) visited our offices in 2012 and announced that the president had ordered the newspaper's immediate closure. No explanation was given. The order came when there was a national debate about the execution of nine prisoners. *The Standard* had provided extensive coverage of the executions and criticised the action.

NIA agents denied me access to the Supreme Court during the hearing of the final appeal against the death sentence imposed on a former chief of defence staff and six others convicted of plotting to topple Jammeh. I had covered the trial since its start in 2009 until my newspaper's closure. Binta Bah, a senior judiciary correspondent of *The Daily News*, which had also been shut down, was also locked out. The intelligence men claimed they were acting on orders from the presidency.

The arbitrary closures and interference left many journalists jobless. I resorted to freelance writing for several newspapers, including *The Voice*, a private tri-weekly newspaper.

It was not long before I was in trouble again, this time over a story about the defection of 19 Green Youth members from the ruling APRC party. I had attended a rally at Tanji, a coastal town in The Gambia's south, about 25 km from the capital, where the youths publicly announced their defection to the opposition United Democratic Party (UDP).

The Green Youth were die-hard supporters of the ruling party and were viewed as militant — they would support President Jammeh at all costs — which is why the opposition's youth secretary, Solo Sandeng, furtively gave me the defectors' names. My attempts to interview some of them failed because they feared reprisals from the ruling party. The story about them, with the headline "19 Green Youth join the opposition

UDP" appeared on the front page of *The Voice* on 6 December 2013. Contacted for comment, APRC had denied that there had been any defections.

Not unexpectedly, Musa Sheriff, Editor-in-Chief of *The Voice*, assigned another reporter, Mafugi Ceesay, to write a follow-up story. It was published six days later under the headline "Tanji, APRC deny 19 Green Youth defection to UDP."

On the second week of January 2014, I received a call from state agents who said that, on the president's directive, they had investigated my report on the youths' defection and found it to be false. I was summoned to Sanyang police station. A colleague had sent me a message that police had visited *The Voice*'s offices in Serrekunda asking for me. They had demanded copies of my article, together with the second story and questioned staff about editor Sheriff's whereabouts. They arrested him when he entered the office at around 11 am.

Alarmed by the turn of events, I nervously called my family and the Gambia Press Union (GPU). At Sanyang police station, I was ushered into the CID office and questioned for an hour. The police said they were investigating the veracity of my story. I told them I was present at the rally and stood by the report. They asked about my sources and suggested that I had written the article to alarm the public. I refused to answer any more questions until I had a lawyer.

The press union contacted attorney Lamin Camara to represent us, but he could not make it to the police station that afternoon. On our first night in detention, all our personal belongings were taken away. We were herded into a tiny, grimy cell and were not allowed any outside contacts. Terrified, we slept on small mats on the bare floor near the washroom. The cell was infested with mosquitoes and other pests. It was difficult to fall asleep.

The following day, the police told our colleagues from *The Voice* and the press union that our arrest had been ordered by President Jammeh. We

would not be released or formally charged without his permission, they said. We were transferred to police headquarters in Banjul and placed in a cell far more uncomfortable than the first one. Twenty people were crammed into a tiny space and all of them used a filthy bathroom. There was no proper ventilation and the stench was overpowering. Lights were switched off at about 5 pm. Mosquitoes kept us awake. One bright spot: our cellmates treated us with respect when they learnt that we were journalists.

We were lucky that our case attracted international attention. This may have shielded us from being treated much worse. Amnesty International called for our release, referring to us as "prisoners of conscience detained solely for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression". I had been in regular contact with Amnesty's office in Dakar. When I failed to attend sessions of the African Commission for Human and Peoples' Rights in January, they immediately realised something was wrong.

On 16 January at around 10 am, we were taken to the Banjul magistrate's court and charged with two counts: conspiring to commit a felony and publishing false news to cause fear among the public or disturb public peace, against Section 59 (1) and Section 368 of Gambia's Criminal Procedure Code.

We denied the charges. I was not really surprised, knowing the regime's penchant for stifling information, but the charge filled me with panic. Writing an article to incite fear could be a grave matter depending on the prosecutor's purpose. I worried about his next move.

The court finally set bail at 20 000 Gambian dalasi (equivalent to $520 at the time). I was afraid my family would not pay for fear of being targeted, but one of my brothers brought the money and I was released the same day.

During the preliminary hearing, our lawyer raised several issues about the charge sheet. This delayed the trial and it was moved to 13 February.

On that day, the prosecutors amended the charge to publication of false news, contrary to Section 181 A (1) and conspiracy to commit a misdemeanour, both of which carried a sentence of up to two years in prison or a fine or both.

Once again, we pleaded not guilty. The prosecutors presented eight witnesses. I got the impression most of them had been coached, as there were inconsistencies in their testimonies. I had been a court correspondent and knew that many witnesses were paid to lie.

The first witness was Lamin Jammeh, a police officer and criminal investigator. He told the court that on 7 December 2013, the day after my article was published, President Jammeh directed the Inspector-General of Police to open investigations into *The Voice* article. An enquiry panel was formed. The witness confirmed that an APRC rally was held in Tanji on 30 November 2013.

The case suffered several setbacks. Magistrate Mbaye was replaced. No official reason was given. It may well have been that the first magistrate, whom I had come to know during my days covering the courts, was considered too lenient. Mbaye later fled The Gambia due to threats by government agents. He had ordered the release of a defendant in a case that had taken too long because of unnecessary adjournments prompted by prosecutors.

Our case was adjourned again to 10 April, when the testimony of the second prosecution witness, Lamin Sonko, the leader of the Green Youth in Tanji, was heard. Sonko testified that, although there were 54 Green Youth members in the town, most of them were not in Tanji during the rally. By the time the third witness had testified on 21 July, it had become clear that the witnesses had been coached to cast doubt on the facts. Magistrate Abeke threatened to discharge us as the prosecution kept delaying the trial. As a result, he was removed and another magistrate, Momodou Krubally, was assigned to the case.

On 4 September, as the prosecutors finally wrapped up in their case, our lawyer made a no-case submission. Hearings were deferred after that,

as the magistrate failed to attend court. In October, with no explanation, Krubally was replaced by Jackline Nixon Hakim.

On 10 November, after nearly 11 months of the trial, we were acquitted and discharged based on the court's affirmation of the 'no case to answer' submission. In her ruling, Magistrate Hakim stated: "It's not in dispute that there was a publication. However, evidence adduced before the court regarding both counts was neither direct nor circumstantial in showing that the publication was false or that the accused persons conspired amongst themselves to publish [the article]."

At first, I did not understand what the judge was saying. When it dawned on me that I was finally free, I burst into tears. Magistrate Hakim was later questioned by security agents and was fired in June 2015.

Despite my victory, the trial cost me a great deal. I was shunned by friends, who were afraid to be associated with me. I felt totally isolated. In those days in The Gambia, if you fell out with the state, even your family would cut you off. Newspapers rejected my articles. I lost my source of income while in detention. I could only write for a few foreign publications. Throughout the trial, everyone had advised me to leave the country. But secretly I had prayed for heightened international pressure, which could easily influence the case in my favour.

Shortly after my acquittal, I got a tip-off from a person within the intelligence community that President Jammeh had ordered that new charges be brought against me. Then my brother one day called to say that there were intelligence agents at my house. I could not go home. I decided to spend the night at my mother's house. Meanwhile my brother sneaked into my house and packed my bags. On 14 November 2014, I fled to Senegal.

The first few months in Dakar were difficult. I did not know anybody and was unable to work. With the help of media charities, I started a new life doubling as a freelance journalist for international media, including the BBC and Al Jazeera.

However, it soon became clear that I was not safe from the Gambian government. Dakar had become a popular sanctuary for Gambians fleeing Jammeh's persecution. Protests were regularly staged in front of the country's local embassy. The regime did not hesitate to send its agents after us. One of them was recognised during a protest march. My house was broken into and vandalised. A colleague narrowly escaped being kidnapped by Jammeh's agents.

When Jammeh was ousted in the 2016 elections by Adama Barrow, it was hard to believe that 22 years of his repressive rule had ended, ushering in a new political dispensation.

I returned to Banjul with renewed hopes for a better Gambia, where the rule of law — which includes respect for human rights and media freedom — would be guaranteed.

7

Abdalle Ahmed Mumin, Somalia

Terror and death in Somalia

The call came as I was leaving a mosque in the central business district of Nairobi, Kenya. It was my brother, Mohamed, and he had a grim message: Al-Shabaab militants had bombed the Central Hotel in Mogadishu, killing at least ten people, among them Abdishakur Mire, a close friend and former journalist who had gone into politics.

I had met Mire while working as a reporter on his Mogadishu-based newspaper *Ileys*. Three weeks earlier, he had invited me for a chat in the same hotel. Now it was a heap of rubble caked in blood, the latest testimony to the factional war which had racked my homeland for two decades.

Mire knew what it was like to be targeted. His encounter with terror groups was the inspiration of a book he wrote in 2013 titled *Rise of Islamist Movements*. The book's runaway success brought him little joy. He had received endless threats from people who believed he was against Islam.

Mire had founded a newspaper in the semi-autonomous Puntland region that called out government officials for corruption. This, too, made him countless enemies.

He once told me that if ever he was killed, it would be because of clan-related disputes, which in Somalia often turned violent.

In one of the world's most dangerous cities, the Central Hotel was among the few places where Mr Mire, like other Somali journalists and officials, felt safe. His heart always seemed to be in his former profession. As a journalist, activist and later a politician, Mire tried everything he could to improve Somalia. And he was killed for it.

We all lived under the fear which stalked Mire's life. Though younger and less politically active, I had received numerous death threats and survived an armed attack. My work as a correspondent for western media put me in the limelight. A story I sent to the digital *Wall Street Journal* alerted the world to the death of al-Shabaab's emir, Ahmed Abdi Godane, who had been wounded in a US airstrike in September 2014.

In al-Shabaab's eyes, reporting such news for western news outlets was an act of betrayal. It was no less heinous than military espionage and the perpetrator had to be punished.

First, I received anonymous calls from people who threatened me with death. Terrified and confused, I sneaked out of the country and stayed for two weeks in neighbouring Kenya, hoping the risk would fade away.

It was the most traumatic two weeks of my life. I was sick with fear, not knowing what would happen when I returned to Mogadishu. The danger facing my young family, who were innocent but extremely vulnerable, compounded the problem. Then there was my job, which hung by a thread if I was out of station. In late December, I returned to Mogadishu and resumed filing stories for the *Wall Street Journal*.

At midday on 25 January 2015, I was driving home from a local bank when I noticed a white Toyota Noah on my tail. From my modest safety training, I became attentive and carefully monitored it. Suddenly shots rang out and I realised the men in the Noah, clad in the jungle green uniform of government security forces, were firing in my direction. One bullet hit my car but I was unscathed.

Something told not to go home; they could follow me there. I sought

refuge in a suburban hotel. The next day, I reached out to my family, packed a small bag and headed for Mogadishu airport with a security escort. The flight to Nairobi was literally a godsend. I repeatedly thanked Allah as the plane soared over Somalia's capital, a shooting survivor's turbo-charged ticket to anonymity and safety.

My stay in Nairobi was ridden with fear and anxiety, a crippling terror of the invisible enemy who might have crossed the border. I missed my family and lost my job as a stringer. Away from the theatre of war, I was useless to my media clients. I wandered the streets of Nairobi begging for support from non-governmental organisations.

Back home, the situation became more worrisome. Armed men visited my home and threatened the family. Ten months after I flew out of Somalia, my family was forced to flee Mogadishu and join me in Nairobi.

Before they came, life was lonely and stressful. I kept thinking about my lovely wife and our seven children. On the streets, I constantly glanced over my shoulder and peered into unfamiliar faces, hoping to spot the enemy before they could pick me out. I was a refugee and a man on the run.

In February 2015, I registered for asylum in Kenya because that was the only way to remain in the country legally. After two years of screening interviews and a long wait for resettlement, my family's hopes were dashed when the new US president, Donald Trump, imposed a travel ban on 11 Muslim-majority nations, including Somalia. We could no longer enter the United States.

Press freedom remains precarious in Somalia and journalists are targeted for exposing the truth. In 2019 alone, 81 journalists were physically assaulted and 53 arbitrarily arrested. At least eight have been killed over the past two years; five died in indiscriminate Al-Shabaab attacks, two were killed by unidentified attackers, and one was shot dead by a police officer.

Death threats and obstruction of access to information — all representing a vital constitutional right that citizens were meant to enjoy — are persistent. While the militant group is responsible for most attacks on journalists, the government also continues to order arbitrary arrests and suspensions based on perceived criticism. It blocks independent news websites and has introduced a law restricting media freedom.

My passion for journalism had flickered into life in a Mogadishu displacement camp in the early 1990s. Growing up in the squalor of a charity village, I witnessed extreme poverty, over-crowded accommodation, insecurity, lack of sanitation and poor access to water. I have experienced the hardships faced by marginalised communities, including women and the disabled in aid camps.

It left me with the conviction that I had to be a voice for the voiceless. A willing convert to advocacy journalism, I believed that media that made a difference went beyond asking for soundbites and quotes. They listened to the people's stories and understood their plight, enabling them to report with impact.

I had started off as a general reporter on a Mogadishu newspaper in 2003 and then switched to broadcast journalism. At different times, I worked as an editor and news producer at local radio stations. It still did not prepare me for the hectic life of a fully fledged reporter who wrote approximately a dozen stories a month on a diversity of topics, ranging from political drama, recurring drought, terrorism, human rights abuses and Somalia's long-running internal conflict.

Somalia has been in turmoil for the past three decades. It has been scarred by every imaginary security blight, from clan warfare, Islamic militancy, and maritime piracy to terrorist groups which kill innocent people, including journalists and government officials, to assassinations and roadside bombs aimed at peace-keeping forces.

Oddly, there are no official regulations on what a journalist can or cannot report in Somalia. Media professionals prey on all sides in the civil war. Some have paid for it with their lives.

They include my friend Mohamed Mohamud, who was popularly known as Tima'ade. He died at 26. A brave and outspoken professional, Mohamud had been covering military operations in Mogadishu. Gunmen shot him six times as he drove to work on the morning of 22 October 2013.

The year before, another journalist, Hassan Osman Abdi, was assassinated after he uncovered a graft scandal within the Mogadishu seaport. This year one of two journalists killed was Said Yusuf Ali, a young reporter I had mentored and trained.

Puntland authorities jailed a colleague, Abdifatah Jama, in 2019 for interviewing a rebel leader. Following Mire's arrest and trial, I visited the prison where he was being held and wrote stories exposing the appalling living conditions in the country's overcrowded central prison of Bosaso.

After the story ran in international media, armed policemen raided my home in Bosaso on the night of 28 August 2010. I had slipped away just in time. A friend put me up in a safe house to continue working while waiting to be ferried to another city in central Putland. After eight days, I arrived in Mogadishu, Somalia, and began a new life.

In 2018, I started mentoring young journalists and giving training on safety, ethical reporting and labour rights. Through this programme, I travelled across the regions of Somalia and witnessed the brutal violation of press freedom. As attacks against the media mounted, mostly perpetrated by state agents, my friends and I formed the *Somali Journalists Syndicate (SJS)*. This is an independent journalists' union dedicated to defending the rights of journalists, providing legal defence assistance advocating access to information.

I took the rum decision to defend the rights of fellow journalists and advocate media freedom in a country that has never known free flow of information. This is not a simple task. Working as a journalist in Somalia is putting yourself in the hands of others and being a press-freedom defender is akin to suicide.

My colleagues and I took to the streets at least five times in April and May 2020 to protest against government harassment and the jailing of two journalists who wrote critical stories about the capital's managers.

Somalis are traditionally oral people. They gather and talk at the slightest excuse. At the individual level, free speech is a means of social and political participation; it is the vehicle through which important issues are debated, the means by which people contribute to decisions which shape the community and the wider nation.

I will have contributed something meaningful by helping to protect and nurture free speech in a democratic Somalia. Free speech enables individuals to take part in politics and stand up to be counted, to be an active player in a democracy, not a passive spectator.

As for the idealistic belief in a privileged Fourth Estate, that is an illusion of the western world. In Africa, journalism's special mission does not shield us from political violence. Still, I want to make a difference, but doing so means risking my life and that of my family.

8

Mimi Mefo Takambou,
Cameroon

Protest and war over language

Cameroon finally discarded its liminal status. It stopped being a country that was not at war but was at the same time not experiencing peace. That was also the start of what turned into an all-out civil war, with a section of the country clamouring for separation.

The 2016 change in the country's status also mirrored an increase in the danger faced by journalists. The number of imprisoned media people shot up, culminating in the arrest, torture and murder of Samuel Ajiekah Abwue Wazizi. When the popular television anchor was arrested on 2 August 2019, it appeared 'normal', given that more journalists had been detained the previous year.

However, when news of his murder was confirmed in June the next year, and it emerged that he had died more than ten months earlier, the stark reality hit me like a thunderbolt. It could easily have been me. Wazizi was killed for doing his job. The same job I have been doing and which I deeply love. The same job which forced me to flee my country and find sanctuary a continent away in Germany.

I became a journalist because of my conviction that the media had the power to bring about positive change. In 2016, working as the first female English-language Editor-in-Chief of Equinoxe, a private TV station, I was confidently on my way to breaking the glass ceiling for women in the broadcast media. Little did I know that in a couple of years there

would be no glass ceiling to aim at; rather, it was the roof over my head that would come crashing down.

At the heart of the Cameroonian government's hostility to the media — and the instability rocking the country — is what has come to be known as the Anglophone crisis.

For decades, the country had been a living nightmare. Bad governance, corruption and total disregard for human rights were the hallmarks of Paul Biya's government. When lawyers and teachers in the two Anglophone regions began staging peaceful protests, the public looked on with indifference. The general assumption was that this was just another flare-up in Cameroon's tempestuous history.

Biya, predictably, reacted with brute force. Many protestors were beaten by police and thrown into jail. The Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium was formed. Strikes were called; children stopped going to school and the judiciary's work ground to a halt in the English-speaking region.

The regime did what it knows best, arrest the protest leaders and put them behind bars. In February 2017, the internet was shut down to prevent the sharing of stories and images on human rights abuses.

An interim government was announced for the self-declared state of Ambazonia, with Sisiku Ayuk Tabe Julius as leader of the "independent" state. This further infuriated the regime, leading to more killings. By 2018, the situation had degenerated into one in which soldiers were being killed by separatists and the soldiers in turn were meting out collective punishment on the population. Whole villages were burnt down, creating a flood of refugees into neighbouring Nigeria and the safer parts of Cameroon.

Journalists had only one option: go out into the conflict area and investigate what was happening. Together with a dedicated crew from Equinoxe, I set out for the conflict regions. I visited remote areas such

as Mbalangi and Ekona in the south-west region. I was also the first journalist to visit the residence in the north-west region of the Batibo DO, who was kidnapped on 11 February 2018. These were heart-wrenching stories of communities that had been completely dislocated by the worsening conflict.

While Equinoxe was able to air these stories, which gave many their first real glimpse of the human costs of civil war, it also attracted hostility from the Cameroonian government. From prohibiting journalists from using the word 'federalism' in their reports to outrightly threatening media houses with closure, desperation marked every step of the government's reaction. While only two journalists had been imprisoned in 2016, the number increased four times within two years.

A shut-down of the internet for more than 330 days in 2017 left our broadcast station, Equinoxe, as one of the few sources of information about what was really happening in the English-speaking regions. I also started my online news platform known as Mimi Mefo Info (MMI), to run stories that my managers at Equinoxe could not touch for fear of government reprisal.

Cameroon swiftly changed from a society that had for years shown a veiled intolerance to press freedom to one in which journalists were openly labelled 'terrorists' and 'enemies of the state'.

The situation became hopeless when 40 young people were massacred in the locality of Menka in the Santa Subdivision, north-west of Cameroon, and I was told Equinoxe could not air the results of my investigative report. To this day, my finding that Cameroon's government was behind what was the first of many large-scale massacres has never been published.

With the government lashing out to cover up its excesses, journalists found themselves in peril. One wrong word could cost you your freedom or, worse, your life. Many fellow professionals disappeared and are languishing in prison for daring to report the truth. Others, like Wazizi,

died a slow agonising death at the hands of state agents. Then there are some like me who slipped away and continue the struggle at great personal risk.

Journalists faced two choices: report the news as it happened and suffer the consequences or become a bystander, paralysed by fear. Many well-meaning news people, understandably, took the second option, not because they are cowards but out of a deeper concern for their families, who were easy targets for vindictive security agents.

I made the decision early in my newsroom career that I would rather stop being a reporter than turn a blind eye to injustice. Rather naively, I believed that my rights as a journalist would be respected if I were honestly and professionally doing my job. I could not have been more mistaken.

When I reported on our television channel that evidence suggested that US missionary Charles Trumann Wesco was shot dead by government soldiers, we took the trouble to include a comment from Biya's officials, who unconvincingly blamed separatists. Although the story captured opposing views, the regime was furious that a journalist could dare point a finger at the military.

Charles Trumann Wesco was shot dead in Bambui, a small town near the restive province of Bamenda, which is Cameroon's north-west region. A popular news platform, Cameroon News Agency (CNA), confirmed his death on 30 October 2018 and said soldiers were responsible. After cross-checking with local sources, Mimi Mefo Info relayed the same information, quoting CNA.

As I compiled and published follow-ups on Trumann's death, I received a summons on 1 November 2018, to appear at the gendarmerie brigade in Douala, where I lived. The news spread like wildfire. My home was under watch. Daily I saw military vehicles in my neighbourhood on my way to and from work.

After a conversation with police, I was whisked away to a military court and charged with "publishing and propagating information that infringes on the territorial integrity of the Republic of Cameroon." Handcuffed and escorted under heavy guard, I found myself at Douala's New Bell Central Prison at midnight, silently doubting the wisdom of having chosen journalism as a career.

Three days in the squalor of a crowded women's prison is nothing but a living nightmare (that is a story for another day). But the solidarity among inmates was heart-rending; the bottomless compassion shown by total strangers to those they think are in greater need I will never forget.

At the second court appearance, the charges against me were dropped and I was freed. This opened a period of self-examination, which sometimes hardened into bouts of doubt. Eventually, I decided that my integrity as a journalist was more important than living in fear and covering up injustice.

The fury of the authorities when I resumed publishing was palpable.

Second, some non-state actors who joined in the campaign for my release felt that I owed them my freedom. They were disappointed that I refused to push their agenda as a propaganda tool

Not surprisingly, many professionals living in Cameroon would no longer publicly associate with me or MMI. They were afraid of state sanctions. It became difficult to find people who would work with me.

Finally, amid vitriolic attacks online and on the front pages of Cameroonian newspapers (especially those pandering to the regime), MMI itself became the focus of repeated hacking attempts.

Winning the Index on Censorship 2019 Award in Journalism brought a significant boost to my confidence. It made me realise that I could not stop fighting for media freedom. I moved to the UK and later crossed

over to Germany to work at Deutsch Welle, the national broadcaster with audiences scattered across the world. More by circumstance than design, I joined the ranks of Cameroonian journalists in exile.

It is hard to forget Samuel Wazizi and the cause for which he paid with his life. Thinking of professional colleagues languishing in prison for a cause we once shared spurs me to continue fighting through journalism. Thoughts of Kingsley Njoka, Paul Chouta, Awah Thomas Jr, Nfor Wawa, Mancho Bibixy, and Tsi Conrad make me realise that the value of individual freedom lies in making a difference to the lives of others.

9

Bob Rugurika, Burundi

Escape from Burundi's killing fields

I was relatively young in my career as a journalist when I first came face-to-face with the heavy hand of authority.

Just four years after I started working as a reporter at Radio Publique Africaine (RPA), the independent and most popular broadcaster in Burundi, I was investigating an arms smuggling ring at Bujumbura airport in February 2008. For my efforts, the airport commander and two of his guards ganged up against me, beating me up thoroughly. Scars remain on my body from the encounter, a reminder of my fiery entry into the world of fighting for truth and justice.

But I was determined to get to the bottom of the scandal. It was later established that guns were illegally passing through the airport in a corrupt arms-for-minerals deal between certain high-ranking Burundi officials and the leaders of the rebel Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, which was operating in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Anti-corruption activist Ernest Manirumva, who had attempted to formally investigate the case, was not so lucky; he was murdered on the night of 8 and 9 April 2009, by agents of the national police and the intelligence service. I now had a new line of enquiry to follow: the assassination of Manirumva. Who were the perpetrators? What was the motive? My task was made easier by a source with whom a friend

working in the police force had put me in contact. The man, who claimed to be one of the killers, was prepared to talk in exchange for protection. Apparently, those who had ordered the assassination were cleaning house by eliminating witnesses. I put him in contact with some diplomats as the murder of Manirumva had attracted international attention, and he was transferred to a safe location.

The man's testimony implicated a dozen senior police and intelligence officers. When the information was released in international reports, the Burundian regime retaliated. Several agents suspected to have revealed details of the assassination were killed. The work visas of foreign civil rights activists involved in the investigation were cancelled. Once the authorities discovered my links with the whistle-blowers, they turned the heat on me. Through my contacts at the National Intelligence Service, I learned of a plan to harm me. This prompted my first exile in September 2010. I fled to Kampala and then Nairobi for a few months.

However, my heart was still in Burundi, where I wanted to continue my work of exposing the abuses of government officials and helping to be the voice of the voiceless, in French *Voix des sans Voix*, as the slogan of my radio station suggested. I devised a way to clear my way to go back. In mid-November 2010, I visited Mogadishu and filed several positive reports on the Burundi soldiers in the peacekeeping mission in Somalia and the important role they were playing. The reports were well received by the regime and helped to cool the anger of those who were after me. This facilitated my return to Bujumbura.

For the next two years, I quietly continued digging for the truth in Ernest Manirumva's assassination. I got more information from several other sources. I also reported on the massacre of almost 40 people at a bar in Gatumba on 18 September 2011.

Unsurprisingly, the massacre leads pointed to the same circle of generals linked to Manirumva's assassination. The main witness in the Gatumba attack was Innocent Ngendakuriyo, alias Nzarabu, who was convicted of the killings. He said senior army and intelligence officers had been

involved. Ngendakuriyo later escaped from custody and was killed in a state-sanctioned assault on a rebel group in Vugizo in 2014. They summoned me several times to answer questions on the attack after my report came out.

In February 2012, I released the report of my investigation into the Manirumva assassination. It implicated several senior police and intelligence officers. The news hit many quarters of the Republic of Burundi. The story was taken up by the international media, including Radio France Internationale (RFI).

I knew that I was taking a great risk carrying out the investigation. I was living in fear of retaliation by government officials. Still, I had underestimated the effect the report would have on the officials who were mentioned: they did not know how to get out of the situation, as the Burundian population and diplomats waited to hear their explanation because the testimony of one of the executors clearly implicated the state.

Military, police, and political decision-makers called a crisis meeting to take a stand on the government's response to the accusations. My sources at the meeting told me that the head of the national intelligence agency floated the idea of having me eliminated. However, others felt that my death at that time would have serious repercussions, as the world was focused on the case. A decision was finally taken to target my wife; she was to be killed in a staged robbery. When I received the information, I knew it was time to run away again. The Belgian embassy gave us visas and within three days. My wife was the first to arrive in Belgium. I joined her ten days later, on the day she auspiciously gave birth to our first child. A friend, a former diplomat, hosted us. We started applying for asylum in Belgium.

I was divided between the desire to stay in Belgium and that of returning to Burundi to continue the fight for the rights of the people, especially as the regime had embarked on a campaign to eliminate its opponents. According to the UN, between 2010 and 2013, the Burundian regime

committed more than 350 extrajudicial executions. Civil society organisations put the figure at more than 1500. Radio Publique Africaine, where I was now editor-in-chief, was on the front line, broadcasting news relating to the killings.

My wife allowed me to return to Burundi to continue the fight for human rights on one condition, that I wait until she was granted the status of a political refugee. She obtained the documents on 30 April 2012.

To guarantee my safety if I returned to Burundi, I decided to present my case before international organisations and Western diplomats. Belgian and American diplomats met with officials of the Burundi government regarding my case while international organisations made urgent calls to various authorities. These efforts helped to focus world attention on my plight. The world learned about the death threats I had received back home.

I decided to write directly to the president of Burundi. I explained to Pierre Nkurunziza how I had learned about the plot to kill me and named some of the personalities involved. This strategy gave me a little confidence in my security. I imagined that my detractors would not want to explain my death in the glare of international attention. All the same, I took precautions and spent every night in a different place.

The September 2014 shocking murder of three elderly Italian nuns in their Bujumbura convent called me back to duty. It was necessary to uncover the truth, especially in the face of the blatant cover-up the authorities were attempting. Christian Butoyi, a mentally ill 33-year-old man, was arrested and charged with the crime. This was obviously as a ploy to protect the actual killers.

As was the case in the assassination of Manirumva, most of the people involved in the killing of the nuns were on the run, as the high-ranking officials in the regime started eliminating possible witnesses. According to my sources, the decision to kill sisters Lucia Pulici, 75, Olga Raschietti, 82, and Bernadetta Boggian, 79, had been taken at the highest level in government.

The motive: to silence them as they knew that certain elements in the government were training and arming Burundian youths in the DRC to attack opponents of Nkurunziza's bid to win an unconstitutional third term in office. It appeared the nuns knew about the training camps from their previous posting in DRC and it was feared that they could be persuaded to testify about them in court.

When I decided to investigate the case, I knew that there would be two possible outcomes for me: prison or death. When the first reports on the killings were broadcast, officials sent a certain trader to try to bribe me in order to stop the airing of the news. I rejected the offer.

Finally, the regime decided to arrest me and, on 20 January 2015, they came for me. My source had informed me that the officials had tried to pay a prisoner to attack me when I went to prison. The news was reported in the media.

While I was in prison in Muramvya, some 60 kilometres from my home, I knew that intelligence officials were still keen to eliminate me. An agent close to the intelligence chief, General Adolphe Nshimirimana, had been charged with overseeing the plans and was commuting regularly between Muramvya and the capital, Bujumbura. But each time, individuals — often state agents — leaked the information to the media, thwarting the plans. I had earned the sympathy of many people in the security forces because of my work, which they heard about on radio. Also, the murder of the Italian nuns had shocked the nation. Most Burundians, 80 per cent of whom are Catholics, were not pleased about the killings and wanted the perpetrators punished.

Due to national and international pressure, the government gave in and on 18 February 2015, granted me a provisional release. I was ordered to pay a bond of 15 million Burundian francs (about 8000 euros at the time), with orders not to leave the country and to report to the prosecutor every Monday.

On the day of my release, there was a spontaneous outpouring of joy all over the country. This popular reaction, showing the public's

support for the media, which the government considered to be pro-opposition, did not please the regime. To punish me and try to block public demonstrations, Nkuruzinza's government postponed my release from prison by a day. The reason officials gave was that it was to avoid incidents that would threaten law and order.

That evening, a team of officers led by the Bujumbura commissioner of police appeared at around 7 pm, supposedly to drive me home. I was aware that the law did not allow anybody to enter or leave a prison after 6 pm. Worried about my security, I declined their offer. When the officers insisted that I accompany them, and threatened to remove me by force, it was obvious my life was in danger. I started shouting that I did not want to go with them because it was after hours. Alerted by the heated exchange, other prisoners joined in, shouting in protest. The people who had camped outside the prison also added their voice, telling the police that no prisoner would be released that night. The police had to leave without me.

What the government had wanted to avoid happened on my release. On the morning of 19 February 2015, thousands of protesters lined up along the road from Muramvya Prison to the capital city, Bujumbura. I later learned that similar demonstrations of joy took place in several corners of the country.

A few days after my provisional release, my informants inside the government told me that my life was now in real danger. The information suggested one of the masterminds of the crimes had ordered two infamous murderers to shoot me in public.

The threat was too serious to ignore. The regime was afraid of protests against President Nkurunziza's attempt to get a third term and was ruthlessly putting down any opposition. His government was wary of media coverage of the protests, fearing that it would defeat their plans to stifle opposition.

It was decided that I had to die to send a message to those planning

to mobilise people and organise demonstrations. On 29 March 2015, armed men who had been sent to deal with me mistakenly stormed my neighbour's house in Kinindo. They harassed the nanny, demanding to know where I was. The neighbour called to warn me, so I did not return home that Sunday. I had no choice but to go into hiding.

On 25 April 2015, the ruling party nominated Pierre Nkurunziza to run for a third term, in violation of the constitution. The opposition and civil society called for street demonstrations. On that day, three government ministers besieged our radio station and banned live coverage of the protests. The regime decided to close the radio station on 27 April.

Dozens of people were killed during the protests. Even in hiding, I stayed informed about the events via social media. After two weeks of bloody repression against the demonstrators, it emerged that a group of soldiers were planning a coup against Nkurunziza in order to restore calm. Such a situation could quickly deteriorate into a political and security crisis, making it difficult for me to leave the country, I thought to myself.

So, I decided to leave Burundi earlier, on 8 May. Five days later, the coup makers struck but their putsch collapsed. The regime, via a loyalist militia close to the government, decided to destroy the independent media that had aired the putschists' statements. Our radio station, which had been closed for two weeks, was bombarded with heavy weapons and burnt down. Three other independent media houses were closed.

The violence sent more than 500 000 Burundians into exile in neighbouring countries. More than 100 independent journalists also fled. Burundi quickly became a prison, with no free flow of information. The priority of the journalists in exile was to get Burundi out of the information blackout. Together with other courageous news people, we launched new media platforms. Since June 2015, three Burundian media platforms, supported by donations from Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium, had operated in exile and constituted the main source of independent news on Burundi, according to feedback from listeners.

In October 2016, I was awarded the CNN/Multichoice Press Freedom Award. RPA's work was showcased on Human Rights Day in December 2018, through *On Air: La voix des sans voix*, a documentary directed by Manno Lansenns, on the Belgian public radio and television.

Despite the hardships of working in exile and the difficult living conditions for many families of journalists living abroad, we are proud to contribute, through professional reporting, to the search for a lasting solution to the crisis that has dogged Burundi since May 2015.

During my exile, I have covered the tragic end of the two main sources of my ordeal. The former head of the intelligence services, Lieutenant General Adolphe Nshimirimana, was assassinated on 2 August 2015, in Bujumbura, by unidentified commandos. President Pierre Nkurunziza died on 9 June 2020, two months before the end of his third term, a mandate that had plunged the country into a bloody crisis.

I would have preferred to see them brought to justice for their crimes. Alas! That is not possible now, but I condole with their families.

10

Michèle Rakotoson, Madagascar

The split personality of Madagascar

It was an almost classic exile. One day I was called in by an uncle: "I can't protect you anymore; you have to go," he growled. "Your children will stay here with us; we will send them to you when they are older. "

His words seemed like a terrible punishment and filled me with grief. A father figure had given his ruling. The truth was that a number of my buddies had been politically "compromised". We were members or sympathisers of the far-left party, the MFM,[1] and its power had to be destroyed.

The 1980s in Madagascar was the era when helicopters were exploding in mid-flight, the time of unexplained assassinations, of the Pochard camp — a site occupied by militiamen engaged in dirty work — the years when kids where shot dead in peaceful demonstrations, bridges dynamited, the period of censorship and wiretapping. And all this under nationalist and socialist leadership, the time of the so-called Socialist Revolution.

I remember Madagascar was featured in the news everywhere, and our instinctive revolt, they said, was the action of "servants of imperialism." Didier Ratsiraka, the "Admiral" was elected on 21 December 1975, with 95.57% of votes in a constitutional referendum coupled with the presidential election.

1 Party for Proletarian Power (MFM — Mpitolona ho amin'ny Fanjakana ny Madinika).

A whole generation of Malagasy people, those who participated in the May 1972 Revolution, felt the movement was stolen from them. It was their view that a whole chapter of their history was discarded, and that we were left in a schizophrenic situation: our rulers were posturing as leftists while the grassroots reality was different. Sadly, important pages of Malagasy history seemed destined to be re-written.

I left the country after winning a one-year university scholarship. A year later I returned secretly to prepare for the departure of my children, clear about the philosophy which would guide my life: I am who I will be and will become; I shall build myself and choose my exile.

I was stubborn at 27. I did not care about the everyday difficulties of life, as my partner was extremely supportive. He was a vital pillar.

My first year in exile was relatively easy, since I had a scholarship and student status.

“If you want to cope with this environment, travel around this city of Paris, travel around France, try to understand where you settled,” a friend said to me.

“Understanding” was the key. I had to start all over again and rebuild myself. Exile seemed first and foremost as dispossession and mutilation. The mutilation of what had created me. Twenty to thirty years of work; this is what it takes to build a personality, a force of habit, a historical connection with ancestors. By going into exile, I had relocated my whole being, taken into another cage, one bearing the name *immigrant*. I refused the downgrade.

I worked hard in my first year as a sociology student. Being on a scholarship and enjoying protection offered an incredible opportunity. I sharpened my psychological skills and technical competence. That year, I began to fit in French society, learning cultural codes, understanding local practices and important issues.

This was the omission which disadvantaged many women in exile, forcing them into life as high-end prostitutes or escort girls. The older ones among them and the less pretty ended up as domestic servants or assistants in retirement homes, where they did menial work. Was I aware of this world? No, but more than once there were attempts to lure me into it.

The first two years helped me survive the Parisian jungle and its traps, to which I was a total stranger.

My children, luckily, were safe. My partner catered for their needs. It was essential to give them a near-normal life. My feminist husband accepted the thankless task of looking after the home.

Exile is a difficult experience materially and psychologically. Silence and silencing are terrible weapons, and this is what exile does to you: wrapping you up in silence and rejection. When the Gordian knot that connects an exiled person to his or her country is not broken, it causes psychological stress. It creates an obstacle which prevents you from moving forward. The agony of an exile's life is terrible for the family and the country. I came to understand that, to be integrated into the host country and yet not disappear in it, the past must become immaterial. There should be no sentimental attachment to it.

For a human being, this is almost impossible. The exile who has no intention of returning home can do it. But it is a different story for the one who still has a slight chance. Exile is all the harder for the children of former colonies; they leave their poor country to live in the rich nation which once ruled them. Consciously or unconsciously, it brings an inner feeling of betrayal.

Silencing was a political weapon. Madagascar was considered to have a "Socialist, left, proletarian revolution". The Admiral was popular. He relied on fiery speeches and political rhetoric. Those who protested could only be "enemies of the people".

For my part, I was considered a fantasist who invented things, a bourgeoise activist and a creature of the right wing. Newsrooms were closed to me; specialised journalists were the "authorised" informants. If you were an immigrant, there was no way of getting news out and reporting the predations. As a matter of fact, less and less information came out of Madagascar because people kept silent. They were scared. "Don't lose your militancy, join the other movements," the same friend advised me.

I thank her for these encouraging words. They kept me afloat and reinforced my fighting spirit. I joined the *Blacks and Beurs* and *Without Borders* movements, which at that time called for the integration of young French people born of "immigrants".

Indeed, it was necessary to integrate the children into the new nation of their parents, which was the only motherland the younger generation knew. Another task was to cultivate in the youth a dual culture, keeping alive the ways of the country their parents came from. That was a formidable challenge, especially because this new generation saw the host country as home rather than exile.

It was necessary to make up for the lack of social structures necessary for living together and create structures which allow them to express their opposition to a society they felt was rejecting them. That was not just their problem, but mine too.

Researching and writing this article has been something of a rebirth. Unfortunately, the conditions under which it was put together were less than ideal. Racism in France is systemic and subdued. While we considered ourselves as having been integrated into the host nation, the community categorises us as poor, underdeveloped and somehow "wild", those who had to be educated and assisted.

I have visited newsrooms offering freelance work, some of which either pay poorly or do not pay at all. I also visited *Jeune Afrique Magazine*, *Beur Black*, *France Antilles* and *Sans Frontières*. I concealed from those who

knew me that I mopped the floor and prepared coffee. I had to accept being invisible, because the coffee maker was invisible.

At first, I could not attend editorial meetings. But when you have been a teacher and a theatre director, you are stubborn, especially when you are a black woman. My advantage is that I came to France speaking and writing French and having published in French. Integration was, therefore, faster.

Forty years ago, integration was easier than it is now. François Mitterrand was in power and his speech at *La Baule*[2] was yet to be delivered. Associations and small newspapers were emerging to help immigrants, exiled people and foreigners to find an identity.

Then there was a period of tolerance. I was able to join Radio France Internationale (RFI), not as a journalist, but as manager of the RFI-ACCT[3] (before it became the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie — OIF) competition. Thousands of stories were received from nearly a hundred countries.

My office became the meeting place for a mix of exiles, foreigners and refugees. They came to rest there, to cool down after visiting the *Prefecture*, to compose themselves after grappling with tough reporting conditions.

Then I became head of the Listeners' Relations Department. We were receiving calls directly from foreign countries — sometimes terrible calls — which I passed on to the relevant editorial staff.

There was my extraordinary adventure with the *Revue Noire*. A living challenge to conventional images, *La Revue Noire* was a means of showcasing alternative voices, not those of a sad Africa dependent on charity, but an Africa of contemporary creation: an Africa of banter, creativity and bashful laughter.

2 16th conference of French and African heads of States, La Baule-Escoublac, June 1990.
3 ACCT: Agence de coopération culturelle et technique.

Messages streamed in from all over, including Senegal, Cameroon, Niger, and Madagascar. From different corners of the world artists spoke, sculpted, painted, danced and celebrated their societies, their inner rage and their talents. Alongside these passions, I continued to freelance, submitting works to newspapers and broadcast stations like AITV, always in the artistic field.

Back home, political upheaval continued. A popular demonstration accompanied by an eight-month-long strike ended in dramatic carnage on 10 August 1991. The iron grip on Madagascar was eased. Then presidential elections were held in November 2001. Admiral Ratsiraka ran against the little-known Marc Ravalomanana, an entrepreneur. Ratsiraka won by 70%, a result which the public rejected.

This gave rise to a long crisis in the form of another strike. To protect opposition supporters, we created an information cell which alerted the international press and the Malagasy diaspora to goings-on and mobilised crowds for public meetings. It was a journalistic group composed of Malagasy and some Europeans. We maintained the strike until Ratsiraka had to leave. This informal press organ was listened to and trusted.

We became whistle-blowers again in 2002.

The end of exile had come. My psychological and sociological status had changed, I was no longer an exile but a Malagasy in France, living in the journalistic world, able even to set up projects for Madagascar from France and to weave together development networks. I was now able to move back and forth between the two countries.

I returned home in 2008. My partner had passed away; my children had returned; my debts were cleared. I had no reason to stay in exile. Instantly I realised that the country I had returned to was not the country I had left. History had rolled on and no one was expecting me in Madagascar.

Certainly, the country had undergone an important democratic transition, which had substantially changed the mentality of young people. The fundamentals, however, remained the same. We are a poor country and we have been a failed state; politics and power remain the most effective ways to become rich. This political line makes it possible to justify the grabbing of the country's wealth by a few "compradores".

Becoming rich when the proposed economic model requires continual transformation demonstrates one thing: an endless spiral, an abyss that often leads to corruption. And this model is more and more sophisticated, as well as methods to hide the truth. Control and censorship of communication systems are well in place and extend from emails to Facebook and the telephone.

For me, it was not the time for retirement. I went back to work, published socio-political chronicles and coached young writers and young journalists in a newsroom.

Territories have changed but the fundamentals remain the same. Journalists we are; journalists we will always be. Exiled we are; exiled we will always readily become if conditions demand it.

11

Pius Nyamora, Kenya

A reform struggle's radical voice

Kenya was in ferment in 1988. News headlines were dominated by a fast-growing campaign against President Daniel arap Moi's one-party system of government. Moi had inherited the structure from the country's founding father, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, but went on to perfect it by amending the country's multiparty constitution to place all power in the hands of Kanu, the ruling party. It was an earth-shaking reform, one which his predecessor had avoided for the 15 years he was in power. Until his death, Kenyatta maintained an unofficial one-party arrangement but firmly stamped out all attempts to create any rival movement.

Two dailies, the *Daily Nation* and *The Standard*, dominated the news market, with the highbrow *Weekly Review* and its sister, the *Nairobi Times*, offering feeble competition. I had worked for the *Daily Nation* as a parliamentary reporter for 11 years. Hired as a trainee reporter, all the journalism I knew was a product of in-house training on the country's largest publication.

Looking back now, I marvel at the naivety and ignorance which steered me into publishing as a business venture. Evidence of Moi's intolerance of pluralism and civil liberties was all around us, but I inexplicably ignored it. My objective in starting *Society* — to provide a forum for government critics whose views could not be heard through the mainstream media — amounted to poking the government in the eye.

The launch of *Society* magazine at the peak of Kenya's struggle for a multi-party system filled me with pride. By any measure, growing overnight from a political reporter on a daily newspaper to the owner and editor of a weekly publication was a stupendous achievement.

The indirect pressure applied on the media by the government was a frequent talking point in the *Nation's* newsroom. Self-censorship was an unwritten rule, the dark art of self-preservation and balancing readers' entitlement against political sensitivities at which every editor had to be adept.

I came face-to-face with it when editors on the *Daily Nation* found it necessary to alter some of my stories, which they suspected would annoy the powers that be. Usually, self-censorship entailed "softening" criticism of the government in a story or watering down unsavoury revelations about influential establishment figures.

The often-brutal persecution which in later years would be meted out to my family, the magazine's staff and me because of publishing *Society* — six years of running battles with the government — should not have been surprising, given the state of media freedom at the time.

From independence to the early 1980s, Kenyans had relied on the *Nation* and the *Standard*, formerly the *East African Standard*, for their print media news. Although the two papers claimed to enjoy freedom of expression, in reality they practised an intuitive form of self-censorship.

Intolerance to criticism rose sharply under Daniel arap Moi's presidency. During my time as a parliamentary and political reporter on the *Nation*, especially under the editorship of Joe Rodrigues, I never witnessed interference with reporters' stories. However, with the arrival of Rodrigues' successor, George Mbugguss, an amiable former editor of the Kiswahili daily *Taifa Leo*, things changed dramatically.

I had a rude awakening early in Moi's administration when an editor expressed reservations about my story about the inauguration of the new president.

"Daniel arap Moi is Kenya's second president," read my intro.

The editor asked, "How can you call the president "Daniel arap Moi?"

"He was not president before he was sworn in," I pointed out.

I had my first taste of overt self-censorship when the story appeared the following day with the new leader addressed in the "correct" way, with the title "President" preceding his name. Throughout the first 14 years of his regime, before multi-party democracy, Moi was addressed as "President Daniel arap Moi" at every mention, or the obsequiously flattering tone adopted by the State-owned *Voice of Kenya*, "His Excellency President Daniel arap Moi".

Official meddling in media had grown worse as Moi settled on the political saddle. In 1981, for instance, Rodrigues, *Nation* Managing Editor Joe Kadhi, Chief Sub-Editor Philip Ochieng, News Editor John Esibi, Senior Reporter Gideon Mulaki and I were locked up in police cells for nearly a week because a story I had written described an unsigned statement from the headquarters of the ruling Kenya African National Union (Kanu) as "anonymous". Apparently, this was interpreted to mean that our media house regarded the party leaders as "non-persons".

We were never formally charged in court, but the increasing attacks led to Rodrigues' retirement in July that year and the self-censorship became more stifling. This was the atmosphere into which my monthly news magazine, *Society*, was born in September 1988.

My first mistake was not acknowledging — and therefore failing to prepare for — the challenges of a repressive political environment. The bigger, wealthier and older mainstream *Nation* — set up in 1960 by the influential Aga Khan — and the much older *Standard*, once owned by the British conglomerate Lonrho, had learned to survive. A publication established with the express aim of opposing the government was surely headed for a rockier patch.

Another mistake I made was failing to recognise the unwritten rule that some personalities were never to be covered by the media except in a negative light; that some voices were not to be heard. One such person was opposition leader Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, simply referred to in Kenya as Jaramogi.

At independence Jaramogi became the country's first vice-president but soon turned into President Kenyatta's harshest critic, leading to his resignation from the government to form an opposition party in 1966. However, his KPU party was banned and he and his key supporters were detained without trial, to be released nearly a decade later when Moi succeeded Kenyatta.

Odinga tried to re-enter politics by contesting a parliamentary seat but was thwarted without a legal justification. The *Nation* ran an editorial criticising the government's decision, which it termed as "unconstitutional, undemocratic." Furious, Moi's officials launched an attack on the *Nation*, accusing it of "assuming the role of an opposition party".

Even though I had witnessed this chain of events, I naively put Odinga on the cover of the first issue of my magazine. The story was the first in a series I intended to run on leaders who had suffered under Moi's dictatorship.

Moi had come to power on the promise of following his predecessor's footsteps. His rule became increasingly repressive after a failed military coup in August 1982. The coup plotters were court-martialled and their leaders executed. Opposition leaders, including Jaramogi and his son, Raila Odinga, were arrested. The younger Odinga was put in detention without trial together with left-wing university lecturers considered to be critical of the government.

Society joined two magazines that were trying to give a voice to those who had no access to mainstream media: *Finance*, run by economist Njehu Gatabaki, and lawyer Gitobu Imanyara's *Nairobi Law Monthly*.

These two had been set up as specialist publications but they unavoidably turned political because of discontent with the country's leadership.

In 1990, Odinga announced the formation of the opposition National Development Party (NDP). The story was ignored and only appeared in brief in the *Weekly Review*, an independent news magazine.

The *Nairobi Law Monthly* and *Society*, appearing two weeks later, published the first extensive commentaries on the new party. They paid a heavy price. *Nairobi Law Monthly* editor Gitobu Imanyara was arrested for publishing a "seditious attack" on the government. His magazine and *Finance* had carried interviews with Odinga about the proposed party and lawyers who contributed to the debate suggested that Section 2A of the constitution, which institutionalised one-party rule, should be repealed.

The August 1991 issue of *Society* carried the memorandum of association of the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy, a lobby that Odinga had formed to press for multi-partyism.

Mainstream media could only report Odinga's activities under court privilege, when he sued the government to register his party.

As our publication continued to attract attention, our printer at the time, the *Standard*, became restive. The paper's Editor-in-Chief, Ali Hafidh, issued an ultimatum: I allow him to read and vet all the stories in *Society* before the company could print the paper or the contract would be terminated.

I rejected this offer on the spot. Another printer, Colourprint, was agreeable, but did not have the capacity to print 10 000 magazines.

The print order of *Society* was even higher when, in November 1991, the magazine became a weekly. Circulation rose. Kenyans were tired of political oppression. The bold reporting of *Society* and other news

magazines on personalities and subjects that had hitherto been taboo had reawakened in them the hunger for change.

Circulation continued to climb after we featured on the cover another opposition politician, Kenneth Matiba. He had been a minister in Moi's cabinet until 1988, when he resigned to join the campaign for multi-party democracy. For his efforts, he was put in political detention and suffered a stroke while in prison.

I turned to Kenya Litho, one of the country's biggest packaging printers, to print *Society*. Kenya Litho was efficient and could comfortably handle our weekly print order of 30 000 copies. The drawback was that it was a subsidiary of Nation Newspapers Ltd, which Moi had accused of acting like an opposition party.

In January 1992, *Society* led with a story about the enquiry into the death of Foreign Affairs Minister Robert Ouko. The country's highest-ranking diplomat had been found tortured and killed, and rumours had linked senior government officials to his death. To dispel allegations of government complicity in the assassination, President Moi invited Scotland Yard to help in the investigations. A judicial commission of enquiry on the murder was disbanded suddenly and with no explanation before it completed its work, leaving more questions than answers.

The cover of *Society* shouted, "Moi knows Ouko killers". The magazine questioned the wisdom of ending the investigations prematurely. As our printers prepared to deliver 30 000 copies of the issue, police officers arrived at their premises and, without any court order, impounded the entire consignment.

Under questioning by the media, police commissioner Philip Kilonzo told the press that the magazine had carried material that was false and inflammatory, with the intention of harming the president. The *Nation* carried an editorial criticising the government's action.

The *Nation*'s editorial could have prompted the police to summon me to Parklands Police Station on 10 January 1992, to be served with the

order that should have preceded the raid. During the two hours I was questioned, police said they would allow the magazine to be distributed if some stories and the president's photograph were removed. I turned down their offer.

A few days before summoning me, the police had tried to arrest my wife Loyce, a director of the company that published *Society*, at her office. They left when she insisted on seeing an arrest warrant.

But trouble was just starting for me. On 16 April 1992, police pounced as I was visiting Nyayo House to collect my passport. My wife, who was waiting in the car, tried to stop the officers but was shoved aside. I later learned that she had also been arrested. I was whisked off to Athi River police station, several kilometres from Nairobi.

However, when we were presented in court on 21 April, the state was surprised to find 14 lawyers representing us. The sedition charges concerned several stories published in the magazine in the past year.

On April 30 1993, armed police dismantled Fotoform's printing press after impounding 30 000 copies of *Finance* which had just been stapled. The publishers of *Finance*, *Society, Economic Review*, and their printer, Fotoform, sued, asking the court to stop the attorney-general and the commissioner of police from interfering with the freedom of the press.

Justice Effie Owuor dismissed the Fotoform case, ruling that the police were justified in dismantling the press and that the publishers and their printers were not entitled to any compensation. She said she could not order the press parts returned for fear of prejudicing another case in a lower court.

One evening in June, someone firebombed the *Society* offices on the fourth floor of Tumaini House in the city centre, disabling phones and all forms of communication. My wife, two members of staff and I were lucky to escape through the back door without injuries. Police swooped again in February the next year and took away 10 000 more copies of the magazine.

These raids were accompanied by attacks against us, as journalists, at public rallies by politicians allied to the president. Our detractors accused us of doing the bidding of "foreign masters" to destabilise Moi's government.

One of the most shameful attacks on us came not from party hirelings or security agents but from the *Kenya Times*, which was owned by the ruling Kanu party. Its editor, Philip Ochieng, had been one of the leading lights of the local media in his younger days. The *Kenya Times* relentlessly pushed the unproven claim that *Society*, *Finance*, and *Nairobi Law Monthly* were funded by foreigners seeking to depose Moi. In one instance, it made up a court story, complete with quotes, claiming that *Society* was fighting bankruptcy.

Without advertising, it had become increasingly difficult for *Society* to survive. We had raised the cover price, but this was not sustainable. With frequent interruptions to production due to police raids and a lack of a reliable printer, we were unlikely to survive long.

However, our resilience seemed to grow in direct proportion to the ferocity of government attacks. One raid in April 1992 resulted in our arrest. Editor-in-Chief Blamuel Njururi went into hiding to ensure that the next issue of *Society* was produced. Margaret, our 15-year-old daughter, and my mother Prisca joined our skeleton staff to help distribute the magazine.

We endured constant harassment, with policemen following us everywhere, even watching our house. We lost touch with many relatives and friends because anyone associating with us risked physical and financial harm by the authorities.

It was impossible to continue publishing while waiting for a ruling on our suit against the police commissioner. By the time the Appeal Court rejected our plea, our staff had gone without pay for more than three months, office rent arrears had accumulated and we had no money to pay for production.

It was time to take stock. My main goal in starting *Society* had been to help Kenyans fight for the second liberation. We had achieved that by helping to bring about the country's first multi-party elections in 1992. Although Moi had won the presidential ballot against a divided opposition, I believed we had made a difference by denting the confidence and image of their authoritarian machine.

Loyce and I decided we had done enough and there was no need to risk the safety of our family any longer. We secretly left Kenya in 1994 and found our way to political asylum in the United States We were free at last, but only politically. Economically and socially? Not so much. It was difficult starting afresh in a foreign country with few relatives and friends and a culture to which we were total strangers.

12

Farida Nabourema,
Togo

Cost of fighting a political dynasty

When I boarded a plane to the United States in 2008, I believed that in a few years I would be back home in Lomé with my university degree, ready to help build my long-suffering country. I had no inkling that I would be away from Togo for eight uninterrupted years, and would only return home for a short time.

At 18, my priority was to return home as soon as possible, driven by a heroic fantasy of leading a struggle to free the people from the suffocating rule of Gnassingbé Eyadéma, the oldest military regime on the continent.

When I think of my childhood, I have vivid memories of civil unrest, the fear of pronouncing the name 'Eyadéma' in public, and military patrols that had all the children fleeing at the sight of uniformed men in heavy boots.

I cannot say that I had an unhappy childhood. My parents did everything to make the lives of their bubbly children as normal as possible. However, looking back, normality is something I hardly associated myself with — I was always the rebel child, the sharp-tongued kid who wouldn't keep her thoughts to herself, as Togolese society expected of children.

My politically active father always complained that he was tired of listening to my unending stories. This earned me the nickname *'La Radio'*

from my maternal grandmother, who suggested that I put my thoughts in writing. She promised to read my work and discuss it with me or give me feedback on my writing skills.

Over time, my writing became more than just a literary exercise; it became an outlet for me to express my frustrations and anger. And there was plenty to be frustrated and angry about — there was the abusive political system, which deprived the people of their rights. The youth, and particularly girls, had their rights trampled upon all the time.

In high school I started a student newspaper. Together with a few of my schoolmates, we raised money to print it but the principal would have none of it. In Togo, printing companies do not handle any journal, newspaper or magazine without the government's permission. We were surprised to discover that the rule applied to us as well even though we were just high school students.

This was 2005, the year Eyadéma Gnassingbé, who had ruled Togo for 38 years, died and his son, Faure Gnassingbé, was installed by the military. There followed elections that were marred by violence, leaving nearly 500 people dead. The school principal said he could not trust us not to be political. I was beyond disappointed — my chest filled with anger at the system. For how long would we continue to live in this cage, I asked? Would I also end up being tortured and locked up in prison like my father and grandfather, who were incarcerated countless times for daring to speak out against injustice?

When I finally settled in the United States, I spent my spare time looking online for news from Togo. Internet penetration was low back home but Togolese in the diaspora had created platforms on which they shared information and blogged on their country's politics.

As my writing and microblogging on social media gained traction, I created my own blog in 2009 called *Le Blog de Farida Bemba Nabourema*. There, I had total freedom to comment on the politics of Togo and other African countries without fear of censorship.

My articles were tagged as “radical borderline extremist” because I was openly demanding the fall of the Gnassingbé dynasty. I was not suggesting it — I was demanding it very loudly. Though I never preached violence, the conditioning imposed on us under the dictatorial regime made the average Togolese assume that openly asking the president to step down was not only dangerous but also criminal.

In Togo, to be identified as *opposant* was to be stigmatised and ostracised by society. The people who opposed the Gnassingbé regime were labelled terrorists and their families and friends shunned them, fearing reprisals. They believed the tyrant, who painted his opponents as troublemakers and wanted to start civil strife. Even today, when an activist or a journalist is arrested in Togo, the first question people ask is: “What did she/he do?”

I remember my father telling me that on one of the many occasions he was released from prison, my mother told him that bees did not sting anyone unless they were attacked. In other words, if he was not so bent on irritating the regime, he would not be arrested or tortured. It was a bitter pill for him to swallow considering the numerous broken ribs, toes, and severe injuries he suffered every time he was arrested.

I spent hours listening to my father during my teenage years. I did not understand then, but looking back, I now realise that our conversations must have been a little therapeutic for him. He would tell me intimate details of some of the torture he suffered, things he was not comfortable telling anybody else.

The story that pained me the most was the one of him and his comrades handcuffed together. This miserable group, disfigured by numerous beatings, bleeding from their faces, would be taken from one military camp to another. The families of the soldiers were summoned to come and boo at them and throw at them whatever object they could find while chanting, “Terrorists! Terrorists!” My father said what hurt most was that it was family and close friends who would report him to the military, saying he was anti-Eyadéma. Some of them even took part in his

torture, spitting on his face and slapping him in public, just to prove their allegiance to Eyadéma Gnassingbé.

My father was first arrested in 1977 for writing and distributing pamphlets denouncing human rights violations. He was a student at the University of Lomé. He was expelled for life from the university, his passport was confiscated, and he was forbidden from leaving the country. So, 30 years later, when his daughter had the opportunity to leave, he gave me his full support to speak on behalf of the people who had been silenced for far too long.

Therefore, my goal as a blogger was clear: to amplify the voices of the people of Togo, voices that had been muted by a ruthless authoritarian regime.

I co-founded the 'Faure Must Go' movement in 2011. I was the spokesperson and the only known face in the group. The backlash was immediate. Some government-sponsored trolls made a video in which they called for my assassination and that of everyone in my house, including pets if I had any. My siblings threw me out of their apartment in Washington DC. It was winter, but they did not care because they did not want to get into trouble. My friends distanced themselves from me and the threats my mother was receiving in Togo from government officials eventually led her to cut ties with me.

There I was, a 20-year-old girl in faraway Washington DC, with no close relatives or friends, going to school and working several jobs to survive. To say that it was tough would be an understatement, but I did not want to betray my vows. I had promised Togo that I would fight for it, so I took the challenges as proof that my work mattered and my efforts had meaning. Unlike other young girls who were trying to fight autocracy, gerontocracy, and patriarchy at the same time as they tried to make a difference, I was exceptionally lucky to have had a father who not only encouraged me to keep going, but also empowered me to believe that my sacrifices were all worth it. Therefore, far from desisting, I decided to resist; and I took each threat as a call for a fiercer stand against dictatorship.

In an attempt to explain myself to Togolese youths, who did not understand why a girl could openly criticise such a dangerous regime, I published *La Pression de l'Oppression* (The Pressure of Oppression). This is a collection of essays I wrote in 2013 to explain the multiple forms of oppression we are subjected to, including political, cultural, gender-based, economic, and religious, to name but a few. I wanted the book to be accessible to every young Togolese and wrote in a language they could understand, and also adapted the subjects to our local context. As a young Togolese woman, I felt lonely in the struggle. All the people I could call comrades were at least 10 years older than me, and male. We may all have been fighting the regime and being targeted by the authorities, but their repression was not oriented toward their gender or age, as it was in my case. I was the "delusional little girl who thinks she can bring down a 53-years-old regime", as one opposition leader told me.

When you become a political activist, the people you are fighting against will fight you; the ones you are fighting with will fight you; and those you are fighting for will fight you.

In 2013, I published an article about the minister of health, Charles Kondi Agba, who happened to be from the same village as my parents. He was involved in a corruption scandal. An international organisation accused him of selling mosquito nets that were donated to the government of Togo to be distributed to pregnant women to fight malaria. Local media quickly picked up the story, titled 'Charles Kondi Agba, Another Big Bandit of the Republic'. That article, I believe, finally convinced my mother that I was possessed. She gathered a few relatives, bought gifts, and went to the minister's house to apologise on my behalf. She stated that I had completely lost my mind and didn't know what I was doing.

The mosquito net scandal was, however, nothing compared to what I dared do to next. In 2012 and 2013, opposition parties and civil society organisations led protests demanding political reforms, particularly the reinstatement of presidential term limits, which Eyadéma Gnassingbé had removed in 2002 to allow his family to rule Togo forever. He had even reduced the minimum age for the president from 45 to 35 years

in an obvious effort to pave the way for his son Faure, who was 35 years old then, to succeed him. In November 2013, a bill on term limits was introduced in Parliament at the request of the president, Faure Gnassingbé. Strangely enough, all the members of the ruling party UNIR voted 'No', turning down a bill that their own president had asked them, on national television, to approve. In a clearly choreographed response, Faure Gnassingbé announced that although he supported term limits, members of parliament were against the proposed law.

Aggravated by the contempt of the regime which clearly took all Togolese for fools, I published on my blog the list of the cellular and home phone numbers, and email addresses, of each of the 91 members of parliament in Togo. I asked citizens to call the representatives and ask them why they had voted against term limits. I made a few calls myself, starting with the majority leader of parliament, Christophe Tchao. He called me names and threatened me. I recorded the conversation and shared it on YouTube. Sadly, for Christophe Tchao, that conversation went viral within hours and thousands joined the 'Call your Parliamentarian' campaign.

A parliamentary session was held the following day during which representatives of the ruling party complained about "a barely-25-year-old blogger" who was attempting to terrorise and intimidate the 'honourable' members of parliament. It is a statement of the arrogance and impunity of the Togolese ruling class that the majority leader of parliament could not see the irony in his response as he announced that he could not be intimidated and that as an elected member of parliament, he owed no one any explanation on how he voted. Apparently, members of parliament, who claimed to be elected by the people, were not even aware of their roles and responsibilities, and did not know that the position required them to be accountable to their constituents.

That campaign was one of my proudest moments as an activist and a blogger. For the first time in the history of our country, we had access to the telephone numbers of government officials and could demand accountability directly from them. It was a golden opportunity for

Togolese citizens, some of whom were not so friendly to the officials as they bombarded them with messages and calls. Some MPs complained in parliament that they could not sleep because people were calling them late at night. It was a crowning moment for the people because we reclaimed a bit of our power. I am grateful to the internet for giving us the platform to mobilise, organise, and communicate our needs and desires as citizens.

In 2017, when another demand for term limits led thousands of Togolese people to protest on the streets, the first response of the regime was to shut down the internet, which it now realised was a mobilisation platform. That shutdown, which was ruled as illegal by the ECOWAS Community Court in July 2020, did not weaken the resistance forces. Rather, it heightened people's curiosity, helping us to amplify the abuses of the regime and demand that Faure Gnassingbé step down. 'Faure Must Go', a term I coined when I first arrived in the United States in 2008, became the slogan of the civil resistance in French-speaking Togo. I was amused, yet honoured to read 'Faure Moss Go' on the placards of some protesters who were not proficient in English spelling.

When the regime designated me as one of the main figures of the resistance movement, they intensified their attacks on me, this time focusing on my gender and hoping that the patriarchy of Togolese society would help them slander me. Almost every day, there was a story about my personal life on social media. Blogs were created using my photos and name, offering escort services. I found it ironical that the government was unable to provide jobs for the youth in Togo, but it could manufacture so many positions for me — from a prostitute to a porn star, a drug dealer, and even a war lord. Manipulated photos of my face on naked bodies were circulated on social media platforms. Tapes and videos of fictitious stories of girls asking me to leave their sugar daddies alone were recorded and shared online. The regime was desperate to prove that Farida Bemba Nabourema was a frivolous girl with no morals, and therefore should not be followed.

When I made the decision to go back to Togo in 2016, I defied all the

warnings I had received from government officials, including the minister of security, Yark Demhane, who dared me to come back to Togo If I was 'woman enough'. My return, although frightening because I was aware that it might be a one-way trip to an unmarked grave, was emboldened by the strong support that I had cultivated and gained from the years of blogging and being "the girl that terrorises the Gnassingbé regime".

13

Fathi Osman,
Eritrea

Behind Eritrea's iron curtain

Journalism is a perilous undertaking in Eritrea. Not by accident is my homeland referred to as the North Korea of Africa. This is the country whose regime has been accused of committing systematic human rights abuses against its citizens, which the UN Special Rapporteur has termed crimes against humanity.

The truth of this was brought home to me rather forcefully early in my media career, in 1995, when I was dragged in pyjamas from my bed at 2 am, beaten and thrown into a crowded police cell. My crime? Trying to do my job as an investigative journalist.

I was still a relatively new reporter for the government-owned, Arabic-language *Eritrea Al-Haditha* newspaper, under the Ministry of Information. In August of that year, I received a tip-off from a lawyer friend who was representing a Saudi company that was interested in investing in the fishing industry. His clients complained that officials of the Ministry of Marine Resources had asked them to pay $100 000 before the $3 million contract could be implemented.

The demand contradicted a directive from the Bank of Eritrea that the money be paid to it, then it would pay the ministry in local currency. The bank and the ministry would not agree, so the investors cancelled the contract. As this was not the first case of investor flight, I thought

this would make a good investigative piece on how the country's contradictory policies were driving away investors.

One Wednesday morning at around 2 am, three policemen knocked on my door. They forced me out of the house without giving me a chance to change clothes. One of them slapped me so hard that I started bleeding from the left ear. My eardrum had been perforated. They took me to a neighbourhood police station, Bar Jemma, where I was locked up for four nights. I was detained in a tiny cell with eight other people. It was not possible to lie down in the crowded cell. I was in agony because of my injured ear.

The police station chief accused me of meeting with foreign spies. I retorted that, if the Saudi businessmen were spies, then they must have got the information they needed from the minister and the president of the Bank of Eritrea since they had met them first. My forthright reply shocked the officer. On Monday morning, I was released after he forced me to sign a declaration not to meet any foreigners without permission.

The following month I tried to quit *Eritrea Al-Haditha*, but my boss would have none of it, saying government employees were not allowed to resign. I stayed home for three days in protest, but two colleagues popped in and persuaded me to return to work. They said I risked going to jail if I defied the ministry's decision. One of these colleagues was journalist Saleh Jazairy, who has been in prison without trial since 2002. Nine months later I was among many other journalists who were sacked in a massive downsizing that, in reality, was intended to quell dissent.

The police assault left me with a hearing disability and years later I had to undergo two operations in France. It also stopped me from practising investigative journalism in Eritrea. However, I consider myself lucky because my physical discomfort is quite insignificant compared to the suffering of other journalists who have been imprisoned incommunicado, some for almost 20 years.

Looking back, I should have realised I was treading on dangerous ground. Earlier that year, I had been stopped from doing an investigative

story on the repatriation of Eritrean refugees from Sudan. The government insisted that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) take full financial responsibility for the refugees' repatriation and resettlement.

I did not realise then that I needed permission from the government to undertake the assignment. I enthusiastically embarked on what promised to be an interesting story, as the government of Eritrea seemed to be deliberately trying to hinder the return of the refugees and blaming Sudan and the UNHCR.

As part of the investigation, it was necessary to travel to western Eritrea to meet some of the repatriated refugees and examine their living conditions. For this I needed the permission and technical support of my chief editor. I was surprised when three days later he ordered me to drop the project. The orders were reiterated by the head of the Department of Press in the ministry. A friend who worked for the National Security Agency later told me that the regime was not comfortable with both Sudan and UNHCR and would not tolerate any investigations into the matter. An official at the refugee office whispered that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had written to say that any discussions about the refugees should be conducted with its officials. And that was the end of the project.

At that time, everything in Eritrea, including journalistic practices and traditions, was in its embryonic stage because the country had recently won its independence after a 30-year nationalist war. Even then, there were ominous signs of what was to come. These included the ruling party's rigid revolutionary security concepts that were designed to limit freedom of expression, which became one of the first casualties of the autocratic administration of President Isaias Afwerki. It is not surprising that Eritrea has in the past ten years vied with North Korea for a place at the bottom of *Freedom of Press Index*.

To understand how Eritrea — once a beacon of hope for freedom, with a vibrant media, evolved in a few years into a murderous autocracy that

clamped down on civil and political liberties and tried to brutally control every aspect of the citizens' lives — it is necessary to understand the country's history.

Eritrea's free press dates back to the 1940s and was considered one of the most vibrant in Africa. Although the country was under colonial rule, its citizens were allowed to form political parties. These parties had their own newspapers, published either in Tigrinya, Arabic or a combination of both, through which they expounded their nationalist ideology. There were also English-language newspapers produced by the British administration.

This all changed when Ethiopia in 1962 dismantled the UN-brokered arrangement that gave Eritrea special status as part of a federation, with its own constitution and parliament, and other independent structures. The abrogation turned Eritrea into one of Ethiopia's provinces, igniting a violent struggle as it fought for the next 30 years to regain its sovereignty.

Even at the height of the independence war, all Eritrea's political and armed organisations had their own media outlets, monthly or weekly magazines and radio stations. In 1979, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which emerged as the dominant faction, leading the revolution until liberation in 1991 and becoming the sole and ruling party from independence, established the Radio of the Voice of the Broad Masses of Eritrea, known locally as Dimtsi Hafash. This radio station was the nucleus of the Information Ministry after independence.

Soon after a UN-organised referendum set the stage for Eritrea's full independence from Ethiopia in 1993, Afwerki embarked on removing any possible opposition to his rule. Rival political factions that had taken part in the freedom war were sidelined from the country's new governance structure and their leaders incarcerated. Muslim scholars were arbitrarily arrested, being accused of hatching jihadist plots against the state.

Eritrean authorities keep tight control of the people. Movement, even within the country, is highly regulated. You need a permit to travel from

one part of the country to another and it is illegal to leave the country without clearance. Anyone who tries to flee risks being shot, killed or arrested, yet almost 5000 people flee every month, desperate to escape the killings, forced labour and enslavement. Many young Eritreans would rather risk the dangerous journey across the Sahara desert or on a hazardous boat ride across the Mediterranean than stay at home.

The administration introduced national service, which conscripts young people into the military on the pretext of defending the country. They were initially supposed to serve for 18 months in the military or in government offices and institutions, but the service was extended indefinitely. Some Eritreans are still serving in their fifties, with little pay or leave days, and in slave-like conditions. Many exiles cite the national service as their reason for fleeing the country.

The Ministry of Information runs the country's only radio and television station, and the only daily newspaper, which is published in Tigrinya, Arabic, and English. No private newspaper, television or radio station is allowed. Access to the internet is limited and the only provider is a government company.

Eritrea has no functional constitution or parliament. After a UN-supervised referendum, Eritrea declared its independence in May 1994 and established a 550-member National Assembly. Half of the members were from the central committee of the EPLF.

A commission to draft a constitution for the nation was established. With a senior EPLF member acting as secretary, the commission came up with a constitution on the lines of the party's Marxist tenets and ideology. A large part of the population was excluded because the government prohibited any political opposition. The constitution was ratified by the National Assembly but was never implemented, shelved when a border war with Ethiopia broke out in 1998.

There was a resurgence of press freedom between 1997 and 2001, when several privately owned newspapers, magazines and broadcast stations

sprung up. During this period, the president came under pressure from his own party to allow Eritrea to democratise. People were asking for free elections and an unfettered press. A committee headed by the minister for local government was established to draft the electoral law. However, this work was interrupted by the war with Ethiopia.

The regime used the war as an excuse to shelve all reform activities and crack down on its critics and the media. Influential leaders who were championing change and had come to be known as the G15 criticised President Afwerki for the war and its outcome. Their criticism found expression in commentaries and editorials published in the emergent media. This enraged the government and triggered a blitzkrieg against the president's foes and the press.

In one fell swoop, Afwerki's regime shut down the country's robust media on 18 September 2001, the day that has now come to be known as Black Tuesday. As world attention was focused on the aftermath of Al Qaeda's attack on buildings inside the United States, the Eritrean government rounded up its critics, banned privately-owned newspapers and arrested more than 20 journalists, the founders, chief editors, assistant editors, and freelancers of six private newspapers. They imprisoned 11 out of 15 senior government officers who had dared to sign a manifesto critical of the administration.

Among those arrested that night was Swede-Eritrean journalist and founder of the *Setit* newspaper, Dawit Isaak, whom the European parliament considers a prisoner of conscience. These people have never been charged in any court of law and their whereabouts are unknown. Some of them are believed to have died.

This suppression of the freedom of the press has given Eritrea another of its many monikers, the land of no journalists, because almost overnight, the independent press was wiped out.

It has been 19 years and the journalists are still in detention. The ban on the free press and suppression of journalists, even those working for

the government, continue unabated. Media people are among the many Eritreans who escape the country to seek asylum elsewhere.

All my colleagues at Radio Erena and I have found ourselves in this situation at various stages of our careers and had to make hard choices.

Biniam Simon, the founder of Radio Erena, was a journalist at Eri-TV, Eritrea's state television channel, for 14 years. He had been allowed to travel to Japan to attend a seminar on video production when he received a tip-off that several of his colleagues back home had been sent to prison, He knew he would be in danger if he returned. His request for asylum in Japan was rejected, but with the help of Reporters Without Borders, he made his way to Paris, where he has lived since 2007.

The Radio Erena news editor, Amanuel Ghirmai, worked for almost nine years as a reporter and news editor for the national radio station Dimtsi Hafash Eritrea. He also contributed analyses to the state newspaper *Hadas Eritrea*. He fled Eritrea and joined the radio six months after its creation.

After being dismissed from *Eritrea Al-Haditha* in 1996, I joined the foreign ministry as a member of the commission on the arbitration of the Red Sea islands. I later moved to the diplomatic service and was sent to work as a political officer and deputy head of mission in Eritrea's embassy in Pakistan. From 2004 to 2012, I worked in the Eritrean embassy in Saudi Arabia.

When I got the chance, I travelled to France and sought political asylum. At first, I could not work for Radio Erena because I was worried for the safety of my family. They joined me about two years later and I was able to take up the job at Radio Erena in 2014, pioneering the station's Arabic-language programme.

Eritrea is a closed society. Citizens are not allowed contact with the outside world. The government controls all the information to the citizens. All media is government-controlled. When Radio Erena was started in 2009, the mandate was to fill the information void in Eritrea,

tackle government propaganda and provide the people with authentic news.

Radio Erena quickly built up an audience of Eritreans inside and outside the country. It soon became clear that the station was serious and apolitical, its main aim being to fight for freedom of expression and access to information for Eritreans. Many journalists who lived abroad were not willing to report for our radio station for fear of retribution from Afwerki's regime. Exiled journalists joined its network, sometimes using pseudonyms.

The station broadcasts a two-hour programme in Arabic and Tigrinya seven days a week. This is repeated several times a day, giving it multiple exposures inside Eritrea. Its listeners follow the broadcasts in hiding because getting caught could spell dire consequences. In addition to news about government activities, the radio reports on what is happening to refugees fleeing Eritrea and diaspora success stories.

The main problem for Radio Erena is government interference. The Eritrean administration is always trying to stop its broadcasts. In 2012, the government managed to block the radio, in the process jamming its own television channel as both broadcast on the same satellite frequency. It has also jammed Radio Erena on shortwave and once hacked its website and destroyed it.

The UK charity One World Media presented its 2017 Special Award to Radio Erena for its "outstanding coverage of the developing world, recognising journalists whose work boosts cultural understanding while promoting global equality and justice".

When we did a comprehensive programme on the UN human rights report on Eritrea in 2016, government supporters branded Radio Erena journalists traitors, claiming that we had been paid to work against our brethren. We routinely receive threats of violence on social media. One of our greatest fears is that threats of physical harm could one day be carried out, as happened to journalists Martin Plaut and Amanuel Eyasu, who were both attacked by Eritrean government supporters in the UK.

14

Ansbert Ngurumo,
Tanzania

Three Presidents and a gadfly

I have made many choices, some good and some bad. The one thing I never got a chance to choose or reject is the situation I find myself in, living as a refugee a world away from my homeland of Tanzania.

The irony, however, is that, even though I have suffered physical discomfort and psychological torture in the past three years since I became aware of an impending attack by government agents, and had to flee the country without notice, I do not regret honouring my journalistic calling and fighting for truth and justice.

On 2 October 2017, while working for a newspaper in Dar es Salaam, I received confidential information that killers had been dispatched to eliminate me because my articles and commentaries had become a thorn in the side of President John Pombe Magufuli's administration. I do not know whether the president was aware of the plot.

Although this news had the effect of sending me into a desperate race to escape with my life, it has since become clear that the brutal reprisal was bound to happen sooner or later because of my decision to report candidly on government activities. History has shown that it hardly ever ends well for an intrepid journalist who dares to shine a light on government wrongdoing, especially in African countries ruled by despotic regimes.

My case was no exception. After all, my reporting had irritated three regimes over more than 20 years of watchdog journalism. First, there was Benjamin Mkapa, himself a former newspaper editor who had strayed into power politics to eventually become president for ten years until 2005. Then, also from Mkapa's party, came Jakaya Kikwete, the former intelligence chief famed for his global travels. Magufuli's ascent to the highest office in the land, in 2015, was my moment of reckoning. His was the autocratic regime which was bound to come along and try to silence me.

In 1998, as a cub reporter with *The African* newspaper and a regular contributor to *Rai*, both published by the Dar es Salaam-based Habari Corporation, my article questioning President Mkapa's commitment to fighting corruption got my boss, Jenerali Ulimwengu, into trouble. The analysis titled *'Rais Mkapa, unajivunia nini?' ('President Mkapa, what are you proud of?')* provoked the president's ire and his fury fell squarely on Ulimwengu.

Mkapa's regime expressed its displeasure at my temerity when security officers barred me from covering the launch of his re-election campaign at the capital city's Jangwani grounds. "You're not wanted here," I was told bluntly at the gate.

After Ulimwengu had been declared stateless and eventually stripped of his Tanzanian citizenship in February 2002, in retaliation for his critical articles, I received another threat from Mkapa's men. They told me, through a colleague in the office, that, since my boss had now been 'fixed', I was their next target unless I stopped writing "those stupid articles" about the president.

I later learned that the government had infiltrated our newsroom, bringing in "reporters" tasked with spying on us. They had earmarked me as 'hostile' to the Mkapa administration.

The warning gave me pause. I suspended my articles and even quit my job. It became obvious that I was suffering because I had turned down

an offer to work with the Mkapa campaign team. The secretary-general of Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), the ruling party, had called me to his office at Lumumba and asked me to write several friendly articles on President Mkapa's 'wonderful' work.

I received a similar offer in early 2006 from the communication team of the newly elected President Kikwete, Mkapa's successor. As Sunday editor of *Tanzania Daima*, I had distanced myself from Kikwete's robust campaign, which had sucked in almost all influential editors. One of Kikwete's close advisers, who was also a media owner, called me. What they really wanted was my silence, to blunt my sharp pen. When he insisted that I name a figure, I told him, "You can't pay me; I am better paid where I am."

I later came to learn that, although my refusal to join the team annoyed them, I also earned their grudging respect. Eight years later, I met the Kikwete advisor and he reminded me about my refusal to join the administration. He said he appreciated my loyalty to principle and that he was an ardent reader of my column, *Maswali Magumu*, which had been introduced during Mkapa's presidency and became popular during Kikwete's administration.

In 2015, John Magufuli was on the campaign trail after being nominated as the ruling party's presidential candidate. He made a promise that stirred my critical mind: he would give every teacher in Tanzania a laptop if he became president. In my Sunday column, as usual, I posed several questions about the plight of teachers and the state of the country's education system, which Magufuli and his wife, being teachers, should have known. If laptops were his priority, in a country that was facing so much decline in education, I argued, then he was not the right candidate for the presidency.

Magufuli called me that afternoon and told me he had been following my career for many years. "I am your fan, I read your column every week." He claimed that he had been misquoted and had never talked about laptops, and that he needed people like me in his administration. Then he said he had forgiven me. I took that as a threat.

In early 2016, newly elected President Magufuli sent an emissary to warn me about my critical articles. I was working for Halihalisi Publishers, managing *MwanaHALISI*, *Mseto*, and *Mawio* weekly newspapers. My column, *Maswali Magumu*, featured in *MwanaHALISI* and I published other commentaries in two other papers.

Before Magufuli came to the scene, I had received threats and warnings under the Mkapa and Kikwete regimes, but I regarded them as simply an occupational hazard.

During a visit to Britain, Kikwete insisted that I be excluded from an interview he was giving the media. I was then studying at the University of Hull, within easy reach of the president's hotel. In 2012, my car was broken into and my laptop, camera, notebooks, and passport stolen. A district commissioner, exasperated by my weekly analysis, warned me to leave Kikwete alone to do his job. In early 2013, a fake alert that I had died circulated on the JamiiForums social media platform.

But worse was to come. The Monday, 18 September 2017 edition of the *MwanaHALISI* newspaper carried my regular column, *Maswali Magumu*, with the headline, *'Tumwombee Magufuli au Tundu Lissu?' (Should we pray for Magufuli or Tundu Lissu?)*. I was referring to the recent attempted assassination of Lissu, who was the member of Parliament for Singida East. When the piece appeared, he was in a coma in a Nairobi hospital after being shot. I criticised the government's crackdown on citizens who had gathered to pray for the MP. Several people wearing T-shirts branded with messages wishing the MP quick recovery had been arrested. I recalled Magufuli's repeated pleas to the people to pray for him, saying his job was tough, and questioned the logic of barring people from praying for an ailing Lissu.

My article also criticised the president's speech of 7 September 2017. He had said, on live television, that "the soldiers know how to deal with traitors" because such people "should not be allowed to survive". Two hours later, the MP fell in a hail of bullets after attending a parliamentary session. Incidentally, the MP had been arrested six times in one year for allegedly making seditious statements against the president.

Out of the blue, *MwanaHALISI* newspaper was banned. The then government spokesperson, Dr Hassan Abbas, accused me of insulting the president. When I was interviewed by the media, I defended myself, pointing out that the president was on record as having made the controversial remarks in a live broadcast.

A week later, the government banned another weekly paper, *Raia Mwema*, on the grounds that it had misquoted the president. However, it seemed obvious to many Tanzanians that the paper was being punished for its lead headline *Urais Umemshinda Magufuli ('Magufuli has Failed')*. The government said it was banning the newspapers in accordance with the Media Services Act, 2016, triggering public criticism.

On Saturday, 30 September 2017, I travelled to Mwanza for a morning talk show on Star TV. The topic was the crackdown on newspapers. I criticised the government's undemocratic and dictatorial behaviour and pointed out that it had contravened not only the Media Services Act 2016, but also the constitution. This was a threat to the country's stability and prosperity, I said, citing the abduction, torture and killing of government critics; arrest of citizens expressing their views on social media; the ban on live coverage of parliamentary sessions; and the ban on political rallies and demonstrations while the president enjoyed live media coverage everywhere he went.

I questioned the government's failure to arrest suspects in the Lissu attack and accused it of trying to kill press freedom, thereby endangering national security.

Comments on social media indicated that the show had been widely watched. I later learnt that Magufuli had also watched it and was livid.

Three days later, a source told me some 'rough' men had been summoned and shown my photos and articles by a top government official. The men were ordered to deal with me conclusively. They were to ensure that the mistake that had been made in the botched assassination of Lissu, who was said to have received 'half treatment', was not repeated.

The killers were tasked to drive to Mwanza and their host, nicknamed Banny, was instructed to help monitor my movements. I got the tip-off at about 3 pm and was told that that three men sent from Dar es Salaam were expected in Mwanza the next day.

I was shaken. Obviously, I needed to leave Mwanza immediately. It was hardly three weeks since the shooting of Lissu, and he was still in hospital. I imagined what a successful mission would be like if what had happened to the MP was 'half treatment'.

I moved from my hotel and did not leave my room for the next 24 hours. Three of my colleagues did not leave my side. I was informed when the three assassins arrived in Mwanza and set in motion my plans. The thugs drove to Biharamulo and Bukoba, over 500 km from Mwanza. This is where I was expected to be, according to my schedule, but I went in the opposite direction, to Dar es Salaam, where I continued to move from hotel to hotel.

The manager at my fourth hotel, where I had stayed for a week, asked me to leave when he found out I was not registered under my name. I was informed that two men suspected to be policemen enquired about me and that one of them had booked a room. Hotel staff reported seeing a strange car parked at the hotel every morning for three days. It would stay for about an hour, then drive off.

My would-be assassins were spotted in Mwanza city on 16 October 2017, after failing to locate me in Bukoba and Biharamulo and travelled back to Dar es Salaam the following week. I stayed in hiding until November, when the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) moved me to Nairobi, Kenya, where I stayed until early the following year.

Many people in Tanzania who did not agree with what the regime was doing came to my rescue, helping me to hide and escape. I did not realise how lucky I was until I was safely out of Tanzania. Unknown to me, while I was playing cat-and-mouse with those who wanted to harm me, another journalist was facing a worse ordeal. In the last week of

November 2017, Azory Gwanda, a reporter with *Mwananchi* newspaper, was abducted and has not been seen since. During an interview with the BBC in 2019, Foreign Minister Palamagamba Kabudi let it slip that Azory Gwanda had died. Although he later retracted his statement after a public outcry, it was clear that he knew what had happened to the journalist.

Josephat Isango, whom I had mentored at *Tanzania Daima* and *MwanaHALISI* newspapers, had also died in April 2017. Doctors said he had been poisoned. Isango was a political reporter and analyst who criticised some government policies and the president's disregard for the law.

I set up the *Sauti Kubwa* website *(www.sautikubwa.org)* to circumvent the Magufuli administration's repressive laws and regulations, which seek to restrict independent media, including news websites.

In its two years of existence, *Sauti Kubwa* broke major stories that could not see the light of day in the mainstream Tanzania media. For instance, when Africa's youngest billionaire, Mohammed Dewji, was abducted in 2018, it was *Sauti Kubwa*'s exclusive coverage that gave a clue to his whereabouts.

During my time in exile, I have dedicated myself to pre-emptive journalism, the kind of journalism that saves lives. True, we should support investigative journalism, the kind of news coverage that pre-empts disaster. But journalism that does not save lives is nothing but irrelevant.

During Magufuli's first year in power, I wrote an article which was published in *The EastAfrican* in December 2016, under the headline: *'Critics to have a Hard Time Under Magufuli'*. My prediction has since come true. My lucky escape and the noise I made about it displeased the incumbent's administration, which responded by trying to discredit my appeal for asylum, saying it was unwarranted.

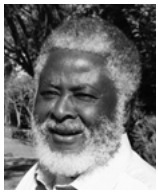
In June 2019, my book *John Magufuli: An Epitome of Cowardice* was finally published. It analyses the genesis of Magufuli's management style, which banks on fear as a leadership tool.

Many journalists from my country who aspire to do good gave up the profession or are in exile because of repressive laws and regulations, which have made authentic journalism impossible. Johnson Mbwambo, my former deputy managing editor at Habari Corporation, quit journalism just a few months into Magufuli's presidency. Some senior editors opted to retire early to escape the country's hostile working environment.

As a result, the quality of journalism has been compromised. *The Yearbook on Media Quality in Tanzania* (2019) says that, apart from journalists, news sources fear expressing their opinions freely. "The overall quality of media reporting in Tanzania in 2019 has gone down. Compared to 2018, the Media Quality Index for all media dropped from 28% to 26.8%."

In the Press Freedom Index, Tanzania has fallen sharply from position 93 to 118 between 2018 and 2019, according to Reporters Without Borders.

A 2019 report by Amnesty International says journalists in Tanzania have resolved to remain silent in order to be safe. I have a message for my colleagues back home: With the likes of John Magufuli in power and unopposed, no one is safe; no journalist can make a difference without risking his life or liberty.



15

Wilf Mbanga,
Zimbabwe

Newspapers as an opposition force

Harare airport will always be a place that stirs mixed emotions in me. For 15 years, which felt much longer, my main memory was of the terror that gripped me as I left hastily, fearing for my life, having been arrested on a trumped-up charge and locked up in a filthy, overcrowded cell.

I had endured a six-month trial and was finally acquitted by one of the country's few brave magistrates. But my life was in danger. It was August 2003 when I left. I did not know when I would return, but I fully expected to be home within a year or so. That hope withered as the years passed and the murderous anger of the Robert Mugabe regime against any dissenting voice grew stronger.

Efforts to hold those in power accountable and transparent comes at a high cost. Most governments in Africa do not take kindly to the tenets of democracy that require them to do so.

I finally arrived back at Harare Airport in September 2018. As the British Airways jet cruised into a leisurely descent over Harare, I looked out of the window at the dry, dusty countryside and wondered what awaited me. After an inordinately long wait, I finally arrived at the immigration desk. I had to pay $55 for a 30-day tourist visa.

My mouth was as dry as the dusty veld. I was expecting government agents to pounce at any moment, as the State-owned *Herald* newspaper

and the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation had reported two warrants for my arrest during my 15-year absence.

But absolutely nothing happened. My little granddaughters waved a colourful banner from the balcony with squeals of delight. I walked out into the September sunshine and the welcoming embrace of the remnants of my family.

Some of my relatives, including my mother, had died while I was in exile. So had many of my old friends. The pain of their loss hit me anew as the unfinished grieving process demanded closure. Cousins, who had young children when I left, now had grandchildren. Everybody I knew looked older.

There was a time when things worked in Zimbabwe, when the economy was booming. Unemployment was not an issue. We had our own currency and the country could feed itself with some extra left over for the neighbours.

Robert Mugabe, Prime Minister, then President and my friend, was regarded as a world statesman in the 1980s and 1990s (despite the *Gukurahundi* massacres of the early 1980s, the truth about which was for many years successfully concealed). I was the founder and editor in 1981 of the national news agency, ZIANA. I travelled the world with Mugabe. In 1987, I was asked to set up a group of eight regional newspapers under the umbrella of the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust. Life was good.

But in the 1990s, things turned sour. Corruption, greed and economic mismanagement took hold. As the media reported on these issues, it became increasingly subject to government interference and abuse. Intolerance of any criticism or divergent views increased, until in 1997 I found my position as Editor-in-Chief of the community newspapers group untenable. Freedom of expression was being eroded by the Mugabe regime at an alarming rate.

I teamed up with a group of like-minded newspaper people at home

and abroad and secured funding, mainly from the United Kingdom, to set up an independent daily newspaper. I was the founding managing director of *The Daily News*. State-sponsored harassment followed almost immediately. I was followed. Strangers came into my garden in the middle of the night. Newspaper vendors were arrested. Some of my reporters were locked up. Finally, the printing press was bombed. I was arrested in 2001 and charged with "fraud" but my real crime was founding an independent newspaper that dared to criticise Mugabe and his cabal or, as the newspaper tag line put it, "tell it like it is".

Repression continued to escalate. It became a crime to criticise the head of state and, even after I had left the country, I was declared "an enemy of the people" for writing a critical column in a Dutch newspaper.

On Mugabe's watch (1980-2017), my country was raped. Millions of carats of diamonds, tons of gold, chrome and platinum, countless slabs of granite and marble and a host of other resources were ripped from the earth and exported, mainly to China, by the ruling-party elite, who grew fabulously wealthy. An estimated quarter of the population (3 million) left the country as economic migrants or political exiles.

Perhaps worst of all was the cancer of corruption that Mugabe's elaborate and effective patronage system spawned, sustained and embedded at every level of Zimbabwean society. The land "reform" programme for which many Africans applaud Mugabe was one foundation of this policy, benefitting not landless blacks but cabinet ministers, police and army officers, senior civil servants and ruling party supporters.

It destroyed the livelihoods of more than 350 000 farmworkers and their families. The farms — worth many billions of US dollars, with nearly 3 million head of cattle, 287 000 hectares of irrigation, 10 000 farm dams and millions of miles of fencing and water pipelines, homes, sheds, and 25 000 tractors — were trashed. The assets were stolen and sold for scrap or transferred to new places. Those beneficiaries who later fell out of favour with the party had the farms taken away from them.

Mugabe presided over a country where citizens lived in fear of state-sponsored extra-judicial kidnappings and killings. Today over 90 per cent of Zimbabweans still struggle to survive, 70 per cent on less than 35 US cents a day. Life expectancy is just 34 years, our hospitals are morgues, many schools in rural areas are little more than care centres for children with nothing else to do. We are among the poorest people in the world. Before Mugabe took charge, we had been a middle-income state with the second most advanced economy in Africa and a major net exporter of food.

Once safely in the UK, I did the only thing I knew how, start a newspaper. *The Zimbabwean* was born in February 2005. Thanks to modern technology, we were able to gather news and photographs inside Zimbabwe, edit in the UK, print in South Africa and distribute inside Zimbabwe and throughout the Southern African region.

Publishing in exile is not something I would choose lightly. But the draconian legislation and the absence of the rule of law in Zimbabwe gave us no option. It was a logistical nightmare, and very expensive, dashing all hopes of self-sustainability. Thanks to the generosity of our donors, we did it every week for ten years.

I continued to be threatened and vilified by the Mugabe regime. I felt safe in the UK, but there was a constant ache: I missed my home and family. It was hard to make new friends and the pain of what was happening to my country was almost intolerable. What kept me going was the conviction that I was helping to make a difference. As long as I could keep publishing the facts about what was being done behind a media blackout (before the social media era), the perpetrators would not enjoy impunity forever. There is a printed record of their ugly legacy that will outlive them.

The Zimbabwean was a constant thorn in the side of the Zimbabwean authorities. It grew to become the most widely distributed independent newspaper in the country, available in a tabloid print format and published online at *www.thezimbabwean.co*.

Our average weekly print run grew rapidly to 30 000 copies, up from 5 000 at inception. At its peak during the 2008 and 2013 elections, with support from donors, 200 000 copies of the newspaper were distributed weekly throughout the country. Recognised worldwide as an accurate newspaper of record and a reliable source of information, its reporting was quoted in the quality international press.

My personal highlight was when Emmerson Mnangagwa, now the President, then Mugabe's election agent, declared that Mugabe had lost the first round of the 2008 presidential election because "the minds of the people had been poisoned by *The Zimbabwean*". Retaliation was threatened and it was quick. On 25 May 2008, the regime's agents hijacked and burnt one of our delivery trucks containing 60 000 copies of *The Zimbabwean on Sunday*. Following that, they imposed a punitive 75% import duty (up from 14%) as a tariff barrier in order to kill the newspaper. We survived this, although with a drastically reduced print run, and it was finally lifted in August 2009, under the Government of National Unity.

The anguish of many years in exile was only assuaged by the knowledge that we were able to tell the stories of those who suffered such appalling human rights abuses, particularly in the very dark days of 2008 when more than 200 opposition activists were murdered, thousands were beaten and raped, many disappeared never to be heard of again and thousands of people had their homesteads and crops torched by Mugabe supporters, who were never brought to justice. *The Zimbabwean* published the names, and where possible the photographs, of the known perpetrators of many of these dastardly acts.

I would like to pay tribute to all the brave reporters who worked for me over the years. I salute their courage. This too came at a huge cost. They and their families lived in constant fear and anxiety. Many were arrested, harassed, beaten and tortured. Gift Phiri died in April 2020, in his forties, and I wonder if his death was hastened by the torment of his kidnapping and torture while working as the senior reporter for *The Zimbabwean*. Itai Dzamara, whose disappearance in 2015 was internationally documented, also worked for *The Zimbabwean* for several years.

From a professional point of view, operating from exile was fraught with complications. We received absolutely no cooperation from government officials, such as ministers and the police, which made it difficult to verify information and, therefore, to report all sides of every story. The then commissioner of police, Augustine Chihuri, banned policemen from reading the newspaper.

Even when I phoned government officials personally, which I did from time to time, they hung up as soon as I identified myself; so there was no way we could balance our stories. In addition to these problems in reporting the situation accurately, we faced massive logistical obstacles. These included long lead times — of up to 48 hours — because of the distances involved and the congestion at the Beit Bridge border post.

We printed on Tuesday night for a newspaper that went on sale in Zimbabwe on Thursday morning. If there was a problem at the border, as there often was, the paper did not hit the streets until Friday, an editing nightmare!

I remember one occasion when we had a document leaked exclusively to us on a Monday night about the SADC position on the crucial power-sharing talks in Harare. We put it on the front page as our lead. But by Wednesday night, the document was freely available to everyone. We had egg on our faces when we went on sale on Thursday, claiming exclusivity.

People often ask me: what went wrong in Zimbabwe? How did Mugabe turn from hero to tyrant? The formation of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change in 1999 put paid to his ambitions of a one-party state, and he regarded this as a major personal insult. This was followed in 2000 by his loss in the constitutional referendum by which he sought to increase his presidential powers. His increasingly repressive regime met this setback with a ferocious reign of terror. Human rights were trampled on, the judiciary was emasculated, the independent media was gagged and the country turned into a virtual police state. Hordes of marauding youths, recruited into state-funded militias, were unleashed

to pillage, rape, beat and otherwise harass the defenceless, largely rural, population into submission to the ruling Zanu (PF).

Mugabe himself became increasingly intolerant of any form of criticism. I last saw him when I sat in the front row of a press conference in 2000 at the launch of his election campaign. By then, he had come to regard me as his enemy, because of my role in launching *The Daily News*, which was critical of his administration. He would not look at me. I remember the feelings of betrayal, disappointment and sadness that almost choked me. That was the day I mourned the death of my Robert Mugabe.

Years later I wrote him an open letter, from the safety of the UK, in which I made an impassioned plea: *"It is not too late. You can still do the right thing. The people for whom you were once prepared to suffer so much are still there. They still need freedom. You once loved them enough to give your life to set them free. Can you not find it in your heart one more time to set them free? Give up your power, Mukoma (my brother). Set our people free. Let them decide who should govern them. Stop starving and beating them to force them to love you. The only thing that will make us love you again is for you to go, now."*

But despite all our sacrifices and pleadings, he would not listen, until finally he was deposed in a bloodless coup in November 2017. Almost a year later, his successor, Emmerson Mnangagwa, assured me that I was welcome to return, despite the warrants of arrest hanging over my head.

16

Fred Muvunyi,
Rwanda

Journalism and genocide denial

Speaking truth to power can be costly. That lesson came home to me rather poignantly when I found myself hiding in a stranger's house in a foreign land, too scared to step outside and not sure I would ever see my son again.

I had long accepted that it was difficult practising journalism in my home country, Rwanda, which had had a difficult history of hatred, violence and genocide. But I always held truth and accountability close to my heart, and this is one reason I became a journalist.

Throughout my career, I had gravitated towards investigations, especially in connection with human rights abuses and corruption in government. Living first as an exile in neighbouring Uganda, where I was born, and then in President Paul Kagame's Rwanda — governed by injustice, intimidation and silencing of critics — and having no political ambitions, it appeared to me almost inevitable that I would end up in this profession.

My determination to dig up the truth earned me a reputation among Rwandan politicians as stubborn. I would not call myself stubborn; I was just trying to do my job and contribute to the reconstruction of a country which had lost nearly 800 000 people in ethnic strife. I considered this to be the duty of any Rwandan interested in hauling his or her country from the shadow of the 1994 genocide.

Enthusiasm for crusading stories repeatedly landed me in trouble. In 2011, I was arrested as I looked into an incident in which Tony Kulamba, head of the national police's crime department, bribed a member of the PS-Imberakuri opposition party to help the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) destroy his own party. I was warned by the then police chief Emmanuel Gasana to abandon the matter. We ran the story anyway.

In 2013, I investigated the misuse of state funds at the Ministry of Sports and Culture. The then minister, Protais Mitali — now also living in exile too — threatened me if I pursued the matter. Still, I used the law to compel him to hand over financial documents that he was hiding. The documents showed how billions of Rwandan francs from state coffers had been paid to fake consultants.

For nearly two decades, the ruling party maintained tight control over all media. The justification was always that media had played a destructive role in the 1994 genocide against Tutsis and moderate Hutus, inflaming passions and actively guiding the killers to their victims.

There is no shortage of media outlets in Rwanda. Apart from the state broadcaster's television and radio station, which cover nearly 80 per cent of the country, there are 34 radio stations, 14 TV stations, 46 newspapers, and about 100 privately owned websites. This is a substantial media presence, especially in a tiny country like Rwanda.

However, numbers should not be mistaken for freedom. Most of the media outlets are owned by politicians and business people, who are staunch supporters of the ruling party. Naturally, this puts in question the editorial independence of these entities, especially as most of their content is pro-government.

I have always supported freedom of expression and self-regulating media. For this reason, I was keen to take part in the debate on media policy that finally birthed Rwanda's laws on media freedom, self-regulation, and access to information.

For many years, the security services and police persistently harassed journalists and newspapers were sometimes summarily shut down. However, things changed in 2011. The Rwandan cabinet, which was chaired by President Kagame, published a new policy that called for the transformation of the country's media. By July 2013, parliament had passed a series of new laws, giving the policy legal force.

The laws deregulated print journalism, eliminated censorship, reduced media bureaucracy and allowed journalists to organise self-regulatory bodies. They abolished the state television and radio broadcaster, replacing it with a semi-autonomous public service broadcaster designed to serve the public and not the government. They abolished the Ministry of Information and established a new media regulatory authority.

The Rwanda Media Commission (RMC) was created in 2013. It was supposed to be an independent and self-regulatory body responsible for media regulation, protecting journalists and implementing a code of conduct. The Media High Council, a state institution that had in the past been responsible for the media, relinquished its extensive powers.

I was elected the commission's first chairman and we tried to strengthen press freedom. We were able to settle about 20 cases. Interventions occurred in several incidents in which journalists were arrested for their work. We convinced police to hand the cases over to us.

But the honeymoon did not last. Just a year after its formation, the RMC faced a test that would determine whether it was to continue as an independent body or become just another appendage of pro-government agencies that littered Rwanda's administration.

The issue that sent me into exile started innocently enough. I was in the US attending a fellowship programme organised by the State Department. Sleeping fitfully in a hotel room in Saint Louis, Missouri, on the evening of 30 September 2014, a message came through from a friend telling me about a 'must-watch' documentary due to broadcast on BBC 2 the following day, 1 October.

I viewed the almost one-hour documentary *Rwanda: The Untold Story* and I was stunned. I knew immediately that there was going to be trouble. Kigali would react strongly because the documentary targeted President Paul Kagame and presented a controversial account of the Rwandan genocide. From a Rwandan point of view, it bordered on genocide denial, a serious crime under the Kagame regime.

I was not surprised when the commission's vice-chairman, Cleophas Barore, sent me a message, asking me to come back home to deal with the pressure being exerted on the Rwanda Media Commission. Apparently, government officials wanted RMC to take action against the BBC.

I left the US almost immediately, arriving back home on 4 October. After about three weeks, Minister Anastase Shyaka, then CEO of the Rwanda Governance Board (RGB), summoned me to an urgent meeting at the Ministry of Justice. He told me to bring RMC's legal documents.

I did not even dare to ask him what the meeting was about. I could guess what lay ahead because Rwandan MPs had two days before passed a resolution calling on the government to ban the BBC and charge the documentary's producers with genocide denial.

The meeting, chaired by Justice Minister Johnston Busingye, was attended by officials from governance board, Kagame's office, the Office of the Government Spokesperson (OGS) and the Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authority (RURA).

Minister Busingye came straight to the point: "We have decided to suspend the BBC for reasons that all of you know. Muvunyi, we asked you to be here because you can help us."

The government wanted to formalise the suspension of the BBC Kinyarwanda service and had decided that the body I headed, the Rwanda Media Commission, should do it since it was in charge of media regulation, and it would look good if an independent authority signed the decree.

Everybody in the room looked at me in amazement when I demurred. I tried to explain that RMC did not operate that way, that procedure must be followed and insisted that the law and ethics be respected.

"I suggest the government formally lodge a complaint; then we will summon BBC and the plaintiff," I offered.

You could hear a pin drop. Each of them must have been wondering how I could dare say no to a decision by President Paul Kagame. You see, Kagame is the most feared person in Rwanda and his underlings even call him the 'saviour'.

Minister Busingye stated firmly that the decision had already been taken and the BBC would be off the air by 6 pm. Long before that hour, news had reached the BBC offices in London and local journalists were calling to ask about RMC's position on the matter.

My position on the temporary suspension of BBC was unchanged. The government had interfered in our mandate and it was unacceptable. Censorship of an entire news outlet was not the way to show that Rwanda was serious about giving greater freedom to media.

Later that night, I started getting anonymous calls, telling me I would pay a high price if I continued to favour 'enemies of the state' and 'foreign agents'.

According to Rwandan law, helping state enemies is treason. Anyone who disagrees with the government is labelled an 'enemy of Rwanda'. Ruling party officials went to mainstream media outlets and social media platforms to discredit me and the Rwanda Media Commission.

Their objective was clear: to set the stage for stripping RMC of its legal powers and hand them over to the Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authority (RURA), a state body that could be more easily controlled by the government. I resisted these attempts because I was aware that the government could not pass that Bill in the cabinet without RMC's approval.

When these efforts failed, the government tried bribery. A cabinet minister whose docket touched on the media offered me a monthly income and other favours in return for going along with the plan to cripple RMC.

I realised I was treading on dangerous ground standing up to the government, when a friend working at the national intelligence service warned me of an elimination plot. Another friend working at the ruling party's communication commission sent me copies of text messages concerning me. They were phrased in such a way that they could only have referred to either my getting fired or killed.

At a meeting on 6 May 2015, the Minister for Local Government, Francis Kaboneka, accused me of working for foreign forces and demanded that I write a letter of apology admitting to the crime.

I was sick with dread. I could discern a pattern. Such apology letters were commonly employed by Kagame's Rwanda Patriotic Front in the prosecution of opponents. This had happened to many confidants who had fallen out with Kagame. It finally dawned on me that I was in real danger and I had to save myself by whatever means.

After signing the apology letter, I kissed my son goodbye. It was an agonising decision. I had no answer for my five-year-old son Caleb's question, "Daddy, why are you sad?" as tears rolled down my face. I could not tell him that I was leaving the country. He was too young to understand.

I thought I was seeing him for the last time because I did not even know if I would be allowed to board the plane. I left Rwanda on 10 May.

A week before, I had been informed of a meeting that had discussed my elimination as prosecuting me would have drawn international condemnation. The US embassy had warned me several times that my life was in danger, but I was determined not to run away. I was born in exile and I knew how my parents had suffered as refugees.

When I realised I had no choice but to run for my life, the missions of the United States and several European Union countries coordinated my departure.

I first landed in Brussels. I had never been there and did not know anyone. A taxi dropped me off at Hotel de France. I took a shower and then went on Twitter to announce my resignation from RMC. My tweet was intended to reassure the people who care for me that I was safe. Already there were rumours that I was dead or in custody, as had happened to many Rwandans who had disagreed with the government.

State officials announced that I had left the country aboard Turkish Airlines, and that they knew the hotel I had checked into in Brussels. I was scared. I knew that Rwandan intelligence was efficient, but I was still surprised at how fast they had located me.

Two days later, two Rwandan men came to my hotel room. They lied at the reception that I was their sibling. The receptionist came up with them because he got no answer when he called my room.

When I saw the Rwandans, my body froze. I remembered what had happened to Patrick Karegeya, a former head of the country's intelligence agency who had defected. He was murdered in a Johannesburg, South Africa, hotel room in 2014. Another retired general and Kagame confidant, Kayumba Nyamwasa, who also sought asylum in South Africa, escaped three assassination attempts.

The two Rwandans could do nothing to me in the receptionist's presence. "We are here to help," one of them muttered in Kinyarwanda, our mother tongue. "We know you and what you have gone through." I turned down their invitation to go out for a drink, pleading fatigue. He scribbled his phone number and took my contacts.

As soon as they left, I phoned a Dutch diplomat in Kigali and recounted the incident. He immediately arranged for me to move to the Netherlands. I did not sleep that night and early in the morning I was on

the train to Amsterdam. My contact met me at Central Station and took me to his house. I was terrified. Every black person I saw looked like a Rwandan spy. I stayed indoors for two weeks, not once stepping out. The next month I moved to Germany to work for Deutsche Welle.

Soon after my departure from Rwanda, the authorities announced the indefinite suspension of BBC's operating licence, which had been temporarily stopped in October 2014.

In July 2015, Rwanda's Justice Minister, Johnston Busingye, who was in the Netherlands on official business, tried to persuade me to return home.

"Why should you live in exile? Even genocide criminals were forgiven and are now working with the rest of us to rebuild the nation," he said on WhatsApp.

But I was still wary. I knew his word meant nothing. In Rwanda, individuals may have a high position but power lies elsewhere, with Kagame and a few people in his inner circle, usually in the military, intelligence services and the ruling party.

The minister turned down my request to put his 'assurances' in writing. A signed document by the attorney-general clearing me of any wrongdoing would be important if I were to be prosecuted. The Dutch ambassador to Rwanda, Leoni Cuelenaere, was our go-between during the exchange. To his credit, Minister Busingye made it possible for me to speak to my son. Members of my family had been questioned and my former wife ordered not to allow me access to the boy.

I sometimes find it ironic that I am suffering because of politics, yet I consider myself apolitical. I do not belong to any political grouping, nor have I ever associated with anyone in Rwanda seeking power. My only crime is a passion for journalism and media freedom.

After moving to Germany, I received three warnings from government emissaries: to stop my reporting about Rwanda or never see my son

again. When I persisted, one of them called to remind me that he knew where I lived. But I could not stop reporting. My dream is to reunite with my son.

About the contributors

Soleyana Shimeles Gebremichael

Soleyana Shimeles Gebremichael is one of the founders of Zone9, a group of Ethiopian online activists who blogged about human rights and democracy. They came together in 2012 to counter government censorship and champion civil rights. Two years later members of the group found themselves standing trial on trumped up charges. Gebremichael was charged in absentia with a terrorism-related offence, forcing her to take up political asylum in the US, where she lived for five years. She returned home after the reformist Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took over. While in exile, Gebremichael had coordinated an international programme to bolster human rights advocacy in Ethiopia and also worked with Human Rights Watch and Freedom House.

Sainey MK Marenah

Sainey MK Marenah is head of media and communications at the Constitutional Review Commission of the Gambia, which is drafting the country's new constitution. He was previously editor at the Gambia Radio and Television Services and correspondent for Voice of America. As chief correspondent of *the Point* newspaper, Marenah was harassed and imprisoned by Yahya Jammeh's regime for exposing abuse of power. He also covered the treason case against military chiefs, who were tried in Banjul around 2009. After a term in prison, he moved to Senegal, where he was a stringer for the BBC, Al-Jazeera, and Germany's ZDF TV. He returned from exile in 2017.

Wilf Mbanga

Journalist and publisher Wilf Mbanga lives in self-imposed exile in South Africa after being declared an enemy of the state by the Zimbabwean government in 2004. He was founder and editor of *The Zimbabwean*, which sought to hold President Robert Mugabe's government to account from 2005. Mbanga has been in the media industry for 46 years, initially

covering Zimbabwe's transition from colonialism to Independence. Later he was involved with the 37-year rule of Mugabe, who once was his close friend, and wrote many analytical articles about the regime for media around the world. He established Zimbabwe's national news agency and launched 15 community newspapers, including Zimbabwe's first independent daily, *The Daily News*.

Mimi Mefo Takambou

Mimi Mefo Takambou is an award-winning Cameroonian journalist who gained prominence for her coverage of the language conflict in her country's English-speaking regions. Hounded into exile because of her television reports, she is currently working as an editor at Deutsche Welle, the German international broadcaster. Mefo spent the first eight years of her career as a print and broadcast journalist in Cameroon. In April 2018, she became the first-ever female editor-in-chief of the English service of Equinoxe, a privately-owned TV and Radio station. She founded Mimi Mefo Info, (MMI), a website which provides accurate information about the violence and unrest in Anglophone Cameroon and is the 2019 winner of the Freedom of Expression Award by Index on Censorship in the Journalism Category.

Keiso Mohloboli

Keiso Mohloboli is an investigative journalist who has handled a range of beats, including health and women's empowerment. She is the co-founder of the MNN Centre for Investigative Journalism, and a director at Kingdom Digital News, Lesotho's only daily news platform, which she helped to set up. A journalist since 2009, Mohloboli cut her teeth reporting at *Daily Sun*, *Mopheme* and *The Monitor* and went on to write for Maseru-based titles *Lesotho Times* and *Sunday Express*. Her articles have also appeared in leading South African newspapers like *City Press*, *Daily Maverick* and the *Mail & Guardian*. Following a major exclusive story about the Lesotho military in 2016, Mohloboli hurriedly left the country fearing for her life and only returned home two years later after the kingdom's government had changed.

Abdalle Ahmed Mumin

Abdalle Ahmed Mumin is a Somali journalist who has written for *The Guardian* (UK), *Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Mail* (South Africa) and Germany's *Die Zeit* and ARD TV. His September, 2014, report on the death of Al-Shabaab leader Ahmed Abdi Godane — killed in a United States drone strike — led to an attempt on his life, forcing him into a four-year exile in neighbouring Kenya. On return, he resumed life as a freelance journalist, while giving safety and labour rights training to young reporters. Mumin is co-founder and secretary-general of the Somali Journalists Syndicate (SJS), which promotes press freedom. He is a former editor of Radio Banadir and Radio Risaala and a past winner of the German Development Media Award *The People's Choice Awards*.

Fred Muvunyi

Fred Muvunyi, a multimedia journalist, served as chair of the Rwanda Media Commission for two years from 2013. A broadcast veteran, he had worked for a variety of Rwandan media outlets, including Restore FM, Radio 10, Contact FM, Rwanda National TV and the triweekly *Izuba Rirashe*, sister newspaper of *The NewTimes*. The commission tenure gave him direct experience of managing media freedom in a hostile environment. In 2014 he resisted the Rwanda government's decision to ban the BBC's radio service over a documentary critical of President Paul Kagame and also argued against a government proposal to transfer the RMC's powers to a state-run body. As a result his life was threatened, prompting him to flee Rwanda. He is now a senior editor at Deutsche Welle in Germany

Makaila N'Guebla

A pioneer of the Chadian blogosphere, Makaila N'Guebla began writing about his war-torn country in the "Vous et Nous" section of the Francophone magazine *Jeune Afrique* in 2001. The articles led to his expulsion from Tunisia in 2005 and he moved to Senegal. Eight years later, he was forced to leave Dakar for Conakry, Guinea, and ultimately found political asylum in France. N'Guebla was a correspondent for *Ialtchad-presse*, based in Canada, and director of publication for France-

based *Alwihda*. In 2007 he founded Makaila.fr, which became one of Africa's most influential blogs He subsequently hosted a show on Manooré FM, then worked in the conflict department of the Rencontre Africaine de Défense des Droits de l'Homme — a Dakar-based NGO.

Farida Nabourema

Farida Nabourema is an activist and blogger who has recently emerged as an influential voice of Togo's pro-democracy movement. Through online articles, Nabourema denounces corruption and dictatorship in Togo and promotes a form of progressive pan-Africanism. In 2014, she published *La Pression de l'oppression* (The Pressure of Oppression), in which she discussed the different forms of oppression people face in Africa and highlighted the need for youth and women to join the fight for democracy. She is executive director of the Togolese Civil League, which promotes democracy and human rights. At 20, she launched the *Faure Must Go Movement* which mobilised youth against the dictatorial Gnassingbé family, which has ruled Togo for over 50 years.

Ansbert Ngurumo

Ansbert Ngurumo is a crusading Tanzanian journalist and blogger living in exile in Sweden. He is the author of *John Magufuli: An Epitome of Cowardice* and an e-book *The Reflections of a Seasoned Journalist*. He founded the dissident site *www.sautikubwa.org* as a response to Tanzania's deteriorating media situation under President Magufuli. From 2016 to 2017 he was managing editor of the Tanzania weekly *MwanaHALISI*, now banned. He was the founding managing editor of *Tanzania Daima* and previously worked for various media outlets, including *The African* and *Rai* as well as *The Citizen*. His analysis of how Tanzania was becoming an information society won him the global *Panos/GKP Media Award* (2003).

Kiwanuka Lawrence Nsereko

Kiwanuka Lawrence Nsereko is a Ugandan journalist and activist who covered civil war in northern Uganda, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. He moved to Poughkeepsie, New York, in 1995 to

escape arrest by President Yoweri Museveni's security agents over stories published in his newspaper, *The Citizen*, and now teaches at Dutchess Community College. Born during the turbulent years of dictator Idi Amin, Kiwanuka became interested in Ugandan politics at an early age and was recruited as a child soldier by a guerrilla army. In the late 1980s he worked for the stablemates *The Citizen* and *Munnansi*, which were critical of Museveni's newly-installed government. He is married with four children.

Pius Nyamora

Pius Nyamora is a retired political journalist who fled his homeland, Kenya, in 1994, at the height of a government crackdown against advocates of multiparty reform. He was the founder and editor of *Society* magazine, an outspoken weekly established to fill the vacuum left by mainstream media's inability to challenge Daniel arap Moi's dictatorship. Launched in 1988, the magazine pushed the boundaries of political coverage and published the first ever cartoon of the country's President. However, due to frequent seizures of the magazine and persecution by state agents, Nyamora and his wife Loice sought political asylum in the US, where they now live in retirement. He had built his reputation as a parliamentary reporter on the *Daily Nation*.

Dapo Olorunyomi

Dapo Olorunyomi is the publisher of Nigeria's first investigative news outlet, *Premium Times*, which he co-founded in 2011. His work as editor during Nigeria's military dictatorship in the 1990s forced him into exile in the US, where he continued his journalism. He serves on the boards of fact-checking organisation, Africa Check, Panos Institute for West Africa, and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. He is also a co-founder of West Africa's first journalism innovation and development centre — *www.ptcij.org*. Back in 1996 Olorunyomi founded the well regarded Wole Soyinka Centre for Investigative Journalism (WSCIJ) before joining Nigeria's leading anti-corruption agency, Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), as its chief of staff in 2006.

Fathi Osman

Fathi Osman is an Eritrean journalist working for the Paris-based Radio Erena, an exile broadcast service founded by independent media people. The station broadcasts in Arabic and Tigrinya, targeting the people of Eritrea, a single-party state where media is tightly controlled by the government. In 2014, Osman launched Erena's Arabic-language programme, only two years after arriving in France. In the same year, his first book, *Eritrea's Journey from Liberation to Dictatorship*, was published in Paris. He started his journalism career at the Asmara-based *Al-Haditha* in 1994 before joining the Foreign Ministry as a member of the commission on the arbitration of the Red Sea islands followed by a tenure as senior research officer in the office of the presidential legal adviser. He previously worked in Eritrea's embassies in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

Michèle Rakotoson

Michèle Rakotoson — teacher, director and writer — left Madagascar for France in 1983 for an exile that lasted nearly 30 years. Though the move was initiated by her family, she had been at the head of two strikes by school teachers and students. In France, Rakotoson joined the protest movement "Blacks and Beurs" and worked in newspapers of the immigrant community before joining Radio France International as manager of the short story competition *"Les Inédits de RFI-ACCT"* for 10 years. Her time in France allowed her to launch many authors such as Kossi Efoui, Kangni Alemdjrodo and Jean Luc Raharimanana. Back in Madagascar, she trains young writers and publishers and has published about ten novels, five plays, short stories and hundreds of columns in the weekly *Hebdo* in Antananarivo.

Bob Rugurika

Bob Rugurika is a Burundian journalist and director of Radio Publique Africaine (RPA), also known as Humura, which up to 2015 was the country's most listened to broadcast station. His journalism career started in 2003, on the eve of President Pierre Nkurunziza's 15 year-rule, and saw him endure harassment, imprisonment and exile. Rugurika rose

from an intern to become RPA's chief editor, working with human rights defenders to expose political killings, a massacre of 40 civilians, illegal weapons trade and corruption involving government officials. In 2016 he was awarded the prestigious CNN/Multichoice Press Freedom Award for his crusading journalism, four years after arrests and death threats had driven him into exile. He now divides his time between Belgium and Rwanda, remotely leading investigative work by RPA teams based in Burundi and elsewhere.

Index

D

E

F

L

M

N

O

P

R

S

T