



Summary

Discussion: „Press Freedom in Namibia and Southern Africa“

1 June 2022, 19:00hrs

Tagungszentrum im Haus der Bundespressekonferenz

Background

For years, Namibia has been one of the best performing African countries in the media and press freedom rankings conducted annually by *Reporters Without Borders* in 180 countries around the world. In 2022, it ranks 18th, only two places behind Germany (16th). Historically, Namibia has also played an important role in the struggle for press independence in Africa: In the *Windhoek Declaration* adopted in 1991, journalists from a total of 38 African countries called the "the establishment, maintenance and fostering of an independent, pluralistic, and free press [...] essential to the development and maintenance of democracy in a nation, and for economic development".

One of the key voices in Namibia's press and a driving force of the Windhoek Declaration: political correspondent, editor-in-chief, and publisher Gwen Lister who received the Honorary Award of the German Africa Foundation for her extraordinary commitment to freedom of the press. Following the award ceremony, the Honorary Laureate and founder of *The Namibian* and Zimbabwean multimedia journalist Josey Mahachi spoke about the status quo and current challenges of press freedom in Southern Africa.

Highlights

- A free press is the basis for the functioning of a democratic and informed society, says Gwen Lister.
- States and institutions would have to support the development of a free media landscape more actively and focus more on the establishment and consolidation of independent media.
- Social media is both a curse and a blessing: a curse as entire elections can be decided on the basis of misinformation, as in the case of the Philippines, for example, and a blessing as it offers every individual a platform of freedom of speech.
- Demand: Freedom of the press must be established as a core element of (German) foreign policy.

In conversation - Status quo of press freedom in Southern Africa

Both speakers emphasised the enormous importance of a free press for the functioning of a democratic and informed society. While Namibia is ranked among the top countries in Africa (2nd place) and

Grußwort

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internationally (16th place) in the annual *Reporters Without Borders* press freedom ranking, many countries in Southern Africa fare much worse. This includes Zimbabwe, which ranked just 137th (out of 180) in the latest *Reporters Without Borders* ranking. Although the situation of the media was already bad under long-term president Robert Mugabe, it has worsened considerably under the current president Emmerson Mnangagwa, says Mahachi. Journalists are threatened or arrested; at the same time, there is only one state media that is responsible for reporting throughout the country. This was also the reason for her to flee the country, Mahachi explained; as an active journalist and TV personality, these circumstances had left her no choice but to leave her home country. In the meantime, she has been able to resume her journalistic work at *Deutsche Welle* and continue her work through her social media channels; yet, there is no complete freedom of speech and freedom of the press for her in Germany either, as her parents still live in Zimbabwe and the danger of threats and arrest is therefore omnipresent here as well, Mahachi said.

Freedom of the press as a cornerstone for democracies

The example of Zimbabwe also shows how restrictions on press freedom go hand in hand with restrictions on other freedoms. Important institutions that had set themselves the task of promoting the development of press freedom in Southern Africa, such as the *Media Institute of Southern Africa* (MISA), which was co-founded by Gwen Lister, among others, would de facto no longer exist today due to the lack of support from several member states and could no longer exert any influence, criticised Lister. That is why it is all the more important for her to support the development of a free media landscape and appealed to all states and institutions to focus more on the establishment and consolidation of independent media. This is the only way to counteract the destabilisation of democratic states on the one hand, and to lay a stable and democratic foundation for hitherto fragile states on the other. Investing in the development of media and the press is an essential step towards preserving and building democracy in which the population can make informed decisions. A positive example of this is the organisation *African Platform on Access to Information* and the *Action Namibia* campaign, says Lister. The *Namibia Media Trust* is also an important institution that, in cooperation with *Deutsche Welle*, trains young journalists, provides access to information and also does fundamental work with the podcast *Freespeak*. Finally, Lister emphasised, access to information is a fundamental human right in her eyes.

The role of social media

Nevertheless, access to information, and especially independent information, is not given in many countries, says Mahachi. For this reason, she uses social media in particular to continue to act as a journalist in her home country of Zimbabwe and to take action against repressive government measures against media and press freedom. At the same time, Mahachi also stressed the danger that social media can offer, especially through the spread of so-called fake news. Lister agreed that social media is both a curse and a blessing: Curse, as entire elections could be decided on the basis of misinformation, as in the case of the Philippines, for example, and blessing, as it would provide every individual with a platform of freedom of speech.

Demands on politicians

Addressing German politicians, Lister called for freedom of the press to be established and anchored as a core element of (German) foreign policy; investments in the development and expansion of independent media as well as the training of young journalists are also fundamental to promoting freedom of the press and thus stability, especially in young democracies. Mahachi agreed that protecting and developing press freedom is the basis for a functioning democratic society.