

Kenyan government imposes news blackout

Warning the government of the dangers of the ban on live radio and TV news reports, Reporters Without Borders has condemned the climate of fear imposed on the privately-owned media in the wake of Kenya's disputed presidential election following the live radio and TV news reports ban announced on 30 December 2007.

Nairobi - "The news blackout could result in the streets being ruled by rumour and disinformation," the press freedom organisation said. "This decision is therefore counter-productive. In as much as it constitutes a *de facto* ban on all news programmes, it imposes a climate of intimidation and plunges the country into confusion. We call on the government to talk to media executives and editors and to let them work freely so that the public is properly informed."

Internal security minister John Michuki announced the live broadcast ban shortly after President Mwai Kibaki was proclaimed winner of the controversial election. The information and communication minister said the "suspension of live broadcasts" had been ordered "in the interest of public safety and tranquillity." A government press release said: "In the prevailing environment, some people are using the media to call for violence and to incite members of the public to engage in violence."

Most of the broadcast media suspended all their news programmes, effectively plunging Kenya into a news blackout. Local broadcast journalists said they were afraid the police could raid their stations and order them to close. One privately owned station, Kiss FM, is continuing to broadcast a phone-in programme. Two TV journalists with privately owned K24 were attacked by protesters while covering demonstrations on 30 December.

An initial meeting was held between the Media Owners Association and the government on the morning of 31 December. Wachira Waruru, the head the Media Council (a press regulatory body), described the ban as "draconian" and said it threatened press freedom.

The situation is tense, with deadly clashes being reported in Nairobi and several provincial cities. Local journalists said news was now circulating mainly by means of SMS messages. Kiss FM host Caroline Mutoko asked listeners not to cite Kiss FM as the source of reports in their SMS messages when it is not true, explaining that such behaviour could result in the station being closed.

Radio Lake Victoria, a station based in the western city of Kisumu, openly supported opposition candidate Raila Odinga, and has been forced off the air as a result of what deputy station manager Seth Oloo called government "sabotage."

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