

World's press urges Kenyan president to halt punitive media law

A proposed new media law in Kenya risks imposing severe financial sanctions against journalists, publishers and broadcasters for breaching a code of conduct, and could even bar journalists from working.



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In a letter to President Uhuru Kenyatta, the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) and the World Editors Forum urged the Kenyan leader to reject the new law and called on him to address mounting press freedom concerns during his speech Friday at the African Media Leaders Forum currently taking place in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa.

"We are seriously concerned that the proposed law could be used to gag the press under the pretext of protecting national security in the wake of the September attack on the Westgate shopping mall," said the letter from WAN-IFRA.

On 31 October, the Kenyan parliament voted to establish a Communications and Multimedia Appeals Tribunal to draw up a code of conduct for the press.

Preventing journalists from working

The Tribunal would have the power to impose fines of up to 20 million Kenyan shillings (about US\$234,000) on offenders, as well as prevent journalists from working.

The bill would also introduce strict controls on broadcasters, with radio and TV stations obliged to ensure that 45-percent of programme content and advertising is locally made.

As a member of the Pan-African Parliament, Kenya is signatory to the Midrand Declaration on Press Freedom in Africa which draws on a variety of African protocols, articles and declarations, including Article of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights and WAN-IFRA's Declaration of Table Mountain, which calls for greater press freedom in Africa.

WAN-IFRA called on the President to ensure Kenya's laws "fully respect the letter and spirit of the Midrand Declaration and its other international obligations to freedom of expression."

The full letter can be read at www.wan-ifra.org.

