

Safrea Joins Voices of Protest Against SABC

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The Southern African Freelancers' Association (Safrea) adds its voice to protests against the suspension of three senior South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) journalists apparently for contravening an order prohibiting them from covering a Right2Know protest outside the public broadcaster's headquarters in Auckland Park, Johannesburg.

The right of media to report in a timely and truthful manner is a foundation of democracy, says Safrea Chair Laura Rawden.

“By putting restrictions on these practices, and penalising journalists who do their jobs, the SABC is threatening all members of society and removing our right to information,” she says.

In May, the SABC took the decision not to publicise any content displaying violent service delivery protests in various parts of the country. According to News24, economics editor Thandeka Gqubule, Radio Sonder Grense (RSG) executive producer Foeta Krige and Afrikaans news producer Suna Venter were suspended last week after opposing Motsoeneng's instruction.

The action follows worrying City Press reports that the SABC has banned reading newspaper headlines on RSG and removed The Editors from SAfm's AM Live. Also of concern are claims that SABC Chief Operating Officer Hlaudi Motsoeneng has ordered that no negative coverage of President Jacob Zuma be broadcast.

“There is no situation we can imagine where the COO of a public broadcaster should be banning news coverage, or forbidding negative commentary on the president,” says Rawden. “Such actions equate to media censorship and should not be tolerated.”

Rawden also notes the damaging consequences such restrictions have for journalists and other news staff. “They are faced with a problem of conscience in whether they should inform the public, and risk suspension, or obey orders that violate the most basic concepts of democracy, and keep their jobs.”

South Africa ranks 39th out of 179 countries in Reporters Without Borders' (RSF's) Press Freedom Index 2016.

South Africa's constitution protects freedom of speech and our very diverse media, particularly in Chapter 2 of the Constitution of South Africa containing the Bill of Rights, Section 16, which states:

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes —

- A. freedom of the press and other media;
- B. freedom to receive or impart information or ideas;
- C. freedom of artistic creativity; and
- D. academic freedom and freedom of scientific research

Safrea supports strong protest expressed by PEN South Africa and the South African National Editors' Forum (Sanef) at the SABC. Safrea also supports media staffers and unions who wish to serve the South African public by doing their jobs.

Safrea calls for the SABC to lift the suspensions and to commit itself to transparent and even-handed news coverage, “without fear or favour.”

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