

Hopes On Media Reforms Dashed

Written by Rudi Prinsloo
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One week, a partner in Zimbabwe's new coalition government says foreign journalists will be allowed free access here for the first time in early a decade. The next, the other main partner says such "lawlessness" is unthinkable.

The split over media freedoms is just one sign of trouble in a coalition government that was supposed to end political squabbling so that leaders could turn their attention to the nation's economic crisis.

The former rivals turned governing partners, though, say they will keep trying to make the coalition work. Without it, President Robert Mugabe has no hope of getting the international funds he needs to help his people - and keep his cronies in line.

For his part, Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai, the former opposition leader, may see a share of power - even if it is a junior partner's share - as better than none. Despite election victories, Tsvangirai was frozen out of office until Zimbabwe's neighbors forced Mugabe to enter the unity government in February.

Western donors, led by the United States and Britain, have refused to provide aid to support the unity government, saying they first want to see evidence of Mugabe's commitment to the rule of law.

Foreign and Zimbabwean reporters have been banned, arrested and harassed by Mugabe's regime. Organizations such as the BBC were banned from entering the country while others have been deterred by licensing fees in the tens of the thousands of U.S. dollars. Some journalists entered and worked without permission - and ended up in jail.

Last week, Tsvangirai announced an end to the licensing requirements, saying they had fallen away under the power sharing agreement.

But Thursday, the state-run Herald newspaper quoted Mugabe's spokesman George Charamba as saying all journalists still needed a government license. "Why would anyone wish lawlessness in the country?" Charamba was quoted as saying.

Mugabe's party still controls the police and immigration posts at borders and airports. So whatever Tsvangirai may say, unless Mugabe agrees, journalists can expect little change.

The country's only independent daily newspaper and three independent weeklies have been shut down in recent years under the nation's sweeping media laws.

The Daily News fought a long legal battle over the government's refusal to license it. Since the power-sharing deal was signed between Mugabe and Tsvangirai, two publishing firms have announced plans to start new independent daily newspapers.

Neither has yet appeared on the streets. Publishing executives say clearance has not been

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given under the media laws and it was considered too risky to go ahead without it.

One of the firms has already appointed an editor and staff who produce mock editions of the NewsDay daily.

Andrew Moyse, head of the independent Media Monitoring Project, said experts in constitutional law noted that Tsvangirai was correct and in the law no authority was in place at present to license journalists.

He said the coalition deal clearly committed the partners to guaranteeing free expression and the creation of a free and diverse media.

But government officials loyal to Mugabe were "twisting the law to retain the accreditation process to control journalism in Zimbabwe and resort to the old, repressive media practices," he said.

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