



Radio Dabanga censored by Sudan even in outer space

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DONATE

People in Sudan often watch television together, outside, sitting on plastic chairs drawn up around the TV. On average one million Sudanese people watch the Radio Dabanga broadcasts, which are received via satellite dish.

On 18 February, the TV image from Dabanga suddenly went dark. Without any prior notice, the Egyptian company, Nilesat, booted the station off its satellite. Free and independent media in Sudan is heavily suppressed and this was the most recent attempt by the Sudanese government to stifle the freedom of the press.

Outraged reactions to censorship

People in Sudan are outraged about the regime's latest measure. Faisal El Bagir of the network of Journalists for Human Rights (JAHR): "This measure illustrates that the regime does not tolerate independent opinions and voices, especially when it comes to the voices of those who would otherwise never be heard." Opposition leaders from different regions also reacted strongly: "Radio Dabanga is the lung for the Sudanese people to breathe credibility, objectivity and a purposeful message." Another says: "Targeting Dabanga is the systematic silencing of those Al Bashir's regime could not kill with weapons." And: "This is a crime against millions, and a violation of international treaties on the freedom of expression." And, stronger: "The cooperation between the security forces of Sudan and Egypt in this matter is a desperate attempt to stifle that free and democratic voice. They are enemies to the truth and cowards who are afraid of their own people, in Egypt and Sudan."

A deal with Egypt

There was in fact coordination between Sudan and Egypt. The Sudanese government, under the leadership of president Al Bashir, who is suspected of having committed war crimes, is making every attempt to silence the only independent station in the country. To achieve this, they have sought the help of the Egyptian government. The Egyptian Nilesat promises reliable satellite television services on its website and wants to be an "all-inclusive" platform for "all our families". Excluding Sudanese families apparently, because Al Bashir's request was deemed more important than those good intentions. The Sudanese regime's long arm of censorship reaches even into outer space. All that's left for the Dabanga news consumer are the radio broadcasts and website, which

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continue to provide independent quality news. Both are produced in exile, sent out from Amsterdam.

‘Incitement’

And this is not the first time this has happened. In 2015 Radio Dabanga was booted from Arabsat, a satellite which belongs to 20 Arabic countries. The company described the reason for doing so at the time as: ‘Radio Dabanga is considered an enemy of the Sudanese government, it’s not about a few controversial news items but about the whole station’. Minister Bilal Osman of Culture and Information then accused Radio Dabanga of ‘incitement’ and of ‘causing instability in Sudan’. He said that there was an agreement among the Ministers of Information from other Arabic countries to remove media guilty of this from Arabsat and Nilesat.

Confiscation and arrests

The muzzling of Dabanga is not unique. A review of the recent media history in Sudan reveals a litany of censorship, confiscation, intimidation, and persecution by the regime. With the regular confiscation of newspapers, the regime is trying to destroy the media financially. In January, a wave of arrests took place among journalists who had dared report on demonstrations in response to the sudden rise in the price of bread and grain. The fundamental right to freedom of expression was not the only violation. During the protests, police, military and security forces cracked down and violations of the human rights of the demonstrators were not recorded by anyone in the absence of journalists. The number of journalists arrested has not been made known and their location is also uncertain. Neither family members nor lawyers have had access to those who are still in detention. So, it is not surprising that Sudan is 183rd on Freedom House’s World Press Freedom Index.

Structural suppression of press

The political control of the media is in the hands of the National Intelligence Security Service (NISS). Although the press and media laws must be passed by the parliament, the current regime issued bills that do not need any approval from MPs or any other institution. The regime plans to control the economic resources and gain ownership of most of the media outlets, especially television and radio. It has total control of content, budget and editorial views of both institutions at

the National Television and Radio Corporation. Moreover, since the regime supporters own other private radio and television outlets, this facilitates the ruling party's control over the production and recruitment of the staff working in the media ensuring a message and a voice for its policies. NTRC has benefited from the state's resources and support as 18 administrative regions have local radios and televisions in addition to some broadcasting houses which were allocated for the regions. The absence of democracy and the one-party system affect the freedom of both political parties and media professionals. Although the government controls both television and radio, the investment in the media sector is very limited and the training for staff is not sufficient. Many qualified Sudanese journalists are leaving the country to work for media companies in the Gulf. The restrictive media environment silences voices, hinders professional development and limits the creativity of journalists.

Opposition

But Sudanese citizens and organisations are not giving up. The Justice Centre (TJC) in the region of Darfur has launched a one-million-signature campaign. Other organisations support critique of the regime, for example, from the Sudanese diaspora. Civil society organisations, journalists, and others who have an interest in independent news as well as Radio Dabanga's audience continue to denounce the Sudanese regime's censorship. Fortunately, the radio station has since found a new spot on another satellite, Eutelsat. It is hoped that this private European company, based in Paris, will not be susceptible to requests from the Sudanese regime to cooperate in censorship. Then, Dabanga's million viewers can permanently be provided with news and information from an independent, professional and free editorial press working in exile.

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