Grand victory for Rwanda media

By Kenneth Agutamba

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11 March 2013 will go down as a very significant day for the media in Rwanda. The day signaled an end to years of constant lobbying and deliberations in the corridors of power with the publication last Monday of the Official Gazette containing several new media-related laws, most of them revisions of older ones.

Most important is law N'02/2013 of 08/02/2013 regarding media regulation which finally came into force to replace the older law N' 22/2009 of 12/08/2009 after almost two years of legislative procedure. The new law is, according to stakeholders, is a grand victory for the media in Rwanda and will according to experts of civil society mark a 'turning point' for the press in the country.

The main victory lies in the fact that the responsibility for media regulation, which in the past belonged to a government agency, the Media High Council (MHC), has now been transferred to the media practitioners themselves. According to Ignatius Kabagambe, the media development project coordinator at the Rwanda Governance Board, the new media law grants self-regulation, a landmark concession by the government.

But, he added, while the law grants 100% self-regulation to print media, audio-visual and electronic media will be regulated by Rwanda Utilities and Regulatory Agency (RURA) to ensure quality control, proper signal usage and fair competition in the industry.

Article four of the new law creates a 'media self regulatory body' composed of journalists and whose task will be to ensure compliance with the principles governing the media and to defend the public's interest.

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Anastase Shyaka DG Of Rwanda Governance Board

Commenting on the new role of MHC, its executive secretary Emmanuel Mugisha said they will be working to promote a professionally vibrant media through improving professionalism and building capacity especially in areas of media content development, business development as well as promoting an enabling environment.

"Because in this new set up, the capacity of the individual media houses in self-regulation is vital for the ultimate success of media self regulation," he observed.

The new mandate of MHC is detailed in the Law N'03/2013 of 08/02/2013 which determines its responsibility, organisation and functioning.

Collin Haba, the president of the Rwanda Press Association on Thursday said members have already appointed an interim committee of thirteen members that will function as the self-regulatory body in the meantime.

"In the next six months, we shall have a fully fledged media self regulatory body," Haba explained.

Another interesting concession in the law is that to start a print publication or media house will no longer require any minimum capital as was the case in the past where for instance one would need a minimum of Frw 100m to start a TV or Frw 60m for a radio station.

In addition, academic qualifications for a journalist have been relaxed; while in the past you needed a degree in journalism to become a journalist, that is no longer mandatory.

No censorship

In general, the new law brings into play several freedoms that were not provided by the old law. For instance, censorship is prohibited under the new law and unless the information jeopardizes general public order and morals, journalists are mandated to defend freedom of information, analyze and comment on information for the general purpose of educating and informing the public.

However, prof. Anastase Shyaka, the director general of the Rwanda Governance Board, emphasized the need for maturity and responsibility on the part of the media as they exercise the new freedoms and self-regulation. "It's important that all involved in these efforts understand that media freedoms are given with the mutual spirit of promoting national development and not instability," he remarked.

With the law in effect, stakeholders agree that the next step should be to help the media and other concerned parties to set up the required bodies to exercise their new role. RGB therefore called on the input of the donor community, not by pointing out weaknesses but by supporting the new reforms.

"The laws have created a new phenomenon for us and we now call upon your support and experience to help us implement these reforms," urged prof. Shyaka.

In the next few weeks it is expected that several ministerial orders will be issued as clarifications on several conditionalities within the law.

Access to information

Another law published in the Official Gazette is law N° 04/2013 OF 08/02/2013 relating to access to information, which enables the public and journalists to access information possessed by public organs and some private bodies.

According to Alphonse Nkusi, who is in charge of media development and training at the RGB, the law will end lazy journalism characterized by speculative desktop articles.

"What I really hope to see is a reduction in unnamed sources; there will be little excuse for that because we have a law that requires anyone in custody of information to reveal it for public consumption," Nkusi remarked.

The law imposes unlimited access to pictures, mails, opinions, advice, press releases, circulars, orders, logbooks, contracts etc. in any form to not only the press but the public. "Reporters are going to have a field day, getting what they want from their sources quickly and entirely," Kabagambe said.

However, the law makes a limitation concerning information that might be deemed confidential or the publication of which may put national security in jeopardy.

Joseph Rurangwa, a governance specialist with USAID, said the new laws are a welcome development to media reforms, and expressed the hope that a free media would result in a more accountable, transparent and responsive government, an element which is important to the general development of the country, he said.

Orinfor to become Rwanda Broadcasting Authority

Also in the pipeline is the dissolution of Orinfor, to be replaced by the Rwanda Broadcasting Authority (RBA). According to Willy Rukundo, the acting Orinfor director general, the senate has already adopted the bill and it's currently awaiting the signature of the president before publication in the Official Gazette.

Sam Campton, an expert hired to help in the transition, explained that as part of the process, staff consultations have already been done and internal restructuring to transform the body into an independent public broadcaster are under way.

Source: allAfrica