Chapter 7
Press Freedom, Media Regulation, and Journalists’ Perceptions of their Roles in Society: A Case of Zambia and Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Given their unparalleled histories and the dichotomous media regulatory frameworks that Zambia and Ghana have, the two countries make for an interesting pedagogical coupling for examining press freedom and the role of the media in African society. That is what this chapter strives to do. Methodologically, a textual analysis of pertinent documents as well as in-depth interviews with journalists was conducted. Some similarities and distinct differences are noted in the two countries’ media regulatory landscapes. For example, both countries continue to lapse where passage of Freedom of Information legislation is concerned. Ghana, however, exhibits more progress than Zambia. The enabling laws Ghana has instituted in the past decade are telling. Ghana’s progress is also evident in how journalists perceive their role in society in comparison to their Zambian counterparts. The former puts more emphasis on the media’s agenda setting role than the latter.

INTRODUCTION

One of the residual effects of the democratic tide that swept across sub-Saharan Africa in the early 1990s has been the philosophical shift in the media environment. Many African governments traditionally renowned for stifling press freedom and excessively controlling the media loosened their grip albeit in varying degrees at the outset of democracy. Zambia and Ghana present an interesting pedagogical coupling for studying this phenomenon because of their dichotomous...
political backgrounds. Given the fact that Ghana oscillated between military juntas and Zambia largely maintained a one-party autocratic regime, one would expect the latter to have a more favorable media environment today. But conversely, as will be discussed later, the over-sweeping constitutional changes Ghana made in 1992 to liberalize the media and defend press freedom have been unmatched; making Ghanaiian media “one of the most unfettered in Africa” (Media Foundation for West Africa, MFWA, 2010, p. 48).

A commonality in the current media environment of the two countries is the proliferation of privately-owned media that resulted from the liberalization policies embarked on in the 1990s. A legacy that these independent media are increasingly being known for is exposing corruption in government. The first democratic governments of Jerry Rawlings in Ghana and Frederick Chiluba in Zambia were not spared in this regard. The two administrations were exposed for misdirecting donor funds, electorate bribery, vote rigging, and so forth, and as such reportage increased it had profound impact on donors, most of whom started conditioning their balance-of-payments support on good governance. This prompted the new governments to start interfering in the media in an effort to mute them. For example, Rawlings repeatedly denounced the private media as irresponsible and selfishly motivated by profit and denied them access to Osu Castle where he frequently held presidential press briefings.

Statement of Purpose and Methodology

Although the independent media have been perceived as a causal factor in democratization and attainment of good governance in Africa (Hyden, Leslie, & Ogundimu, 2002), the processes from the 1990s to date that led to their current disposition have been understudied. This is particularly so at a comparative level, and to help fill that void the purpose of this article is to examine the prevailing press freedom and media regulatory framework in Zambia and Ghana. Additionally, journalists’ perceptions of their roles in the newly found democratic dispensations are also analyzed. Methodologically, both qualitative (entailing a textual analysis of pertinent articles and documents; and interviews) and quantitative (a survey) techniques were employed.

Political Overview: 1990s to Date

Civil society—comprising non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civic and lay organizations and the labor movement, among others—was the centripetal force that drove the transition to democracy in 1991 in Zambia and 1992 in Ghana. In Zambia, it was the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) that was responsible for securing Frederick Chiluba—a trade unionist by profession—his presidential win (Buhlungu & Adler, 1997; Rakner, 2003). Prior to the elections, ZCTU had mobilized its members to strike as a last resort in demanding better wages and living conditions. In June 1990 the country was engulfed in nationwide riots, which culminated in a short-lived coup a month later. Some media analysts have argued that the riots provided the last straw for the then president Kenneth Kaunda to heed peoples’ wishes for change. Therefore, on December 4, 1990, Article 4 of the 1973 Constitution, which stipulated that United National Independence Party (UNIP) would be the sole legal party in Zambia, was abrogated, paving the way for multiparty politics. Shortly afterwards, the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) was registered and the new party held its seminal national convention in February 1991. It was at this convention that Chiluba emerged as MMD’s presidential candidate, eventually beating Kaunda in the November 1991 elections.
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