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GOVIN REDDY: Media assault is only in ANC's interest

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CURRENTLY SA ranks a respectable 33 in the 2009 Reporters San Frontiers Index of Press Freedom, second in Africa to Ghana, which comes in at 27. If the proposed Protection of Information Bill and the media tribunal go through in their present form, expect SA to drop at least 50 places, to be bracketed with the Central African Republic and Togo. No matter which way you look at it, the proposed bill and tribunal come across as irrational and self-defeating.

President [Jacob Zuma](#) claimed in Parliament last week that the proposed tribunal will benefit poor people who cannot afford expensive litigation. Really? Poor people were not involved in the arms deal, Travelgate, purchasing R1,2m cars, staying in five-star hotels and drinking R700 bottles of wine. They are not involved in dubious business deals under the cover of black economic empowerment. They are too busy looking for jobs and making ends meet on a pittance. Many can't even afford to buy a newspaper.

The African National Congress (ANC) bemoans the ineffectiveness of the media's current self-regulatory system. There is some merit in this complaint. The press ombudsman's office is under-resourced and understaffed, operating with two men and a secretary. After its last meeting with the ANC, the South African National Editors Forum (Sanef) undertook to look into strengthening the office of the ombudsman.

Sanef chairman Mondli Makhanya says they are aiming for a Rolls-Royce in self-regulation. That may be a pipe dream. It is media owners who pay for it, not Sanef. A Rolls-Royce would have to match the UK's Press Complaints Commission, which has a full-time staff of 13 and 17 part-time commissioners. Media owners are unlikely to cough up that kind of money. But they can start by increasing the ombudsman's support staff.

The ANC also has misgivings about a journalist being the ombudsman, claiming a journalist would always be biased towards the media. This is silly. In any sector — motor, finance, insurance — the ombudsman is chosen on the basis of his knowledge and expertise in that sector. Why should media be an exception? In any event, an analysis of the ombudsman's findings would reveal several judgments against the media.

Zuma is justified in complaining about corrections and apologies being given minimal prominence compared with the original offending article. Editors would do well to take a leaf out of Business Day's book, which recently published a front-page apology to Communications Minister Siphiv e Nyanda. In the UK last year, 84% of corrections and apologies were published on the same page.

And then there's the red herring about media diversity and control. Despite the fact that the media is arguably one of the most transformed sectors in SA, the myth prevails that the media is still under white ownership and control. That was certainly true until 1992. Today, the biggest and most influential media houses have a majority black shareholding, including [Avusa](#), HCI and Primedia. Independent Newspapers is under foreign ownership with the ANC's blessing.

The SABC has moved from National Party to ANC control. Its three television channels and 17 radio stations have greater reach than all the country's newspapers put together. In the past decade or so, successive compliant SABC boards have ensured that the head of SABC news is not only an ANC cadre, but also supports the ruling faction of the party.

Soon, the ANC will have a sympathetic newspaper in The New Age — fulfilling a dream the party has had since its unbanning. Clearly, the ANC's gripes about media diversity and control are baseless.

Elements in the ANC seem determined to rubbish the organisation's long commitment to press freedom.

In the process, SA's international image is being tarnished and the momentous gains of the World Cup undone. The proposed laws are not in the national interest; they merely serve elite party interests. Opponents of these two toxic bills are the true patriots.

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