

**SPEECH BY HIS EXCELLENCY HON. UHURU KENYATTA, C.G.H.,
PRESIDENT AND COMMANDER IN CHIEF OF THE DEFENCE FORCES OF
THE REPUBLIC OF KENYA ON WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY AT
KENYATTA INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE CENTRE, NAIROBI ON 2ND
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Ladies and Gentlemen of the Press,

It has been over two decades since the UN General Assembly resolved to celebrate the fundamental principles of press freedom annually; to take stock of how the press performs its responsibilities; to defend the media from attacks on its independence; and to honour journalists across the world. Kenya takes especial pride in this day, for this concept was born on African soil, and it is a gift from our continent to the rest of the world.

The day has been celebrated and honoured at the highest levels of our Government. Last year, it was my pleasure to preside at the opening of this gathering, just as it was my predecessor's pleasure to open discussion the year before.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Windhoek meeting in 1991 at which the idea took shape, and at which our own journalists and editors played a prominent role, accepted that the establishment and encouragement of a free and plural press is essential for democracy and development. In this, they were not alone: many years ago, the Nobel laureate, Amartya Sen, argued powerfully that no democracy with a free press had ever suffered a famine.

The Windhoek Declaration envisaged a press liberated from government, political or economic control. Equally, the Declaration stood against monopolies in the media industry, and defended the widest possible distribution of media.

These are principles to which my government is committed, and by which it has lived. That is partly because they are themselves principles with which our constitution is familiar.

Indeed, my Government has lived up to Articles 33, 34 and 35 of our supreme law. In setting up regulations for the industry, it has been the goal of my government to ensure that the press is unbound by government, but also by private, interests. That is the spirit in which the Media Council of Kenya Act and the Kenya Information and Communication Act of last year were enacted.

If our regulations are new, pride in this country's robust media is old. We have now had more than a century of printed media. The record shows that they have been central actors in the history of our nation. They were there at the beginning, documenting our colonial history. You will recall that the first President of the Republic was a journalist and newspaper editor, whose newspaper was banned by the colonial authorities.

And yet, at the height of our struggle for independence, he, and other equally courageous Kenyan journalists and writers, defended with their words and lives the right of our people to be free. The Kenyan journalists of the past were among the heroes of our independence struggle. We remember and honour their contributions today.

Our struggle did not end with independence. At the dawn of our freedom, the young nation faced daunting challenges. Our founding fathers pledged themselves to fight a war against poverty, ignorance and disease. It is a war to which we fall heir, and which we must fight as relentlessly as they did.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The media has been our partner in these battles. But if you are to fight even more effectively than you do now, there must be institutional reform in the industry itself.

With the government guaranteeing you the space to operate, it is your responsibility to ensure that you take advantage of this space. That is one reason why you must be trained to the utmost of your ability.

Another is that Kenya, and Africa, can ill afford journalists who are not qualified, or who do not observe the highest ethical standards, and who do not operate within the law. The very recent experience of our neighbours – experience that is within the memory of most of you here today – teaches us that careless or malicious journalism can destroy a country.

There is no room here for absolute freedom of the press. There is no room here for a freedom of the press that does not come with an equal challenge for the media to be responsible. It is your job as journalists to check your facts, and after you have checked, to check again. It is your job as journalists to know what the law requires, and to observe its demands. It is your job always to keep by your side your own code of conduct and to refer to it before your story is written.

Where this is not done, where you fail in your duties to yourselves, your profession and your countrymen, then the state must and will defend those who have no other way of protecting themselves. We will understand each other better if I offer examples of what I mean.

We appreciate the energy and inventiveness with which you satirise us, most clearly, perhaps, on the XYZ Show and Bulls' Eye, among others. These have given me pleasure over the years. But the freedom you enjoy has not always been used so well. In recent months, we have seen some deeply disappointing headlines.

I will pick two: one claimed that we had spent 100 million shillings on our cabinet retreat, and another claimed that I had secretly and unlawfully extended the term of the Chief of Kenya's Defence Forces. These stories were wholly without foundation, and had the potential to harm the public welfare. The falsehoods could have been avoided by a little more diligence and care on

your part. I trust you will take the advice to heart.

These criticisms are not offered in a spirit of recrimination. We realise that your work is difficult, and that people of goodwill can sometimes disagree about the content of a story. We realise, also, that you are as keen as we are to serve the public interest. But in the instances I have mentioned, you will concede that you fell below the high standard you have already attained.

My Government expects that the Media Council, and the Communication Authority, will monitor and remedy your shortcomings in a spirit of fraternal correction. Just as you will accept fair criticism we fall short of our standards, so too should you accept blame to when you fail to hit your mark. Our freedom to act is not unlimited, and neither is yours.

I must also urge you remember that you are Africans. This is our country; this is our continent, all of us. In the practice of journalism, our media must recognize that we are first and always African. Our challenge is to tell the African story from our African point of view. This means standing up for and defending African values, and the African experience, giving it expression, giving it a voice, and authenticating it. Kenyan journalists cannot afford and should not write about this country as if they lived on Mars.

Our experience in and with the media is still in flux; we must continue to debate the kind of media we have. The time for a robust debate on how the media can contribute to national development, and the evolution of our social values, is now.

My Government spends substantial sums to reach Kenyans with basic public-service information on such services as public health. These are matters in which my government would like a closer partnership with the media, the better to improve the lives of our people. We wish to see a situation where the electronic media, in pursuit of its information and educational role, and in keeping faith with its social responsibility, provides free public service announcements to the Kenyan people.

There is no reason whatsoever for any Kenyan to remain ignorant of basic public-service information when we have nearly 100 stations broadcasting right across the country. Perhaps every broadcaster might wish to provide two minutes an hour to carry free public service announcements, addressing matters of hygiene in the community, dealing with malaria, or educating the public with respect to our values as outlined in Article 10 of our constitution.

Equally, as we struggle with the HIV/AIDS situation in our country, the media would do well to partner with the government by broadcasting, as a service to the public, educational messages on the pandemic.

The regulatory authorities should lead us in this debate. But a basic point to remember is that those who operate frequencies do so on behalf of the public. The public collectively owns those airwaves, and those who benefit from this public service should be seen to serve the ultimate owners of the airwaves.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The country has made great efforts to lay down the infrastructure we need to transmit information. Our goal in landing fibre-optic cable at the Coast, and laying it throughout the country, was and remains, to promote the most rapid spread and exploitation of knowledge. That is a single, though prominent, example of the lengths to which we are going to modernize the country's ICT infrastructure.

You know, as well as I do, just how vital this will be, both for our lives now, and for the development of this country. It is this modernization that hastens our growth, which brings the services of both levels of government closer to Kenyans, and which promises to bring our economy to the point of take-off. My Government will continue to modernize and expand the ICT infrastructure, and to improve access and quality of service.

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Press,

It is your responsibility to deploy this infrastructure – both that which we already have, and that which is to come – for the greatest public benefit. The migration from analogue to digital gives us greater room: room that should be used, in my view, to provide extra information; to provide more diverse information; and to provide far more local content of direct importance to Kenyans.

There is no real reason why we cannot feature substantial agricultural information, letting our farmers plan their activities. There is no obvious reason why the abundant information we possess about our environment should not make its way to our screens and radios. There is no clear reason why the wealth of information available on early warning systems for droughts and floods, or on public health, should not be made available to every Kenyan who can read a newspaper, listen to a radio, or watch a TV.

Beyond the current obsessions with partisan politics, soap operas, and foreign popular culture, this country's media will need to find and supply serious, responsible, analytical content that is directly relevant to Kenyans. The digital migration is their opportunity. As that process continues, those who make policy must protect the public's access to information.

Investors in the media industry expect returns from their investment; they may be tempted to limit access to television and radio content to subscribers only. But access to vital information is a basic right, and the media models we adopt must protect this right for our people. Our policies therefore will guarantee that accessing free-to-air broadcasts remain free. Free universal access to quality content will be guaranteed.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

There is also an urgent need for society itself to reason critically about the nature of our media. Our parents and teachers, priests and imams, the moral guides of our society, must pay special attention to the media, and let us know when they go wrong, just as they will commend them when they do right. The

relevant agencies of my government continue to explore policies that will properly socialize our youth in the use of media, especially new and social media.

It will be useful to discuss how we can introduce our youths to media literacy classes at an early level, to let our young people access its opportunities responsibly. And now, Ladies and Gentlemen of the press, as you reflect on your achievements in the last year, I wish you well. I pledge you greater cooperation, more dialogue, and better access to the workings of government.

I invite you to play your watchdog role responsibly, and to inform and entertain us with your usual energy. Above all, work to make this country, and this continent, all that it can be.

A very happy World Press Freedom Day to you all.

Mungua wabariki na awalinde nyote.