

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/senegal-letter-to-presidential-candidates-20-02-2012,41908.html>

Africa - Senegal

Mission report

Letter to presidential candidates and report of visit to Dakar

17 February 2012

Reporters Without Borders wrote to Senegal's 14 presidential candidates on 17 February, the final day of its pre-election visit to Dakar, urging them to undertake to defend and promote freedom of information if elected on 26 February

"In view of the diversity of its media and the outspoken reporting style, Reporters Without Borders does not dispute that freedom of information exists in Senegal," the letter said. "But this freedom is often threatened by physical attacks on news media, jamming of radio broadcasts, abusive prosecutions and the jailing of journalists such as Madiambal Diagne and El Malick Seck. Such incidents hurt your country's image.

"A proposed new press law that would allow for improvements in the media and provide journalists with better protection has been submitted to the national assembly but its approval has been held up for months. We therefore call on you to commit to include the media in your programme and in your priorities."

The letter to the candidates included a written pledge which they are invited to sign and return to the Africa Desk of Reporters Without Borders. The pledge would commit them to:

- defend and promote freedom of information, media independence and the safety of journalists
- use their influence to convince Senegal's parliamentarians to adopt the draft press law that was submitted to parliament
- support the decriminalization of media offences envisaged in the draft press law, so that journalists who commit offences in the course of their work are subject to fairer and more appropriate penalties than imprisonment.

PRE-ELECTION VISIT TO SENEGAL - ASSESSMENT

"Attacks on journalists and media have so far been limited to isolated cases but it is important to remain vigilant," Reporters Without Borders said. "With the M23 opposition coalition continuing to call for protests, the period beginning now – the last week of the campaign, election day, and the announcement of results – will be delicate. We will not tolerate any obstruction of the media's work or any act of violence against journalists. Respect for freedom of information and the safety of journalists will be one of the guarantees of the transparency of the electoral process."

Media freedom but insidious pressure and mutual disenchantment

"Freedom is respected in Senegal, especially media freedom," a Dakar-based diplomat told Reporters Without Borders. The character of the Senegalese media, their diversity, the freedom with which journalists criticize and express their views all bear this out. Ranked 75th out of 179 countries in the latest Reporters Without Borders press freedom index, Senegal is not a country where the media are unwelcome, where they constantly fear for their safety.

All this freedom of information exists despite a barely viable economic environment and a saturated media market. The 20 daily newspapers wage a front-page headline war to sell copies. Scandal sheets abound. After keeping their distance from President Abdoulaye Wade, the privately-owned media have become increasingly critical of him.

"It is only to be expected that we are hard on him, because the government has to defend his record," a print media journalist told Reporters Without Borders. "When the government is going through a bad patch, the media say so and the president is irritated."

Several journalists described insidious attempts to control the media by means of bribes, the withdrawal of advertising or the launch of pro-government media. One of the most outspoken critics is Alioune Tine, the president of the African Alliance for the Defence of Human Rights (Raddho) and the coordinator of the 23 June Movement (M23), a coalition of civil society organizations and opposition parties. "The desire to control the media is expressed through corruption and repression," he said.

As regards relations with the media, President Wade's record is mixed. Under Wade, freedom of information has been maintained, subsidies for the media have increased, and many privately-owned radio and TV stations have been launched. But the Dakar media complain of "ups and downs" and of swings between "tension and periods of calm."

A journalist said: "There have been three stages to the relationship. Firstly, in 2000, fascination with the power of the media. The government created its own media outlets but they were not as successful as expected. After that failure, the government tried to take over the existing media but failed in that too. It finally decided to undermine their influence."

A number of episodes during the 12 years of SOPI government – SOPI ("change" in Wolof) was Wade's campaign slogan in 2000 – have had a lasting effect on the media. All journalists remember, for example, **Madiambal Diagne's** imprisonment in 2004 and the ransacking of the daily newspapers *L'As* and *24 Heures chrono* in 2008 by then air transport minister Farba Senghor's thugs. And many remember the wave of interrogations of journalists at the Criminal Investigation Division (DIC).

Some accuse the president of rekindling old antagonisms and thereby legitimizing hostile reactions to the media from his supporters.

The pro-Wade Allied Forces (FAL 2012) lambasted certain media during a campaign news conference. President Wade referred to "a certain TV station that is calling for insurrection" and, on 11 February, [verbally attacked a journalist from the northern city of Saint-Louis](#) (*in French*).

Problems persist despite attempts to provide balanced campaign coverage

Prior to the election campaign, the journalists union SYNPICS took several initiatives aimed not only at equipping and training journalists but also making the security forces and the leadership of the various political parties aware of relevant issues.

The initiatives included training sessions for around 200 reporters who would be covering the elections, providing editors with information about election coverage strategies, meetings with senior police officers, the sale of more than a thousand vests with the word "Press" to media for the protection of their reporters in the field, and the creation of 24-hour hotline (77-295-4141) for sounding the alarm and requesting help in the event of an incident.

Together with the Senegalese Council of Media Publishers and Broadcasters (CEDPS), SYNPICS also organized a meeting with media owners in order to encourage them to cover their reporters' expenses so that they would be less exposed to manipulation by candidates and their campaign staff.

Reporters Without Borders, for its part, distributed some 200 copies of its Handbook for Journalists during Elections to the media on 30 January. This handbook was produced jointly by Reporters Without Borders and the International Organization of the Francophonie (OIF).

Each media has tried to cover the election as best it can. The newspaper *Sud Quotidien* gave its staff a refresher course before the start of the campaign. The *Walfadjri* media group decided not to follow the candidates around so as not "to do their PR for them." Instead, its reporters are talking to the public, finding out what they want and comparing this with the candidates' programmes and proposals. The newspaper *Le Quotidien* has assigned 15 people to cover the campaign in Dakar and is using its network of correspondents in the main provincial cities to cover for the candidates' visits to the provinces.

The state-owned daily *Le Soleil* has sent a reporter to each of the 45 departments. Its managing editor, Cheikh Thiam, said: "We do not want to follow the candidates around, to

avoid any conniving. We are in the field awaiting their arrival and we cover local developments." *Le Soleil* said it was court napping by the fact that most of the M23 leaders stayed in Dakar, where the newspaper was understaffed after sending its reporter into the interior. The opposition disputes this explanation and accuses the newspaper of not wanting to upset the government.

The *Futurs Médias* group insists that it has remained professional despite the abortive candidacy of its owner, singer Youssou N'Dour. "The public is waiting to catch us out," said Barka Ba, news director at the group's TV station, *Télévision Futurs Médias (TFM)*. "They know who owns the group. If we are not independent, if we are not professional, we will pay the price."

He boasts of the fact that they have not received any warning from the National Broadcasting Regulatory Council (CNRA). "We have not laid ourselves open to criticism," he said. The CNRA, for its part, says the media are "playing the game." One of its representatives, Modou Ngom, added: "The state and privately-owned media have never provided such responsible campaign coverage."

On the whole, all the candidates have been accorded equal access to the state media and have received a fair share of coverage from the privately-owned media, although there have been some shortcomings.

Radio-Télévision Sénégalaise (RTS) is scrupulously respecting the rule requiring it to assign five minutes a day to each candidate in its "Campaign Report" but some have complained of unfavourable editing. Youssou N'Dour refused to talk to RTS in Thiès on 10 February on the grounds that the station had previously refused to interview him because he was not an official candidate.

The print media's coverage is not always neutral; in fact, reports tend to favour one or other candidate to varying degrees. More serious is the impact that bribing journalists is having on the campaign coverage. Journalists say that [the FAL 2012 media unit pays out about 60,000 CFA francs \(100 euros\) a day to the reporters who cover President Wade's reelection campaign \(in French\)](#).

Several journalists say they are nonplussed by the "unusual and atypical" nature of this election, because the debates are more about the constitutionality of the president's bid for a third term rather than the candidates' programmes, and because the events to be covered tend to be marches and protests rather than election rallies. The opposition's strategy is also hard to fathom. Which candidates are boycotting the election and which are running? Which candidate plans to stay in Dakar and protest, and which intends to go out and campaign?

"Attacks on journalists and media have so far been limited to isolated cases but it is important to remain vigilant," Reporters Without Borders said. "With the M23 opposition coalition continuing to call for protests, the period beginning now – the last week of the campaign, election day, and the announcement of results – will be delicate. We will not tolerate any obstruction of the media's work or any act of violence against journalists. Respect for freedom of information and the safety of journalists will be one of the guarantees of the transparency of the electoral process."

Parliament urged to pass new press law

The national assembly has been sitting on a proposed new press law for more than a year. It apparently has the support of communication minister Moustapha Guirassy and the president himself, who told the media that the proposed law suited him and that he "would not change a comma." Its drafting was the result of a consensus.

By redefining the legal status of journalists and media companies and by overhauling the rules governing media self-regulation and the commercial environment in which the media operate, the law would provide better protection for journalists and would allow improvements in the media sector.

The parliamentarians nonetheless refuse to pass it. In Dakar, the sticking point is said to be its provision for the decriminalization of media offences.

Reporters Without Borders points out that decriminalization does not imply the freedom to say whatever you like. Nor does it put journalists beyond the law. It just means that any offences that journalists commit in the course of their work will be punished by fairer and more

appropriate penalties than imprisonment. This is why journalists in Senegal talk familiarly of “deprisonalization.”

It is vital that parliament understands that the decriminalization of media offences is accompanied by the creation of a series of penalties (above all fines) and measures guaranteeing media self-regulation. The goal of this reform is to recognize media offences as a specific kind of offence and to ensure that proportionate sanctions redress the harm that journalists may cause.

While in Dakar, [Reporters Without Borders wrote to Senegal’s 14 presidential candidates asking them to undertake to defend and promote freedom of information](#), if elected, and to use their influence to convince the parliamentarians to pass the draft press law (*in French*).

► During its 13-17 February visit, Reporters Without Borders met with:

- Representatives of the state-owned daily *Le Soleil*, the privately-owned dailies *Sud-Quotidien* and *Le Quotidien*, and the *Futurs Médias* and *Walfadjri* media groups
- Nancy Ndiaye Ngom, head of the National Broadcasting Regulatory Council (CNRA)
- Diatou Cissé, secretary general of the journalists union SYNPICS
- Madiambal Diagne, head of the Senegalese Council of Media Publishers and Broadcasters (CEDPS)
- Foreign media correspondents, bloggers and diplomats
- Alioune Tine, president of the African Alliance for the Defence of Human Rights (Raddho) and coordinator of the 23 June Movement (M23).

Photo taken by Makaila NGUEBLA, blogger and Human Rights activist.
