

A free press stands between the go

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THE widely reported plan by prominent government officials to seize control of the Sunday Times and its parent company Johncom has generated much debate over whether or not this is a sign of government attempting to intervene in the media.

The proximity of the named officials to the Presidency even suggests that this might be a plan by President Thabo Mbeki to gain direct control of one of the country's most powerful and influential newspapers and a few others besides.

So what is going on? And, what kind of a threat does this pose both to a free press and to democracy?

I do not believe that being the editor of the Sunday Times is the retirement plan for post-presidential Mbeki, nor even that the KoniMedia Holdings deal to buy Johncom signals a new initiative to tame what is probably the country's most outspoken newspaper.

Indeed, Johncom has been chaired for years by a senior ANC

official, Cyril Ramaphosa, who continues to sit on the majority party's highest decision-making body, the national executive committee.

It is true, however, that state intervention in the media has been on the rise for several years now and the news of the Koni Media Holdings deal reflects only the latest instalment of a trend that has been worrying media analysts and freedom of speech activists for some time.

Ramaphosa is not the only ANC-affiliated politician to assume a powerful position at a local media company and the Koni "board" (Ronnie Mamooepa, Titus Mafolo and Billy Mofitse) would not be the last. Think, perhaps, of Satika Holdings deputy chairperson Saki Macozona, the SABC's executive management or of e.tv's Marcel Golding.

But government intervention may also be more subtle than re-deploying cadres on to media boards. Government is one of the country's biggest advertisers, for instance. This conveys enormous power. By 2004, the state was spend-

ing R50 million a year on newspaper advertising alone, making it the sixth biggest advertiser behind major retailers such as Pick 'n Pay and Spar and MTN.

Government continues to exert pressure and influence, in particular on smaller media organisations, but also on the so-called "custom" magazines that have so regularly sacrificed journalistic integrity and their cover stories for ad revenue.

Government has steadfastly refused to scrap apartheid-era anti-press legislation (such as Section 26 of the Criminal Procedure Act of 1977 that forces journalists to reveal their sources) and continues to introduce draft legislation, such as the Films and Publications Amendment Bill, that has blatant anti-press elements.

Further examples of government intervention: its launch of a propaganda "magazine", Vukuzenzele, with a circulation of more than a million; the fiasco of Parliament being hounded into recommending an SABC board with few media skills or credentials; the blatant and

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government and an abuse of its powers

embarrassing political dimension to the SABC's withdrawal from the South African National Editors' Forum (Sane), and Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang's efforts to sue the Sunday Times for invasion of privacy.

There are many more examples to the extent that growing government intervention in the media is more observation than argument.

But what does it mean? There has been a long history of the ANC understanding the power and influence of the media.

For several years in the early 1990s, the organisation seriously contemplated launching its own daily newspaper. The idea was eventually shelved on the grounds of the cost, but also on the back of arguments that a party that had to rely on its own propaganda to stay in power didn't deserve to be there.

There remains great frustration within the ANC surrounding its incapacity to regulate the print media, borne out by renewed and recent calls for the establishment of a media tribunal.

The hostility toward the print media from government is all the more strange given the media's almost total "buy-in" to a prevailing consensus on government policy and its overwhelming support for the ANC.

There is plenty of data to support both of these contentions.

On the first, though, ask yourself when last you read a newspaper or heard a broadcast that argued either for a substantial change in economic policy called for another party to replace the ANC in government or urged a re-engineering of the country's political or institutional architecture?

The media has been good at identifying culprits and villains within government, but these are largely individuals being caught out for misbehaving. There has been no substantive challenge in the media to the state or to the ANC in the 13 years since democracy.

On the latter point, a survey of media content from 16 newspapers and five television channels conducted in the run-up to the 2004

election found overwhelming support for the ANC. The survey by reputable company Media Tenor found both the Democratic Alliance and the Inkatha Freedom Party were portrayed negatively in the South African media, unlike the ANC, while the political coverage given to the ANC was more or less equivalent to the coverage to the second, third and fourth most popular parties put together. Of all the party leaders, Mbeki received the most favourable coverage.

And this was in the build-up to a national election.

But it is not just a basic misunderstanding that underpins the combative and interventionist mien of the state when it comes to the media.

There seems to be a considerable degree of consensus among media scholars and among political theorists that suggests that the crux of our problem is that there is no credible opposition party in the South African political system.

A political party that dominates over the long term, even in a democracy, gets lazy, greedy, corrupt and

complacent. If centralises power in an elite when democracy, by definition, means that power should be spread out to the people. If jealously eyes other centres of power and contrives to undermine them. If strives to abandon accountability in favour of patronage, influence and cronyism.

In all of these, a free press is what stands between a powerful state, even a democratic one, and the abuse of its power.

This latest scheme to seize control of an element of the media is nothing new. It is merely a reminder, a symptom, that our democracy has a grave illness. There is no competition in our politics, other than what appears to be going on within the ruling party. And a democracy without opposition is like a newspaper filled only with propaganda. It looks great, but in the end will cause only frustration and despair.

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