

## Gambian Journalists Comment on Restrictions in the Press

Nicole Morgan

Many Gambian journalists confront constant obstacles that make reporting the news impossible for some, and limited for all. Despite the odds, some journalists have persevered and created newspapers that boldly tell the truth.

This news report is created from information gathered in summer 2000 while talking to journalists about the restrictions they face as professionals. Four respected Gambian journalists have disclosed their thoughts on the craft, on their fellow journalists, and on how they successfully run free press operations in a country where the government has the right to dissolve a newspaper for any reason, at anytime. “It’s just a case of closing your eyes to all the dangers and just doing your job,” said Baba Galleh Jallow, co-founder and editor-in-chief of the weekly *Independent*.

“We come here every morning knowing we could be arrested,” Jallow said, sitting behind his desk with hands folded. “We expect the worst.” The Republic of The Gambia is a democracy. But Jallow, like many of his colleagues, said that freedom of the press is a notion, not a reality. Gambian law does allow for freedom of expression. However, there are several restrictions regarding the press, making expression very difficult, Jallow said.

Newspapers need a cash bond to set up operations, which is a hardship for most Gambian journalists.

“The government has the Minister of Information,” said Demba Jawo, Gambia Press Union chairman. And courts can close down newspapers under Decree 71. But the government often refuses to comment on issues, making it virtually impossible to produce balanced news copy, Jawo said.

The United States has the Freedom of Information Act that requires government agencies to make certain

information available to the general public. However, The Gambia has no such law, said Jawo. “The media is supposed to be a partner in the development of any country,” he said. But, perhaps the government disagrees. “The current president [Yahya Jammeh] has not had a press conference [since his election],” Jawo said in June. “Sometimes he will organize a meeting for government press, but never for private media.”

“We can hardly ever get anyone in the government to confirm or deny rumors,” Jawo said. “We never have access to these people. It’s almost impossible to talk to anyone.”

But while the right to information is not provided in the law, punishment for libel is.

Journalists face constant dangers of being jailed and fined for libel. And just about anything can be framed as libelous when the

government provides little to no access, Jawo said.

Some journalists just give up, or cover safer topics. There are few reporters and editors who would actually write about the government, even if they knew their information was true.

“Self-censorship in this country is a big problem. Our journalists often choose not to write stories because we hardly can ever get useful information,” Jawo said.

Jallow and Demba worked together on the daily *Observer* staff until things were shaken up a bit. In fact, Jallow was the editor of the *Observer*, but he left when the paper was sold in May 1999. “I left because the [current] chairman of The Gambia Press Union was sacked,” Jallow said.

Jawo had a political column “that was very critical of the government.” After threats and strong



*Nicole, or 'Niko,' became one of the most proficient Mandinka speakers in the group.*

suggestions to step down, Jawo got a termination letter. Shortly after, the paper was sold.

It seemed as though Jawo was asking to be fired or perhaps his passion for his craft made him determined to encourage all Gambians to support a true free press. “I am not in any way afraid,” Jawo said about the dangers involved in what he does from day to day.

Since Jallow and Demba left, the Observer is no longer a private paper, and certainly does not bring to light the shortcomings of the government, they said.

“It may as well be a public paper because the owner, Amadou Samba, is a well-known Banjul, an acquaintance of the president, and editors are told what to print.”

“That’s not a fair assessment,” said Observer editor-in-chief, Sheriff Bojang. The Observer “has remained the flagship of Gambian journalism. They cannot disagree,” Bojang said. “A lot of people say this company belongs to the president,” he said. “But we have been very objective.”

Bojang admits that the owner of the Observer appointed an editorial advisor who only wanted to print favorable things about the government. “But they had to sack him. He was useless,” Bojang said. “Now, Observer reporters have few problems reporting fair, accurate journalism,” Bojang said.

However, Deyda Hydera, managing editor of The Point, disagrees. “It’s hard for any journalist to do his

or her job without laws supporting them.” Hydera said. He said he’s tired of the “lip service” the government gives rather than facts. “It’s not just about building schools. It’s also about building minds,” Hydera added. Journalism is suffering in The Gambia because the best students are afraid to enter the field, he said. “The right caliber people don’t come into journalism because there is so much insecurity and so little pay.”

But a lack of qualified staff and freedom of expression are only two problems Gambian print media face. Most of the population is illiterate. Many do not speak English. The papers are written in English; however, some occasionally print articles in a local language. Also, the papers cost more than many Gambians can afford, about five dalasis. Five dalasis can buy a modest lunch, or two taxi rides, or two sodas. Newspaper readers in the United States can do little to nothing with the 25 cents it costs to buy a paper.

So, the few Gambians who can read the news, often share a paper, which hurts circulation and sales. And, because newspapers are mainly distributed in the Banjul area, only a fragment of the population has print news readily available.

“I want the government to be publicly accountable for what they do, and I want Decree 71 appealed,” Hydera said. “We thought by now they would have accepted the fact that they have a role and we have a role.” Apparently, they have not.



*Nicole with her friend Ibrahima.*