Caught Between Two Challenges: the Somaliland Media

INTRODUCTION

In my paper ‘The Quest for Free Press and Expression in Africa: Identifying the Challenges and Lessons from Somaliland’ published in 2013 by the Social Research and Development Institute (SORADI), I critically examined the concepts and conditions of the Somaliland freedom of speech and expression in connection with the notion of democracy. The study analyzed the legacy of the decades-long rule of Africa’s authoritarian regimes with single party systems used to rule, suppress and even ban the birth of any kind of independent media except the state-run. The study linked Africa’s freedom of speech dilemma with the Somaliland media condition, which experiences frequent challenges not only from its internal weaknesses but also from the state apparatuses. The study looked at the link between proliferation and pluralism in the press and the absence of professional ethics, objective reporting and social responsibility with defined critical thinking principles. The conclusion proposed innovative strategies as ways forward to address the challenges that face Somaliland freedom of speech and expression, and at the same time narrow the gaps that existed within the media itself, such as: low level of education, lack of professional integrity and discipline as well as institutional weaknesses that emanate at least from two compatible fronts: inadequate training programs and the absence of effective policies that may regulate the media.

Since 1991, Somaliland has had a vibrant industry of media including television stations that usually find themselves operating in circumstances of varying degrees, including challenges related to their profession, knowledge gap and experience in their field. On the other hand, one may regard it as a major precursor for promoting social cohesion, disseminating and transmitting the voice of the voiceless in a sense of helping those in need. This means that the media has an active and affirmative impact on the overall community development and peacebuilding processes of the state. However, this doesn’t mean that it is without challenges, indeed, it has challenges that need to be addressed through capacity building programs to promote its effectiveness that could balance the interests of the citizens and the state simultaneously.

This study summarizes the paper ‘The Quest for Free Press and Expression in Africa: Identifying the Challenges and Lessons from Somaliland’ and attempts to draw attention to the key challenges relating to Africa’s freedom of speech and expression. It illustrates the gaps that exist within the Somaliland media both state and non-state media,
for instance, lack of professional knowledge in the media industry. This element is the flashpoint of the frequent conflicts between the media and Somaliland’s successive leaders, who see the media as a threat to the survival of their systems. The study proposes strategies to tackle the challenges that face the media and address grievances that exist in Somaliland.

THE AFRICAN PRESS: FREE OR IN DILEMMA?
The consolidation of democracy and its role in the growth of an independent press in Africa is an important context for this analysis. Until recently, much of the African press was hostage to political interests who hijacked the dream of a possible free press; while on the other hand, the already existing press is used by governments as an agent and leverage for propaganda to remain in power. It seems obvious, however, that an intimidated press is unlikely to command the trust of the general public and to be an effective actor of social change and reform. The manipulation of power and corruption in the political process lies at the heart of Africa’s political maneuvers which threatens the independence of the press. On the other hand, African politics have tended to be contentious along ethnic divisions, with the contentiousness sometimes engendered and exploited for political reasons. Not only for governments, but also the opposition who wants to obtain power. For this reason, when partisanship in the press mirrors such divisions, the media loses its potential to bridge social gulfs and inspire reforms. In this regard, one may argue that, the realization of Africa’s democratization is subject to a free, neutral and objective independent press.

Serious cases of lack of objectivity in recent years happen not only in Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Gambia, Rwanda, Swaziland, Somalia, and Zimbabwe, but also in other African countries that experience similar events. In fact, the African governments used to censor the works of the already limited non-state media that existed in their countries. For instance, Eritrea is regarded as the Horn of Africa’s North Korean style of rule and media censorship, and is the only state in the Horn besides Djibouti that does not permit the private ownership and operation of the media. Therefore, it is described by many as Africa’s biggest prison for journalists. While its neighbor, Ethiopia does not permit private TV stations, there are growing numbers of privately-owned FM stations across the country. However, the countries without independent radio or TV are now few and far between in Africa.

In Africa, non-state or independent media usually find themselves operating in circumstances of varying degrees of repressive government action and political turmoil. Despite this, the media continue their operations and disseminate the news outlets to millions of Africans who are in need of finding reliable news outside the state-controlled media and eager to move beyond the perspectives of governments. On the other hand, as the African continent has been ravaged by one-party authoritarian regimes, the right to freedom of expression which is believed to be fundamental to the existence and consolidation of democracy has remained missing post-colonial Africa.

African one-party systems have existed in the continent from the late 1960s until the early 1990s. At least four-fifths of the continent were ruled by authoritarian regimes, either in the form of one-party
system, military regime, military socialist regime or civil dictatorship. This form of governance could be linked at least two major interrelated factors: a) disconnection from the past history of the African societies, and, b) disconnection of the state from the mass of the people. Therefore, it is not unexpected to raise some questions that could seem as critical: what is the role of the media to narrow the information gap between the citizens and the state? Do the Africa media have the professional ethics such as objective reporting to disseminate balanced and neutral information to the public at large?

In Somaliland, what has happened in the media is an important situation that needs to be analyzed, it raises the question of whether media guide the state leaders. To be clear and honest about the issue, the media have failed to adhere to professional ethics, and have not reached the society at the grassroots level to create a bond among the citizens.

OUTLINING THE CHALLENGES: EVIDENCES FROM THE GROUND

Media freedom in Somaliland has been a major precursor for democratization and governance for over two decades and was critical to the success of the democratic revolution in Somaliland. Since its inception in 1991, Somaliland has been practicing freedom of speech and expression which encouraged the explosion of private media from print to broadcasting stations but excluding radio services which the Somaliland state has banned for private ownership. Since then, the media and the state have had a love–hate relationship which sometimes leads both sides to confront and retaliate against one another. The government mostly uses its instruments, in particular the Police, to coerce and crack down on private newspapers and TV stations. On numerous occasions, the Government has ordered the closing of media institutions and the arrest of journalists. For instance, the owners of Haatuf and Hubaal Newspapers, two privately-owned newspapers, have been arrested, fined and finally sentenced to jail though the latter were released.

The media is not the only victim, but in recent years there has been growing criticism of the conduct of the mass media in Somaliland. This criticism is multidimensional (social, economic, political, and ethical) and is grounded mostly in the facts concerning the conduct of the media. Among those who criticize the media are representatives of the government at local, regional, and national levels, the political parties, the elite, academics, judges, and media professionals themselves. At least there are two typical critiques raised against the media. First, the media are not an objective, but a politically biased agent. This criticism is common among all political parties in Somaliland, and political activists, and especially this is common during political tensions, like election campaigns.

Another common criticism is that the Somaliland media lack social responsibility. In this respect, some express concerns that the media’s coverage of national issues may undermine state in a changing regional security environment or offend public morale. One such contention is that intense coverage of military operations and other intelligence information which are unnecessary to declassify. This kind of behavior among the media people in Somaliland increased public fears and anxieties. In many instances, journalists are not objective in their reporting because they cannot avoid selecting issues and because they prefer to interpret.
In Somaliland, both the state and non-state media are not immune from the mistakes happening across the state. Therefore, a number of challenges are needed to be addressed accordingly. These challenges include: lack of knowing professional ethics of the media, lack of capacity building programs both from the media institutions and also from the government. The government is responsible for generating responsive and responsible journalists to serve the nation, lack of enforcing the laws and policies passed by the concerned state organs that might guide the media, and indeed lack of enough payments to the media people. The latter is regarded not as the sole but the major factor that influences the moral values of the media people in Somaliland.12

Though the media has shown a quantitative rapid increase, on the other hand, one may observe that media is lacking two essential elements: a) critical thinking, and, b) sense of nationalism. Absence of a critical thinking with intellectual depth and the necessary tools to think independently, to question and criticize, engage in collaborative work and be open-minded about alternative points of view in the media. This could be linked to the argument that the press in Somaliland has been established without working on acknowledging professions and skills to present the public neutral and constructive ideas. In addition, another crucial aspect in regard to the media adds a weight: the objective reporting, according to Raphael (2001), it is a necessary component of media ethics to narrate an unbiased reporting and cover a given story in a fair and accurate manner.13 This is one of the major if not the sole factor that hampers the ethics and values of the press which is regarded the fourth pillar of the state in the democratic societies those adhere the rights and responsibilities enshrined in their constitutions.

The second point to note is the issue of nationalism: most of the media if not the all are not aware their responsibilities in particular when it comes to the national issues. It is unfortunate to see media outlets across the country that covering issues that might hurt the image of the state, these include: intervening security issue which in one way or another is taboo.14 Engaging such activities gives room for those who engage in damaging and sabotaging the country’s image through propaganda campaigns and also might help the criminal networks both in the region and beyond.

It is not mandatory to adhere objectivity in all cases and issues, one may suggest that the idea of objectivity should be rejected in cases presenting ideas sharply opposed to peace and stability, which encourages various forms of discrimination or violence against others. In consequence, ethics in the media mean taking social norms and responsibilities into consideration. The preservation of those very norms and adhering to responsibilities, which allow the functioning of peace and stability, ought also to require self-containment and self-control on the part of media reporters.15

Without offending any media institution, in nearly every Somaliland media, there is an urgent need for further legal, policy and institutional reforms to cement the commitment to media freedom and to prevent government interference and censorship. In Somaliland, the media has enjoyed editorial independence and self-censoring, but their first responsibility remains in avoiding public and private disappointments. While on the other hand, the major frictions between the state and the media are linked with news outlets which are in one way or
another annoying the government. Though I am not against the media investigations against individual government officials, the absence of objective reporting and truth are regarded as the most challenging factors on the Somaliland freedom of speech and expression. Therefore, the media people neither have professionalism nor the knowledge to exercise media tasks.\textsuperscript{16}

On the contrary, the most surprising and the unfortunate factor observed is that government officials have little knowledge on how to deal with the media and even how to sue it. It’s an especially ironic sentence to conclude: for better or worse, due to many factors and reasons, the Somaliland public was prepared to accept the state of media in Somaliland founded on an “absolute freedom”.\textsuperscript{17} Despite the coercive measures against the non-state media coupled with the presence of some institutional weaknesses from legal to policies existed in the media. It would be no exaggeration to say that the manner and tone of the reporting of the private media in Somaliland in regards to building peace and state institutions as well as the successive democratization processes was an advocacy the sense of peace and social cohesion which served as a milestone for the Somaliland’s lasting peace and stability over the past two decades without international engagement.

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES AND THE WAYS FORWARD

Not politically recognized by any country or international organization, the emergence of vibrant media institutions and its continuous efforts to enhance the freedom of speech and expression through independent newspapers, both print and online, as well as TVs stations, has remained crucial.\textsuperscript{18} Without doubt, however, there are a number of factors and challenges that need to be addressed through implementing a number of sacrifices from the parties concerned. It seems obvious that these challenges emanate at least from two compatible fronts: inadequate training programs plus legal and policies which are to some extent the major problems that are currently facing the media. Therefore, these weaknesses need to be tackled by local initiatives with an international support from the donors to strengthen the sector, which remains one of the prime priorities of the state citizens.

As Raphael (2001) argues “funding is an essential prerequisite for independence of the [media]. According to him, the press should be funded by an independent body – a charity or a foundation – that cares about the press and understands its significant role in a democratic society. This body is required not to be a political, and without any affiliation to the media to demonstrate kind of neutrality. In Somaliland, changing the existing situation where the owners fund the media that are supposed to scrutinize their conduct is necessary. In this regard, some might argue that there is a room to suspect that the public interests are not adequately served when the entire funding comes from the industry.

For this to happen, there is a need to establish an effective press council that unites the all types of the media operating in Somaliland. The council to be an effective and efficient one, it should be made in accordance with a written code of conduct with a clear language set of normative standards for ethical and professional reporting. Moreover, the code must circulate among media circles and among the public institutions as well as the people at large to be aware of its existence.\textsuperscript{19}
Furthermore and very important, the Government should work with the national and international organizations that eager to help the media in Somaliland. As part of that collaboration, the Ministry of Information should take the initiative and jointly work with the media council to settle disputes that occasionally arise through consensus and constitutional mechanisms. This mechanism remains the prime force for the Somaliland democracy. Moreover, the Government should facilitate in providing training programs and seek opportunities to the Somaliland media, both public and private that aimed at upgrading the knowledge and skills of the media people. Therefore, it is believed that these programs could serve as a milestone for promoting the level of collaboration and understanding between the two, the Government for one hand, and the Media for the other.

CONCLUSION

Though the Somaliland media have been on a rapid increase with an active and affirmative impact on the overall community development, peace-building processes and democratization of the state over two decades. On the other hand, it was not without challenges: these challenges need to be addressed through capacity building programs to promote its effectiveness that could balance the interests of the citizens and the public simultaneously.

The independent media in Somaliland is relatively regarded by both the donors and citizens as one of the major private institutions that maintain Somaliland’s internal cohesion with the presence of some institutional weaknesses not only from the media itself but also from the Government Specialized Agency for the Media, the Ministry of Information. The Ministry of Information which is the only governmental institution mandated to preserve, coordinate and control both the private and the public media institutions. It appears that it has failed to exercise and materialize its authority to direct the media which reflects its mandate. In this regard, there is in an urgent need for further institutional reforms and restructuring.

To come close to the point, the effectiveness of the Somaliland media rests on adhering media ethics and social responsibilities to penetrate deep into the society with an objective reporting to disseminate reliable outlets. In this sense, though the media has engaged tirelessly in the successive state and peace building efforts as well as the democratization stages. On the other hand, building its capacity should be a long-term key priority focusing on capacity, which requires more attention in a post-state-building endeavor not only from those who have concerns on the media, but the major responsibility rests on the government shoulders to sketch ways forward groundbreaking strategies to overcome the very institutional weaknesses of the media that remained since its inception.

Notes

4. Ibid., 2.
Germany: OmniScriptum Publishing Group

Ibid., 4.
Ibid., 6.
Ibid., 2.
Ibid., 2.
Ibid., 2.


Discussions with one of the senior journalists in the Somaliland Ministry of Information, Hargeisa, Somaliland

Ibid., 11.
Ibid., 2.
Ibid., 10.
Ibid., 2.
Ibid., 3.
Ibid., 3.

Somaliland Journalists Association (SOLJA) is an autonomous legally registered journalist association based in Hargeisa and representing the entire Somaliland journalists
ABOUT THIS PAPER

The concept of free press and expression has been one of the major preoccupations of political maneuvers in the developing world since the end of the Cold War. In connection to this, there has been a considerable progress achieved in regards the expansion of independent media in Africa though in some countries, the revival of mass media pluralism and activity has exacted a heavy toll on journalists and human rights activists. Not different from those countries in post-Soviet collapse period, Somaliland has experienced both ups and downs regarding the media. This study examines the challenges that face the Somaliland media, the positive achievements, and the efforts needed to build the state and non-state media capacity to work together. The major purpose of the study is to seek ways forward strategies to tackle the challenges that face the media and frequently lead its confrontation with the state and its representatives.

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