



Free Speech Emerges Under New Rule

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*Launching a new AllAfrica feature, blogs written by members of AllAfrica's staff, **Boakai Fofana** - who works from our Monrovia office - reflects on the return of free speech to Liberia.*

One of the most noticeable changes seen in Liberia under the leadership of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is the degree to which people are willing to express themselves freely. Many Liberians feel they can now speak without fear that their opinions will land them in trouble.

Over the years, as in many African countries, Liberia witnessed a kind of controlled society where voicing opinions critical of government was unwelcome. In some cases, the consequences of doing so were as extreme as death.

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This was particularly evident during the tenure of Liberia's immediate past president, Charles G. Taylor, during whose rule Mrs. Sirleaf and most other contestants in the elections that brought her to power lived in exile, fearing for their personal safety. Taylor's regime instituted a climate of such fear that no one dared speak ill of the government.

A private radio station, Star Radio, was shut down when it was seen as broadcasting anti-government rhetoric. Two respected politicians now serving in the Sirleaf government, Dr. Amos Sawyer and Tiahwon Gongolo, were mercilessly beaten for criticizing the regime.

University campuses were raided because student political activity was regarded as hurting the government's image. A one-time Taylor ally, Samuel Dokie, disappeared after breaking with the then leader and was later found murdered. The government claimed it had nothing to do with his death, but many believed he had paid the price for being labeled a traitor.

Now, with the advent of what many call a "new day" in Liberia, there seems to be a break from the past. Especially noticeable is the proliferation of radio stations and newspapers, many of which sometimes broadcast messages that would have been deemed "seditious" in the past.

Late last year, a young man named Mulbah Morlu, who advocates a war crimes court in Liberia, called Mrs. Sirleaf a "rebel president" for what he termed as her involvement in the removal of Samuel K. Doe, Liberia's president for most of the 1980s. Morlu remains free, roaming the streets of Monrovia without fear of intimidation by the authorities. In the past, this would have been unthinkable.

In another case, the commissioner of the General Auditing Commission, John Morlu (no relation) said recently that the current government was three times as corrupt as the transitional government that preceded it, an administration viewed by most Liberians as very corrupt. His comments have not been substantiated but they generated heated national debate and he was invited to speak to the National Legislature. And Morlu – a presidential appointee – still holds his position.

These are just two instances of a number I could mention – including my own experience of hosting guests who are sometimes very critical of government on my weekly radio program for youths on the United Nations radio.

Although this new openness is welcome, it is alien to some Liberians, who sometimes abuse their rights in the name of free speech. On average, however, people who would have found themselves in prison under the autocratic and dictatorial rules of the gruesome past are both free to speak and speak responsibly.

It is my hope that our government will not confine itself to allowing critical opinion to thrive only while Liberia is under an international spotlight. Continuing to tolerate critical opinions will strengthen both government and country.

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