

Jamaica has been ranked 13th in the world for press freedom by Reporters Without Borders, which is something for all to celebrate, especially on a day like today, and where there are so many other countries faced with greater press freedom challenges. Press freedom is indeed alive and all stakeholders must be credited for this achievement.

We must not become complacent. However, as our country remains seriously challenged, our economy is stagnant; we have high levels of crime and corruption; we have an under-performing education system; and an overwhelmed justice system - all constraining Jamaica's ability to keep pace with global development.

As policy decisions by successive political administrations continue to influence the above areas, there are many more questions to be asked and many more difficult questions to be answered. Our media still have a considerable amount of work to do as the ears and voice of the average citizen. A free press and greater access are needed more urgently than ever if Jamaica is to truly hold public officials to higher standards of performance, enhance transparency and accountability and to build trust.

Rankings notwithstanding, the media industry and citizens of Jamaica remain constrained in their right to freedom of expression due to a lack of steadfast action in several areas of reform. These include:

1. Updating the Country's Libel Laws: In spite of significant progress and collaboration among stakeholders for almost 10 years, the highly anticipated changes to the Libel Laws have not yet been completed. While the MAJ commends the changes accepted by the Parliamentary Select Committee, we believe that they are not transformational enough in nature, and invite the Minister to reconsider certain elements which have been left out.

2. Update of Access to Information Act: After a 4 year process, which began in 2008, with a few

recommendations accepted by a Select Committee of Parliament, changes have not been followed through.

3. Proposed Changes in Broadcast legislation: The raft of changes currently being proposed to the existing broadcasting legislation is largely inimical to the continued viability of a free press in Jamaica. A more consultative approach with sensitivity to the commercial impact on industry players is also required.

4. Digital Switch Over- Attempts to implement switch over from analogue to digital broadcast on the aggressive timeline proposed, and at the expense of media houses is unprecedented in other countries which have gone this route and have far greater resources. The MAJ believes that more robust conversation and analysis must take place in order to plan a smooth transition for collective benefit of all stakeholders.

The above concerns, if not adequately addressed, could prove to be retrograde steps in Jamaica's pursuit of greater press freedoms and the higher standards we should be setting for ourselves to be truly transformational as a nation. The MAJ stands ready to engage further on all the above with the responsible parties to ensure this does not happen.

On this World Press Freedom Day, The Media Association extends high praise to all media professionals who commit themselves daily to exercise and preserve the precious freedom we have.