

25th October 2024

For several months now, media professionals across the country have raised concerns about harassment, aggression, intimidation and non-cooperation by politicians across the political spectrum. Guyanese politicians continue to seek to normalise targeting media houses and media workers in many forms. Over the past years, those actions included singling out journalists and media houses in the most disparaging, discriminatory and vulgar ways of aggressively responding or addressing journalists, and preferential treatment and access by media houses for interviews. The government also stands accused of using State-owned media and State actors to target other media houses and journalists, sidelining certain media houses by providing interviews to friendly media and social media commentators, and the outright refusal to engage with some media houses on matters of national importance. There are also threats to the distribution of advertisements across the board to the media.

Those actions collectively remain a worrying trend, not only because Guyana has entered another election cycle but as the country grapples with the rapid changes that come with its earning capacity. It is clear that the civic space, freedom of the press and expression are all under threat under the pseudo-cover of the government's right to reply. Several of the actions listed above have already created self-censorship among journalists and media houses as well as civil society actors.

These are just SEVERAL of the concerns raised over the past few months by media houses:

Threats of sedition and obstruction charges

In October, through a statement from the Guyana Police Force, Head of the Special Organised Crime Unit, Fazil Karimbaksh threatened to institute sedition and obstruction of justice charges against journalist Leroy Smith for a news report as part of Smith's reporting on the Calvin Brutus investigation.

<https://www.stabroeknews.com/.../socu-head-rejects.../>

Stabroek News reporter shouted at by Minister of Foreign Affairs

In October, Stabroek News in its reporting called out Minister of Foreign Affairs Hugh Todd for his aggression towards reporter Khadidja Ba. While covering the special sitting of Parliament on October 10th, Ba was approached by Minister Todd and shouted at for her reporting on an issue related to migrants in Linden.

<https://www.stabroeknews.com/.../stabroek-news-stands-by.../>

State Media Workers targeted by Opposition Members

State media workers have filed two complaints with the Guyana Press Association over the past couple of months. This included a report on May 18th that NCN Manager Reycia Nedd complained about being intimidated by APNU Councillor Vanessa Kissoon. Nedd detailed a verbal attack on herself which prompted her to leave the assignment.

Additionally, reporters attached to the Guyana Chronicle have complained to the GPA about aggression from Opposition Leader Aubrey Norton to their questions at the Party's press conference. Reporters said that many of these questions are met with aggressive or refusal to answer. On May 30th, Guyana Chronicle in an editorial called out Kaieteur News for referring to a journalist as "annoying" in her questioning of the Opposition Leader.

<https://guyanachronicle.com/.../norton-attacks-guyana.../>

In October, National Communications Network (NCN) Linden raised another issue of "threatening language" being used against reporter Ianna Benjamin by an APNU councillor, Abdulla Hamid. According to NCN, the incident occurred during a Mayor and Town Council meeting and has left the reporter traumatised.

<https://guyanachronicle.com/.../ncn-raises-concerns-over.../>

Kaieteur News Reporter target

On World Press Freedom Day, Reporter Anasha Williams was the focus of a Facebook live video where Commentator Mikhail Rodrigues showed several videos of hers at a Vice President Jagdeo Press conference while calling her derogatory names.

President's Press Conference

On June 20th, 2024, at a Presidential press conference, members of the media were berated and insulted by President Ali. Two reporters Vahnu Manickchand of the Guyana Times and Shervin Belgrave of Kaieteur News were insulted, one being grilled on a question she asked, and Belgrave being scolded by President Ali.

News Source Journalist targeted

Aggression towards journalist Svetlana Marshall. President Ali on more than one occasions singled out Marshall during sideline interviews. One such interview was in November 2023 as the journalist asked him about the rising cost of living. Another sideline interview was on the power ship in March 2024. Both times, Ali was aggressive towards Marshall but not with other reporters.

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=793078346033590> - NEWS Source: President Ali becomes combative when questioned about about securing services of "power supply ship" to assist GPL with power

Targeting GPA

Responses to GPA in June 2024 - In addressing the disrespect of the media professionals by the President, the President of the GPA was also attacked for comments made in support of the media workers. In an effort to discredit Nazima Raghubir as a journalist, Vice President Jagdeo continued his attack on Raghubir on June 27th, August 8th and August 15th. These public comments are often followed by cyberbullying by known social media accounts and letter and column writers in the state media.

Advertisement

Among the other issues raised is the continued campaign for advertisements to be reduced or removed from a number of media houses and or for a number of State officials to disengage with some media houses. This campaign is mainly done by commentator/influencer Mikhail "Guyanese Critic" Rodrigues who, every week would ask Vice President Jagdeo about taking questions from Kaieteur News reporters and or reducing State ads for Kaieteur News in particular.

Twice in recent times, Vice President Jagdeo acknowledged the issues of state ads for the media, one time saying that this should be reviewed and on another occasion, that he would raise the issue in writing with President Ali as he branded Kaieteur News a political entity. The GPA considers this issue a threat to the economic viability of independent media houses in Guyana.

Additionally, there is a campaign to discredit the media and more so the independent media. This has been ongoing for years but has been amplified over the months. Even as we call on politicians to respect the media and media workers, we expect that this will be no easy task. There is no genuine effort to be open with the media, address the concerns and simply do better. Instead, there is a trend to attack the media, journalists, the GPA via the state-controlled and social media pages. The Guyana Press Association (GPA) hopes that this changes and there is a willingness to acknowledge the work of the media as well as working with the media.

We also call on media houses to use this opportunity to encourage media workers to attend and absorb all training opportunities. There is also a need for even more robust fact-checking mechanisms within media houses and verification of information before publication. There continues to be complaints about issues of verification of very basic details in reporting. To this end, the GPA is committed to continuing its training with media workers.

The GPA wants to use this opportunity to call on several bodies including the Guyana Elections Commission to not only consider media monitoring but also elections-related training for media workers. And as the election cycle has begun, GECOM should also consider a political code of conduct for politicians, as it does for the media.

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