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REGIONAL JOURNALISTS AND ACTIVISTS DISCUSS THREATS TO MEDIA FREEDOM



The Freedom of Expression Institute, in collaboration with the Southern Africa Litigation Centre (SALC), Right 2 Know Campaign and the Wits Journalism School on Monday, 7 September held a public discussion on threats to media freedom in southern Africa. Of particular concern was the use of criminal defamation and other similar mechanisms to silence journalists.

The panelists at the discussion were journalists who have been targeted by powerful interests – most often with the involvement of their governments – and media freedom activists. The journalists were Rafael Marques de Morais from Angola, Tomas Vieira Mario from Mozambique, and Tom Nkosi from South Africa. SALC's Caroline James, a freedom of expression lawyer, and Justin Pearce, a research fellow at the University of Cambridge and an expert on Angolan and Mozambican politics were the other panelists.

Attention was drawn to the legal obstacles currently used to rein in critical and investigative journalists in southern Africa. Caroline James noted that while a number of countries have decriminalised expression, southern Africa still has defamation laws on its books and actively pursues journalists using the laws. Rafael Marques told of his troubles with army generals in Angola country and how he was recently on trial for writing a critical book that was published in Portugal, and hence outside the jurisdiction of Angola. He noted that the absence of an independent judiciary in Angola was the biggest obstacle to media freedom in that country.

South Africa, despite being the most democratic and liberal country in the region, is not doing any better. Tom Nkosi said he currently faces criminal defamation charges for an investigative report that did not go down with the Premier of Mpumalanga province. Meanwhile, Tomas Vieira Mario said exercising what would be basic political rights in Mozambique risks landing

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one in prison and court over criminal defamation (an economist is currently on trial in Mozambique for publishing a Facebook post critical of a former president; a newspaper editor who republished the post is also being tried alongside the economist).

The seminar was a reminder of the many challenges standing in the way of full freedom of expression in Southern Africa, and the need for cooperation across borders to fight for the decriminalisation of expression.

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