

President Ramaphosa salutes media for Covid-19 coverage

President Cyril Ramaphosa has paid tribute to the South African media for its in-depth coverage of the Coronavirus pandemic, despite the industry itself being confronted by daunting challenges.



(Brasília - DF, 14/11/2019) Palavras do Presidente da República da África do Sul, Cyril Ramaphosa. Foto: Isac Nóbrega/PR. Licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license](#).

In the latest instalment of his weekly newsletter on Monday, the President said countries with strong institutions, vigilant judicial systems and a robust media have been able to prevent human rights from being undermined and the authority of the State being abused.

“It has been six months since the national state of disaster was proclaimed. Despite the unprecedented nature of the disease and the immense challenge of placing a country of 58 million people under lockdown, we have fared well.

“We have managed to contain the spread of the disease, primarily because of the cooperation and vigilance of all citizens,” said President Ramaphosa, adding that this was to an extent due to sterling media work.

Tenacious journalists, he said, have worked hard to keep the nation abreast with the latest developments, and disseminating key health messages about social distancing and hygiene.

“They have done so under extremely trying conditions, often with limited resources.

“They have told the stories of the effects of lockdown on the lives of people and their businesses. They have been out in the villages, towns and cities, bringing stories of ordinary people and drawing national attention to problems experienced in hospitals and clinics, prompting government action,” the President said.

He commended media on bringing to light issues that would not have ordinarily come to light.

“They have fulfilled their watchdog role by unearthing acts of corruption and maladministration, sparking a massive national debate and leading to a number of high-profile investigations. Through this reporting, they have earned people’s trust.”

He said a free press is not an end in itself. “It is a means by which democracy is secured and upheld. During this pandemic, our media has played not just its traditional watchdog role, but exercised its civic duty in supporting the national effort to contain Coronavirus.”

However, like many sectors of the country’s economy, media houses were not spared by the crippling effects of the COVID-19 imposed lockdown. In this regard, it is reported that, during this period, some publications saw revenue dwindle by up to 60% in the early days of the lockdown.

This saw various media houses announce the closure of publications, staff retrenchments and salary cuts as a mitigating intervention.

“A number of companies have had to implement salary cuts, reduce staff numbers or reduce hours worked. Regrettably, some publications have even been forced to close, among them some of South Africa’s most established and well-known magazine titles,” President Ramaphosa said.

All this, said the President, was among a range of issues sharply raised during his engagement with the South African National Editors’ Forum last week.

“Instead of lamenting their fate, however, the media industry is working hard to refine business models, to drive innovation and to retain staff as much as possible.

“At the same time, media is a unique entity in any society because its practitioners fulfil a role that is so essential to our democratic order. They work to keep the public informed and to keep power in check.”

The country, the President said, needs more journalists, not less. “That is why the loss of even a single journalist is not just a loss to the industry but to the country.”

The President urged media veterans to avail their vast experience and institutional memory, as they are also able to offer critical reportage and informed analysis.

“At the same time, we need more young journalists in the profession, who are tech-savvy, abreast with new trends in storytelling and in touch with the concerns of a youthful population.

“As a society, we owe the media our full support. Whether it is electing to pay for content, supporting crowdfunded journalism, paying our SABC licence fees or simply buying a newspaper, we can all play our part to support this industry in crisis.

“As government, despite the gloomy economic climate, we will continue to extend advertising spend to publications and broadcasters, especially community media.”

Private sector encouraged to support media

President Ramaphosa has also called on the private sector to continue to support the industry through advertising and working with media houses in the production of innovative content, in line with global media trends.

“Local philanthropic and donor organisations should also come on board and support public interest journalism ventures, as is the case in many democracies,” he said.

The proliferation of fake news during the pandemic, primarily on social media platforms, he said, “has added to the urgency for more news that is accurate, fair and impartial”.

“During this time, our people have relied on our established media houses for information, once again underscoring their importance as pillars of our democracy.

“As we begin the great task of rebuilding our economy in the aftermath of the pandemic, the media industry will need our support more than ever. The free press was once described as ‘the unsleeping guardian of every other right that free men and women prize’.

“As we salute their role in this pandemic, let us do what we can to ensure that the free and diverse media in our country is able to survive and thrive,” said the President. – [SAnews.gov.za](https://www.sanews.gov.za)

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