

PRESS STATEMENT

ISSUED BY THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION COALITION

The Coalition on the Right to Information, Ghana has noted with great concern His Excellency John Dramani Mahama's comments on Ghana's Right to Information (RTI) Bill in an interview on DW TV Political talk show called Conflict Zone on October 7, 2015.

In the said interview, the President made the following observation in response to the question on why Ghanaians have been waiting for ten (10) years to get an RTI law: "I don't think that it changes the sense of free expression and the very vibrant media landscape that Ghana has.

It's taken unduly long and my government is fast-tracking it as quickly as possible.... When Tim Sebastian, the host interjected that some NGOs have criticized the draft Bill as opaque, not transparent, and that it lacks independent oversight, has broad exemptions on information with the of risk of making the Bill toothless, the President replied " Indeed that is what has delayed it.

There's not been consensus on what the scope of exemption should be and so it's gone back and forth. I believe that people are quite satisfying with what we have, is a starting point and if we need to tweak it a bit in the future, we can always make an amendment to the act.

In Ghana there are many guarantees of free speech and independent media. One of the best is chapter 12 of our Constitution that guarantees a free and independent media. I don't think the RTI Bill would transform Ghana's independent media landscape in any dramatic manner.

We have that freedom already; our people have absolutely no problem expressing themselves in the media. The media has the freedom to investigate anything it wants and so the freedom of information Bill will only enhance freedoms that they have already.

It's going through the process and I'm sure Parliament will pass it before the life of this Parliament is over and when that is done the media, researchers and anybody who wants to take advantage of it can do so".

This response is particularly worrying because it obviously confirms the long-

standing misconception in Ghana that the RTI law is primarily for the media and tends to conflate the right to free expression and media freedom with the completely different fundamental right to information.

The Coalition finds the President's comments very disappointing and begs to differ. The RTI is not mainly or exclusively for the media but rather the right of every citizen, whether as an individual or as a group. The right to freedom of speech and expression and the right to information are separate fundamental human rights.

That is why the constitution makes specific provisions for freedom of speech and expression, including freedom of the press and other media in Article 21 (1)(a) while at the same time making provision for the right to information, subject to such qualifications and laws as are necessary in a democratic society in Article 21(1)(f).

Therefore the President's focus on the media and media's rights in Ghana in his attempt to respond to a question on why Ghana does not have a right to information legislation is with respect misleading and Ghanaians in general should be very disturbed.

As much as the Coalition admits that the right is important for the media, it needs emphasis that the right to information plays a much wider and more significant social role in empowering citizens to take and play their rightful role in the society to their material benefits.

Among others, RTI laws promote transparency and openness in governance and equally promote accountability and probity in public life thereby constituting a major weapon in the struggle against the canker of corruption. It enhances the ability of citizens to participate in the decision-making process.

Basically, an uninformed population cannot engage in any objective political debate or make informed electoral choices. They are an easy prey for gross exploitation, abuse, and arbitrary rule.