

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BSQ-17

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The Press in Sierra Leone, part 1

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
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Dear Peter,

Three weeks after coming into effect, Sierra Leone's newspaper regulation act has not yet driven the independent press off the streets as critics feared.

The law, passed by Parliament in January but not signed by President Siaka Stevens until July, requires newspaper publishers to register with the minister of information and broadcasting, paying a 2,000 leone (about \$2,000) fee. Annual registration fees thereafter are 1,000 leones, a steep price for backroom printers of 10-cent tabloids.

More worrisome to editors is a provision empowering the minister to reject a registration application or cancel registration already granted. Regulations recently established to enact the law set up an advisory committee to counsel the minister on such actions.

Three of the nine members of this committee are government officials and a fourth is the editor of the ruling All Peoples Congress party's newspaper. The editor's appointment may be especially troublesome for The Tablet, the leading independent paper, which has attacked him professionally and personally in several recent issues.

The government members on the commission are the solicitor-general or his representative, the director-general of information and head of mass media or his representative, and the deputy chief information officer and editor of the government-run Sierra Leone News Agency. The Sierra Leone Bar Association is also to be represented. That appointment and the names of four public members have not been announced.

The party newspaper editor and the news agency editor were chosen by the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists as its representatives. The newspaper editor is the association's president. Its independence as a professional organization is dubious.

The new registration rules also state that a newspaper editor must have had professional journalism training or a university degree with four years of journalism experience. The intent is ostensibly to upgrade the quality of journalism.

Pios Foray, editor of The Tablet, thinks the rules have been made with him in mind. He began the paper with two friends

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in December 1977, just after graduation from Fourah Bay College where he majored in English. However, Foray said he has worked on newspapers since he was 12 years old, when he was a reporter for his brother who had a paper.

Foray also maintains that the new rules have come right from the top. He told me he called the information minister in August to find out what the rules were. This was seven months after the bill was passed, several weeks after it had been signed into law and only a few days before the registration deadline. Yet the minister did not know what the rules would be because, Foray said, quoting the minister, he hadn't received instructions from State House.

Foray was vague when asked for his reaction to the new law. He said it no longer concerned him. He said The Tablet would not be put out of business, and referred to a statement Stevens made to Washington Post correspondent Leon Dash in July that while he is alive The Tablet will not be closed down.

The paper is having its share of troubles. It missed publication for a week because of a lack of newsprint. According to Foray, the second vice president bought up all available paper with a 6,000 leone check shortly after The Tablet printed a derogatory story about him. Foray said he isn't sure whether the vice president's action was in retaliation for the story, since the official is in charge of the party publication, We Yone. However, that paper hasn't appeared this week because, according to a newsboy, it also lacks newsprint.

For the moment, The Tablet has solved its paper problems, but it has had to raise its price from 10 cents to 15 cents and cut down on the normal 8-page length to six or even four pages.

Foray said the price increase has not affected the size of his readership, but the shortage of paper has. The Tablet is down to a run of 10,000 copies from a peak of 15,000 during the Organization of African Unity summit meeting in July. Foray thinks he could sell twice the latter number but, besides the paper shortage, his second-hand press can't handle a larger run.

About 500 copies are sent to each of the three provincial capitals. The rest of the papers are sold by hawkers on the streets of Freetown. The Tablet comes out twice a week, on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Foray claims that although it doesn't have the largest circulation of Sierra Leone's newspapers, it has the widest because up to five people will read a single copy.

It seems to me The Tablet is at least as avidly read as the state-owned Daily Mail. When I walked through the bar downstairs on my way to lunch Wednesday afternoon, half the patrons had their heads hidden behind copies of the paper. The public doesn't seem to be worried about being observed reading The Tablet and Foray hasn't let the new press law intimidate him. The paper seems to have become more outspoken since the law went into effect.

On September 3, the lead story told of the agriculture minister buying his wife a car estimated to cost 18,000 leones and asked how he could afford it on a 9,000 leone annual salary. The banner headline read "CORRUPT?". Yet the story offered nothing except appearances to make its innuendo. Most of the article was editorial comment.

The rest of the issue was equally inflammatory. In one

regular feature called "Uncle Joe says...If I were man enough I'd ask," the writer strings together charges of government corruption in the form of questions. In the September 3 issue, he concludes: "Need I suggest to His Excellency that to bring the nation to its normal keel, he needs to institute commissions of inquiry that will identify and root out this national malady or cancer, CORRUPTION?"

"Mr. President, please do something, the people are embittered and emaciated, need I say more?"

Uncle Joe and his fellow writers are not too thorough about following up on their charges. The Tablet's brand of journalism is mostly uncorroborated statements and gossip from anonymous sources. Little attempt is made to present both sides of an issue. It appears, for example, that the minister who bought his wife the expensive car was not asked to comment.

The paper thrives on scandal-mongering, not thorough reporting, but it is read and taken seriously even by those in power. The August 20 issue reported on a "month-old rumor" that large amounts of money had been found at the airport in what was apparently a huge currency smuggling attempt. Three days later the paper reported that an MP raised a question about the article in Parliament and the finance minister admitted that such activities do take place. There has been no further word about an investigation.

Other Tablet stories fade from view more quickly. Such has been the fate of the corruption charge against the agriculture minister and of an August 9 report that President Stevens had announced to his party that he will retire next year. The Tablet's stories are almost never picked up by the Daily Mail or We Yone. The paper has had to issue only one correction and apology that I've seen, concerning the mistaken identity of an MP who was dragged from his car and beaten by a mob.

The paper usually leads with an eye-catching headline, but it often softens it with a question mark, even when it shouldn't have to. In this week's issue, under the headline "New Political Party Formed?", it tells of the launching of a National Democratic Party at a rally of Sierra Leoneans in Washington D.C. This country has by law been a one-party state since 1978.

The Tablet concentrates almost exclusively on political matters. It doesn't cover sports, although the soccer league here seems to be a prime example of corruption and political influence. The paper has few regular news stories, although Foray said he has a staff of five reporters. The court reporter has come up with some revelations about the murder of a former bank governor.

The paper usually has one or two long commentaries, normally unsigned or using a pseudonym, further condemning corruption and mismanagement by the government. Another weekly feature is called "Ears to the Ground." It is a potpourri of muck-raking, scandalous gossip, believe-it-or-not and entertainment notes. In the September 3 issue, for example, the writer began with a story about a man in the Northern Province who stole his wife's baby before it was born. He allegedly died in the hospital awaiting a caesarean. Then there's a quick note announcing a meeting of the Bombali Youth Entertainment Club, followed by a report about consternation at the Freetown Dental Unit over the incompetence of its new administrator. Next comes an offer

to Muslims for accommodations on the pilgrimage to Mecca, then two tales about irregularities at different ministries.

These wide-ranging gossip columns are a popular feature of the newspapers here. The Daily Mail and We Yone have similar columnists, although the Mail's appears infrequently.

Another regular feature in The Tablet is the letters page. Here, too, unsubstantiated charges are often leveled at officials. The letters are usually signed.

The Tablet is not much to look at. The printing is usually smudged or faded and often illegible. There are no photos and little advertising. If one takes the time and trouble to decipher it, it is an entertaining and informative paper.

Press censorship is not new to Sierra Leone. In 1855, William Drape, a West Indian Negro, started a weekly newspaper called The New Era in Freetown. Its motto, "To consult the welfare of the people is the first great law," hinted at its opposition to the government. Sure enough, the paper began to satirize the British governor. He had government notices withheld from the paper and then had an ordinance passed to regulate the press, similar to regulations in England.

The regulations required Drape and the proprietor of the only other newspaper in the colony to have two sureties. Both men missed the deadline. Drape was fined £30, the other editor got off free. The governor then rejected Drape's sureties.

Embarrassed by attention the governor's actions were receiving in Parliament, the British secretary of state ordered him to repeal the press ordinance and return Drape's fine. The secretary felt strongly enough about it to threaten the governor with recall when he hesitated to comply.

Sierra Leone has had a lively press for almost 150 years, although most papers have been short-lived due to lack of financial support. The Tablet's motto shows that it is in the tradition of The New Era and other independent voices in this country's history: "The use of words is a choice of arms."


Foray says he has just come to realize that he is doing the government a favor by printing what he does.

"When people read these things, they think something's being done about them. So it takes the pressure off the government," he said.

Although this recent realization has depressed him, Foray is not about to give up his fight. He feels The Tablet at least draws a line beyond which the government fears to step.

In the next letter, I'll look at the government's press.

Regards,



Bowden Quinn