

Gurmad Statement on the Recent Arrest of Journalists in Mogadishu

We, Gurmad, outright condemn the recent arrest of journalist Awil Dahir Salad and the Director of Universal TV's Mogadishu office, Abdullahi Hersi.

As widely reported in the press, on October 2, 2015, following a town-hall style interview where two prominent members of the Somali parliament discussed with the audience about the current political situation in the country, the National Intelligence & Security Agency (NISA) raided the UniversalTV office in Mogadishu, made two arrests, and ordered the indefinite closure of the office.

In the interview, Parliament Members, Hon. Abdi Hashi Abdullahi, Chair of Media and Communication Subcommittee, and Hon. Mohamed Abdi Yusuf, have expressed their grave concern over the perilous direction that Somalia is headed. They asserted in no uncertain terms that the current government—though on paper out the transitional period—has willingly surrendered the sovereignty of the nation to the neighboring Ethiopia and UNSOM. They then urged the Somali citizens to reclaim their political rights and the sovereignty of their nation.

Due to the selfless courage they demonstrated, the frankness of their assessment, and the patriotic reputation of these two elder parliamentarians, the interview video instantaneously went viral. Counterintuitively, the government has turned its wrath on the journalists and the media outlet that provided them the platform. We condemn these arbitrary actions by the security apparatus and reiterate that they constitute a blatant violation of the Somali provisional constitution which guarantees freedom of expression and that of the press.

To make matters worse, on October 6, 2015, NISA has issued a statement that implicates the two imprisoned journalists and the media outlet as criminals who aid and abet terrorism in Somalia. As an organ of the executive branch of the government, NISA has no inherent constitutional authority to make or interpret laws including the Somali Criminal Code. Even its agency rule-making authority is subject to court review. It has no power to deprive citizens of their basic constitutional rights without due process of law. If NISA has substantive evidence against the journalists, it should seek to bring appropriate criminal charges through the relevant prosecutorial agency and the court system without maligning the reputation of any journalists and media groups by issuing blanket and threatening media statements. In a free and democratic society, constitutional offices, including the president, are not above criticism or even ridicule by citizens as long as such expression is conducted peacefully and within the confines of the applicable laws.

In Gurmad's view, The Somali government's action is clearly intended to stifle dissent and weaken freedom of the press and expression in the country. The Somali people aspire for a democratic state rather than a security state where citizenry and civic institutions that play critical role in the checks and balances process are coerced into silence or jingoism.

The issue at hand is the latest in a long line of questionable actions by the Somali government that have led to outright censorship and political intimidation of the press. These actions cast serious doubts upon the Somali government's commitment to open democracy and to uphold the supremacy of rule of law.

We urge the Somali people and people of conscience around the world to protest against these latest undemocratic government actions. Furthermore, we urge the donor nations to weigh in on pressuring the Somali government to immediately release these wrongly imprisoned journalists and reopen Universal TV's office in Mogadishu. This is a flagrant step toward authoritarianism; as such, it should never be tolerated.

Government's relationship with media reflects its relationship with the people. Throughout history, governments that don't put the public or the collective interests ahead of all other interests have and do employ the heavy hands of its security apparatus to suppress free flow of information in order to maintain the status quo or self-interest.

Lastly, we underscore the importance of protecting the personal safety and wellbeing of the aforementioned prisoners and the brave parliamentarians.