

Journalist freed in Ghana amid free speech concerns

A Ghanaian newspaper editor was released last Thursday after serving a controversial 10-day jail term ordered by the west African nation's supreme court for criticising the judges' handling of a dispute over last year's presidential election.



Ken Kuranchie (Source: www.dailyguideghana.com)

Ghana Prison Service spokesman Francis Agyirey-Kwakye said Ken Kuranchie, publisher of the Daily Searchlight newspaper, left a prison in Nsawam, a town about 37 kilometres (23 miles) north of the capital Accra, on Thursday morning. "He was released and he's on his own now," Agyirey-Kwakye said.

Supreme court justices found Kuranchie guilty of criminal contempt last week and sentenced him to 10 days behind bars, an unusual occurrence in a country viewed as having one of the freest presses on the continent. His detention sparked a debate over Ghana's constitutionally protected right to free speech.

Those in favour of his jailing argued that harsh criticism of the court could lead to unrest once it rules in the tense and closely watched election dispute.

Kuranchie's jailing was related to a move by opposition New Patriotic Party to challenge the results of last year's presidential election.

Riddled with irregularities

The party claims President John Dramani Mahama's triumph was riddled with irregularities. The NPP says candidate, Nana Akufo-Addo, was the true winner.

Since being filed in December, the case has attracted intense media attention, with the court's deliberations broadcast live on television and radio.

An NPP spokesman, Sammi Awuku, was kicked out of the courtroom at the end of June by judges angry over statements he made criticising the court.

Kuranchie ran afoul of the court after he published an editorial slamming the judges for banning Awuku. The judges summoned Kuranchie to the courtroom, then ordered him to jail after he refused to apologise.

A spokesman for the ruling National Democratic Congress was also jailed for three days for statements he made.

Both were imprisoned for scandalising the court, which falls under the country's criminal contempt law, said Kwame Karikari, executive director of the Media Foundation for West Africa, a think-tank based in Accra.

Advocacy group Reporters Without Borders this year ranked Ghana as the country with the third-freest press in Africa, behind Namibia and Cape Verde.

Undermining authority

But Karikari said the judges are worried that too much criticism of their handling of the case could undermine their authority and potentially lead to violence.

"People think that contempt of the court is necessary to stop people from (engaging in) violence," Karikari said. "What could lead to violence is not people making outrageous statements. It's political parties organising their foot soldiers."

Ghana, a country of some 25 million people, is seen as a rare example of stable democracy in turbulent west Africa, but the opposition argues last year's vote failed to live up to that reputation.

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