

How artistic expression is being stifled in East Africa

Monday 21 May 2018, by [GATHIGI George W.](#) (Date first published: 6 May 2018).

In today's world, bloggers, artists, designers, techies, hacktivists, writers, musicians, and citizen journalists all use modern tools of digital technology to speak truth to power. This digital savvy group can be referred to as artists because they use their creative skills to generate content.

Increased mobile phone penetration and internet connectivity has boosted their ability to reach new markets. They use their art to push boundaries and make bold statements on diverse issues. As such, art has provided a means for the population, especially the younger generation, to express itself.

Through their creativity they challenge dominant views and perspectives. These views go beyond governments to include religious and socio-cultural norms that are driven by powerful gatekeepers like cultural influencers and popular celebrities.

This use of artistic expression drives conversations and includes topics - like homosexuality - that were once muted in public discourse because they were considered taboo.

Art, therefore, has become a reference point that generates critical debate around human identity, modernity, and politics. But the amplifying impact of the internet has meant that freedom of speech is coming under increased attack in East Africa, specifically in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. These East African states are attempting to muzzle the voices of everyone in the expressive space. This is a means to stifle dissent.

Artists under attack

Action taken against East African artists has been precipitated by the fact that they have moved beyond the everyday role of educating and entertaining to speaking out against political oppression and advocating for change.

Some of their common areas of focus include governance, peace building, gender fluidity, emerging societal trends, environment and climate change, sexual reproductive rights, and gender based violence. In Kenya for instance, musicians are often at the forefront of the movement for social justice. Singer and songwriter Eric Wainaina is one of many.

There have been concerted state efforts to control the vibrant East African creative industry. This has been done through arbitrary arrests, harassment, intimidation, and even murder.

In Tanzania popular musician Nay wa Mitego was arrested for releasing a song titled Wapo which was deemed to be critical of the government.

His fellow musician Roma Mkatoliki was kidnapped by people suspected to be government agents. While he was abducted at a recording studio it's still unclear why he was taken. Roma later released

Zimbabwe, a song about his ordeal and the risks of speaking truth to power. He was then banned from performing for six months.

These events have led to popular Tanzanian musicians like Diamond Platinumz speaking out against political oppression. In his song Acha Nikae Kimya, which means 'let me remain silent', he speaks about the state of political affairs in Tanzania. Recently, Diamond was arrested on charges of indecent exposure.

In Uganda, activist Kasha Jacqueline Nabagesera who is fondly identified as the founding mother of Uganda's LGBTQI rights movement, was arrested for advocating for LGBTQI rights in a country where being gay is illegal.

In Kenya, photographer Msingi Sasis Bekko was arrested and accused of being a terrorist. Msingi was arrested in April 2015 at Galleria Shopping Mall in Nairobi. He was grabbed while taking pictures and accused of terrorism.

A number of other barriers also affect freedom of expression. One of them is cultural values. Critical work by artists is not always well received because part of the audience is deeply conservative - politically, culturally and spiritually.

Poorly protected

The field of creative arts is poorly regulated. This has allowed East African governments to deal harshly with what they perceive as disruptive output. Creatives are susceptible to state suppression through draconian legislation because they are not enough laws to protect their rights.

In Kenya for example, the Kenya Film Classification Board has been seen to overstep its mandate which is to regulate the creation, broadcasting, possession and distribution of film and broadcasting content. Most recently it banned a Kenyan film because of its lesbian content.

Finally, some creatives confess that they have to grapple with self-censorship, both at an individual level and within their employment contexts. One example is newsroom cartoonists who must constantly question if they have gone too far with their criticisms of the East African leadership. For instance, Gado, a Tanzanian cartoonist who lives and works in Kenya, was fired from the country's leading daily newspaper in 2016 for criticising the president.

These realities call for a robust conversation on the freedoms of speech and expression. This must recognise the intricate relationship between traditional and nontraditional sources of information in a world where citizen journalism has become more prominent than ever before, and press freedom applies to anyone who creates content.

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