

6 A Congolese Media Congress puts in place a Media Observatory

By Tshivis Tshivuadi

We've been right to place our bets on the Congolese press! Fourteen years after the N'Sele Congress gave birth to the Congolese Press Union (UPC), a recent major gathering of Congolese media professionals, only the third of its kind, served to reestablish a foundation for a free, democratic and responsible media by creating the "National Union for the Congolese Press" (UNPC).

The National Congress for the Press in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which took place in early March 2004 at the Nganda Catholic Center in Kinshasa, was both a historic and decisive turning point in the structuring of the Congolese media during this postwar era and in the run up to the May 2005 elections, the first the country has experienced in 40 years.

New foundations, new structures

During five days, approximately 200 Congolese journalists from all of the country's provinces gathered together, finally as one unified body. They were joined by foreign experts to assess the media landscape in the DRC. Among other topics, discussions were held on the legal framework for media, the status of journalists, and the economic viability of media outlets.

Participants also discussed the role of media in a post conflict and pre-electoral situation. They exchanged views on the possible mandate of professional media organizations before deciding on new structures and assigning individuals to preside over the destiny of the profession that has been characterized for so long as having "gone to the dogs" and as having been tainted by "black sheep."

Observatory for the Congolese Media

The UNPC, a non-profit organization now headed by Kabeya Pindi Pasi, director of information for "Channel Tropical TV," and several other autonomous structures were established in order to train journalists, to promote unity within the sector and respect for a professional code of ethics.

The new structures also include a UNPC disciplinary commission; a Press Center which will serve as a meeting point for journalists to exchange ideas and information; a training center for journalists with a special focus on the use of Information and Communication Technologies; and a Commission in charge of granting and allocating professional accreditation.

The most important achievement of the Nganda Congress was, without a doubt, the establishment of an Observatory for the Congolese Media (OMEC) and the nomination of its President, Polydor Muboyayi, the Director and Editor of the daily newspaper "Le Phare". OMEC will strive to be a professional and autonomous agency by having its

own legal status and being led by representatives of civil society. The Observatory's main function is to ensure that the media respects a code of ethics by monitoring abuses and recommending penalties to the disciplinary commission or acting as a mediator between the public and the media.

Decriminalizing defamation

The establishment of OMEC is also a significant step in the efforts to decriminalize defamation laws and comes at a key moment in the campaign that has been led on this issue by *Journaliste en Danger* since December 2003.

During the closing banquet presided by President Joseph Kabila, Modeste Mutinga, the President of the High Authority for the Media (an institution established by the transitional government) congratulated participants for setting up of this self-regulatory body destined to limit the much deplored performance of the Congolese media.

Vital Kamerhe, the Minister for Information and Press, went on to congratulate participants for organising the conference and holding elections in a spirit of national unity in order to establish structures and identify its leaders in a transparent manner. "You have set the example for reunification, harmony and tolerance for our politicians," he said.

President Kabila was last to address the congress participants. He expressed his wish to see the resolutions of this meeting applied in an effective way so as to truly rebuild the Congolese press and to support the efforts of the Institutions of the Transitional Government in its goals to achieve peace, reunification and to organise free and democratic elections in the DRC. "Beyond the need to rebuild the media, it is the whole Congolese nation that needs rebuilding", concluded the President.

New fervor

The Congress will go down in history as the meeting that dissolved the original UPC in exchange for a federal framework bringing together journalists and professional media organizations with the ultimate goal of returning legitimacy, value and dignity to a tarnished profession.

The new UNPC president promised to do everything in his power to raise Congolese journalists out of their misery. His achievements will be judged at the next congress expected to take place in four years.

Meanwhile, congratulations go out to Stéphane Kitutu Oléontwa, former president of the UPC and president of the preparatory commission of the Congress, for providing leadership to the deliberations. It will be remembered that he kept the ship from being steered off course by sectarian politics, the ignorance of some participants, and by politicians and foreign partners that also had much at stake on the outcomes of this Congress.

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