



Taking a Stand, Resisting Corporate Tyranny

By Rasna Warah



Senior managers at the Nation Media Group have tried to underplay the significance of the joint resignation of columnists Maina Kiai, Kwamchetsi Makokha, George Kegoro, Nic Cheeseman, Gabriel Lynch, Muthoni Wanyeki, Gabriel Dolan and myself by claiming that the withdrawal of our columns was prompted by a hysterical “political activism” moment rather than a genuine concern about the newspaper’s editorial independence and integrity.

In a front-page editorial published three days after our resignation, the Nation newspaper’s editors took great pains to explain to readers that the NMG’s publications were non-partisan, independent and “committed to telling the truth”. The Nation’s Public Editor, Peter Mwaura – he appears to have abdicated his role as the neutral arbiter between the newspaper’s readers and its editors – defended the NMG by saying that there appeared to be an “unspoken reason” for our “groupthink”, suggesting that we had made the decision to resign *en bloc* for political reasons.

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“The independence of the media...is determined by reporters or editors, not columnists,” he wrote,

adding that columnists “can only bask in the sunshine of that independence. They cannot bestow independence to [sic] a news organisation.”

Perhaps the Nation’s Public Editor is not aware of the fact that media independence – a hallmark of democracy – is not bestowed on columnists by individual reporters or editors; freedom and independence of the media is guaranteed by Article 34 of Kenya’s constitution. Through his ill-informed defence of the NMG, Mwaura betrayed another truth – the very reason for our resignation – that NMG’s editors have taken it upon themselves to decide who, just as much as what, is politically acceptable to publish.

The flimsy and unconvincing reasons given for the removal of the cartoonist Godfrey Mwampembwa (Gado) and economist David Ndii also suggest that it may not even be senior editors who make decisions about who to hire or fire, but influential and powerful individuals within government.

The NMG emphasised that none of the eight columnists had been censored by their editors and even issued a statement stating that each of us had individual contracts that the group had dutifully honoured, adding that editors had not tampered with our opinions “except to correct basic errors” – an obfuscatory tactic portraying us as petulant writers, easily upset by the heavy hand of the editor.

I must admit that initially I was conflicted about whether or not to resign...I am also deeply aware that as a woman – and an Asian woman at that – such privileges are hard to come by in our male-dominated media. Female columnists are rare in our newspapers; in fact, I was the only female op-ed columnist in the *Daily Nation*.

If the NMG’s senior managers had listened to us carefully, and read our press statement, they would know that none of us claimed to have been censored by our editors; on the contrary, I made it a point to state at our joint press conference that we were not resigning because we felt that we were being individually censored but because we could no longer remain silent and watch our colleagues being fired on flimsy – and what appeared to be politically-motivated – grounds. By glossing over the reasons we gave for our resignation, the NMG made us look like spoilt troublemakers, old farts stuck in their ways who needed to give way to younger, less jaded (and perhaps less opinionated) columnists.

I must admit that initially I was conflicted about whether or not to resign. I realise that having a column in the country’s largest-circulating newspaper is a great privilege and honour. I am also deeply aware that as a woman – and an Asian woman at that – such privileges are hard to come by in our male-dominated media. Female columnists are rare in our newspapers; in fact, I was the only female op-ed columnist in the *Daily Nation*. Before making the decision to resign, I wondered if giving up my column was not an act of ceding to reactionary forces who would be only too happy to see me go. However, I also know that the privilege of a column cannot be enjoyed in a vacuum. The context within which I left the NMG is critical to understanding the reasons for my resignation.

In our joint statement, we emphasised that past attempts by some of us to get the NMG’s Board of Directors to address what we felt was “a systematic process to constrain independent voices within the company, contrary to its stated editorial policy” had borne little fruit and that we had resorted to this radical measure when the NMG went ahead and fired the economist and Nasa political strategist David Ndii and NTV’s Linus Kaikai, who had spoken out against collusion between the Executive and some media managers to block the television station live coverage of the mock swearing-in of opposition leader, Raila Odinga.

Weighing in on the matter, retired op-ed editor Magesha Ngwiri, who edited my column for nearly a

decade (with a very light hand, I might add, even though we held politically divergent views), insinuated that the majority of the columnists who had resigned did so because they belong to human rights organisations and so must “earn their keep”.

The answer to Ngwiri’s question is that our conscience did not allow us to “clothe the loss of editorial independence and media freedom at the NMG with respectability”. Some of us, and I include myself in this category, resigned because we no longer wanted to be associated with a newspaper that was increasingly looking and feeling like a government mouthpiece.

Ngwiri, one of the Nation’s most experienced editors, rightly stated that “if an editor purports to slant the views of a writer towards the conventional, then he or she is doing a disservice to the profession.” Indeed, the publication of diverse and diametrically opposed opinions is what lent the NMG’s publications credibility – credibility that has been seriously eroded in recent months. Ngwiri then went on to describe the columnists who wrote for the Saturday and Sunday editions of the Nation as individuals “who go hysterical every weekend in the belief that he is making an impression”, dismissively adding that these columnists were living in “cloud cuckoo land”. He went on to ask what could have induced others in the group to join “a cabal of rebels without a cause”.

The answer to Ngwiri’s question is that our conscience did not allow us to “clothe the loss of editorial independence and media freedom at the NMG with respectability”. Some of us, and I include myself in this category, resigned because we no longer wanted to be associated with a newspaper that was increasingly looking and feeling like a government mouthpiece, rather than an independent and trusted source of news. More importantly, by standing in solidarity with Kaikai, Ndi, Gado and others, we were saying that if the NMG felt compelled to silence these voices, then it would not be long before it felt emboldened enough to silence our voices as well.

Having fought so hard for the freedoms we enjoy under a new constitution – freedoms that were denied to us in the past – we could not sit back and watch our media, particularly the newspaper we wrote for, return to those dark days of subterfuge, censorship, silence and intrigue. What legacy will we leave behind for future columnists and journalists if we do not resist state capture of the region’s most influential media organisation?

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