STEVEN FRIEDMAN: Press is not telling us what we need to know

‘The problem here is a pack journalism in which some decide what the story is and everyone follows’

www.businessday.co.za
Published: 2010/09/08

OF COURSE the press must be free. But why does it not use its freedom to give us the information we need?

Government attacks on the press have ensured that it is hard to question journalists’ priorities for fear of being seen to encourage censorship. But it should be possible both to defend the press’s right to tell us everything we need to know and to complain that, in the main, it does not tell us — to oppose not only the controls politicians place on papers but those journalists place on themselves.

The point is illustrated by two articles which appeared recently in this newspaper. Obviously, we might not know about them if a newspaper had not published them. But the fact neither has become a major subject of media attention shows just how much South African reality press coverage is ignoring.

First, researchers and activists wrote an op-ed article on the North West’s human settlements MEC who threw a man out of his RDP house because he was renting it from the owner and was running a tuck shop from the premises. The MEC complained that he was misusing a house meant for the “needy”.

The authors point out that the MEC has no right to evict a legal tenant. They add that a core goal of encouraging home ownership is to offer the poor a productive asset and that the owner and tenant are being punished for doing what the policy says they should do. And they make the most important point of all — that politicians have no business telling the poor what their choices should be.

This is no isolated incident; it is part of a trend which directly affects our prospects of building democracy and development. Our chances of achieving both are hampered by the assumption by elites — public and private — that the middle class knows better what the poor want than the poor do.

The housing policy the MEC seeks to defend is an obvious case: when it was adopted, specialists insisted that it would turn the poor into an idealised version of solid middle-class suburban citizens.

When poor people had their own ideas on what ought to done with the houses — such as renting them to others — the specialists were distressed that people were not doing what the policy wanted them to do. But in most cases, like this one, the choices poor people were making were perfectly rational and showed that they knew better what they needed than officials and researchers.

Until everyone is allowed to make their own choices, we will not have a strong democracy and will continue to get development wrong by giving people what they do not want or need.

Alas, the North West incident suggests that the African National Congress (ANC) has changed its leaders, but not their elitism.

This issue goes to the heart of the challenges facing our society and should have been a major subject of debate and coverage. That it was not shows again the deep elitism of most press coverage: its world is the world of the middle class and we read mostly about how officialdom makes life slightly less comfortable for the well-off, not how it often makes it impossible for the poor.

Second, a news item reported that Parliament's defence portfolio committee refused to consider a bill because Defence Minister Lindiwe Sisulu will not hand over to it a report it needs if it is to deal with the law. This is the first time a parliamentary committee dominated by the ANC has responded in this way to an ANC minister.

So, at a time when it is fashionable to denounce everything majority politicians do, a committee dominated by the ruling party is doing exactly what it is meant to do — forcing the government to give it, and us, the information it and we need.

We might have expected that this sign that current political turmoil is creating not only threats but also opportunities to hold politicians to account to receive much reportage and analysis. We might expect to be told why this is happening and whether it could be the beginning of a Parliament whose majority will care more about its image among voters than the favour of its own party's ministers.

And yet this possible break in a politics that has protected ministers from scrutiny, was ignored.

The problem here is a pack journalism in which some decide what the story is and everyone follows — and reportage which is obsessed with the actions of a few political figures rather than the patterns which may shape where our country is headed; its practitioners are judged by how connected they are to politicians, not by whether they identify trends.

As long as that persists, we will be told who political insiders think is in or out, but not whether democracy is working any better and is enabling us to address our challenges.

We do not need controls on the media. But we do need a press far more willing to tell us how most South Africans live and about where political events might be driving us.

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