

Award Acceptance Speech
On behalf of
Nelson R. Mandela

May I begin by congratulating the African Editors Forum on its bi-annual conference! Bringing together leaders of a major continental institution, the Forum occupies a vital space in the ebbs and flows of thought and opinion on our continent. This is a space the African Editors Forum occupies at a crucial moment in Africa. The theme of this conference, *'Media and the Challenge of Peace in Africa'*, is most relevant to the call of our times.

I am privileged to be here, a participant at this award ceremony as a representative of the Nelson Mandela Foundation, and to receive this award on behalf of our founder, Nelson Mandela. Madiba is truly honoured to receive this award from a distinguished gathering of journalists described as "the biggest gathering of editors on the continent". He accepts this award with humility.

On February 14, 1994, two months before South Africa's historic election, Nelson Mandela addressed the Congress of the International Press Institute. Nelson Mandela said:

"A critical, independent and investigative press is the lifeblood of any democracy..."

He continued:

"I have often said that the media are a mirror through which we can see ourselves as others perceive us, warts, blemishes and all."

Nelson Mandela concluded:

"It is our considered view that such criticism can only help us to grow, by calling attention to those of our actions and omissions which do not measure up to our people's expectations and the democratic values to which we subscribe."

A 'critical, independent and investigative press'! That is what Nelson Mandela called for. A press that demonstrates such qualities helps Africa to grow as the continent builds and strengthens democracy, stimulates vibrant market economies, and seeks to consolidate peace and stability between countries and within countries.

This role for the media to stimulate continental growth in the four areas of strategic endeavour just mentioned, should never be granted as a concession. It is even more than a right for the citizens of our continent. It is part of the air we breathe; the water we drink; the food we eat; the land we see and live on, and the human communities we conceive and create to sustain our lives. This is because in and around all aspects of human life, human thought flows constantly and unendingly. It is the primary purpose of all media to ensure this constant flow of human thought.

Nelson Mandela understands that when human thought flows it enables us to reflect, to review, to revoke, to renew, to invent, to recreate. That is why he stands among the pioneering African leaders who have understood the resuscitative power of regular changes in leadership. Countries that change leaders whether for the best or for the

worst, always learn from change. Their citizens get to experience and learn from a variety of leadership types and over time develop the wisdom and capacity to manage them.

This perspective enables us to say: countries that have had the same leader for two or three or more decades can be said to be imaginatively trapped, incapacitated, and disabled. Deprived of the opportunity in the course of their history to experience and grapple with variety in leadership, citizens of such countries develop limited intellectual and political skills than those of countries that have seen and experienced various types of leaders. Such deprived citizens are much slower to learn that when the challenge of governing a democracy gets harder, governments should not gag the press through laws and tribunals. Rather, they are called upon to apply their minds ever more deeply and more rigorously. If governments are unable to respond to such a responsibility and call of duty, then citizens should not hesitate to change the government through the ballot, and try another one. That way, citizens and governments grow. That way, everybody gets better at what they do for the good of all.

What applies to individual leaders should equally apply to political parties that stay in power for too long. They cause their countries to die a slow death.

Such wisdom, acknowledged through this award, is captured in the consistent testimony of a proven life. Nelson Mandela has steadfastly believed:

- That freedom of expression, is an essential component of democracy;
- That the critical role of the media is a feature of all societies, in both emerging and established democracies;
- That citizens in democracies must be vigilant against threats to media freedom from individuals, political and religious institutions, and governments;
- That feedback is an essential, healthy ingredient of all human and social growth;
- That change stimulates growth.
- That democracy is far more than what happens at election time. It is more fundamentally about what happens between elections. The flow of thought and opinion between elections is the lifeblood of democracy.

And this is what Nelson Mandela said: “A critical, independent and investigative press is the lifeblood of any democracy...”

This award is a tribute to this philosophy.

Njabulo S. Ndebele
Trustee
Nelson Mandela Foundation