

REMARKS BY HIS EXCELLENCY DR. GEORGE MANNEH WEAH

PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA

AT THE 2019 ANNUAL AWARDS EVENT OF THE PRESS UNION OF LIBERIA

PAYNESVILLE CITY HALL, FEBRUARY 9, 2019

Mr. Charles Coffey, Jr., President of the Press Union of Liberia;

Officers and Members of the Press Union of Liberia;

The Dean and Members of the Cabinet

Officials of Government, here present;

Members of the Diplomatic Corps, here present;

Award Winners;

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for inviting me as your Special Guest to this 2019 Awards Event of the Press Union of Liberia.

I am particularly happy to be here tonight, to be able to put faces to some of the voices we hear on the radio, and to some of the writers of the articles that we read. Congratulations to all the winners.

Let me first of all express my commendation to all journalists in your organization for the work that you continue to do in an effort to strengthen our young democracy.

As it is with all professions, journalism is hard work. Having owned and operated a media institution myself for many years, I have first-hand experience of the struggles that all journalists go through in practicing their profession.

As journalists, you have an important responsibility to keep the population informed about all activities in society that may impact them, including the activities of their government and all other actors, as well as society itself.

As United States Chief Justice Frankfurter once said, and I quote: “Without a free press there can be no free society. However, freedom of the press is not an end in itself, but a means to the end of a free society.” Unquote.

Those of you who go the extra mile in this endeavor to do good work, will always stand out, and be recognized, and honored. We are proud of you.

We promise you our fullest support – irrespective of your various editorial policies and perspectives.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

The press is an integral part of a fully functioning democracy. While some do not consider it a prominent actor of the political system, it holds great social and political influence over the population. This influence must serve to benefit both the government and the governed.

As I have promised before, and in keeping with the Constitution of Liberia, my administration will continue to do all in its powers to protect the fundamental rights of all Liberians, including journalists, – which include the right to free expression in keeping with law.

As a mark of this commitment, our legislature recently endorsed my proposition for speech-related offenses to be de-criminalized. These old laws had been in existence for many years from previous administrations, and had hindered the practice of professional journalism for many decades.

When they were in full effect, they allowed for the arbitrary arrest and jailing of journalists on trumped-up charges, once the authorities decided they did not like the content of their stories.

However, as Nelson Mandela once said, and I quote: “None of our irritations with the perceived inadequacies of the media, should ever allow us to even suggest, that the independence of the press should be compromised or coerced.” UNQUOTE

Under the new law, which we were pleased to name after one of your fallen colleagues, Kamara Abudullai Kamara, no journalist can be imprisoned for practicing his or her profession lawfully.

However, newsmen and newswomen must know that they too have responsibilities, including legal ones.

There are laws under our legal system which address issues of confidentiality and privacy, as well as libel and slander. I have been informed that the Kamara Abdullai Kamara Act does not provide you with immunity if you violate these rights of other citizens, and it does not prohibit any citizen from seeking legal recourse through a civil lawsuit, when there is a perception that individual rights have been violated.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

Journalists are required to be responsible citizens and are not exempt from their duty to abide by the laws of our country. I therefore want to use this occasion to call on the leaders of the Press Union of Liberia to do more at self-regulation.

In this regard, I was pleased to note in the letter of invitation you sent me that this event is part of efforts to self-regulate your members. If I may quote directly from the letter, you stated therein that:

I QUOTE: “The Press Union awards night is an integral part of the self-regulatory regime of the Union intended for the journalism profession to police itself against ethical transgression”.
UNQUOTE:

Mr. PUL President, we hold you to these words. We urge you to stem the dangerous rise of un-professionalism within your ranks. Do not let the bad apples spoil the bunch. There can be no better phenomenon that should jolt you into action, than listening to the airwaves or reading social media. They have become inundated with profanity, fake news, and incitements to violence.

Journalists should seek the truth and report it. This has been the primary rule that many of you have dutifully followed, and as a result of this you are receiving your accolades tonight. Yet still, there are those who have deliberately opted to disregard every laid-down rule of professional and ethical journalism. In your efforts at self-regulation, there must be consequences for those who act unprofessionally. It is those people, Mr. President, who must be weeded from your ranks.

Again, congratulations to all of tonight’s winners. You are exemplary practitioners of your profession, and you are truly deserving of this recognition.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

Just before I take my seat, I would like to raise an issue directly with your President, Mr. Charles B. Coffey, Jr.

Charles, I want to remind you of my offer made to you at the beginning of your tenure, that I am ready and willing to do whatever I can to assist your organization to be adequately housed in suitable premises that would contribute to efficient and effective operations.

To date, I have not heard from you on this matter. Instead, I have been made to understand that my motives are being questioned by some people. Well, I made a similar offer to others in a situation similar to yours, and they took advantage of it. I am confident that they will be able to testify that I have not asked them to make any compromises on their independence or integrity since then.

My offer still stands, Charles, for the time being, and the ball is now in your court.

Thank you!