

Media freedom 'under threat'

IT IS unlikely that the media will ever be gagged again as they were by the apartheid regime, SA National Editors' Forum (Sanef) chairman Mondli Makhanya said yesterday.

"Today we are far, far away from that time and we never want to go back," said Makhanya in Johannesburg.

He was speaking at a function to commemorate 34 years since the National Party government banned black consciousness organisations and jailed journalists.

The day, on October 19, 1977 is known as "Black Wednesday".

The event was also convened to celebrate South Africa's Media Freedom Day.

Threats

Makhanya said journalists, especially at the moment, faced other threats to media freedom – the Protection of State Information Bill – and manipulation.

He said there were serious attempts by "very powerful" people to curtail South Africans from speaking out against injustices and the media's ability to report on them.

"Over the past 18 months, there have been moves by those in power to move our country to be a closed society," he said. "We should not allow the people who want to try to close the free space of information to triumph."

Makhanya said journalists should be vigilant of any manipulation by government officials to sway reporting ahead of



LAUNCH: Durban University of Technology (DUT) Vice-Chancellor Professor Ahmed Bawa, left, current Press Ombudsman and SA Press Council's Joe Thloloe, right, and Zaytoon Akhalwaya-Abed, daughter of the late struggle journalist Ameen Akhalwaya, attend the launch of the DUT read-in 'Reading is Power' hosted by Women in Action and the DUT Book Club to mark Media Freedom Day at DUT. The programme involved a panel discussion on readings, poetry and a question and answer session. Readings and a critique were aired on Akhalwaya's book, *Comrades and Memsahibs*.

PICTURE: RAJESH JANTILAL

the 2012 African National Congress conference.

"Democracy by its very nature breeds influence peddlers. We need to make sure that reporters can withstand the tsunami of manipulation."

Makhanya said media should remain self-critical: "We have to ask, are we being true to our calling of truth tellers?"

If journalists performed their duties to the fullest, politicians, government departments and business would be "more scared of us".

Press Freedom Commission

project director Mathatha Tsedu said journalists must make input for consideration in a report due out by March next year.

The idea of a report was in response by the media to the ANC calling for a Media Appeals Tribunal.

The report is expected to outline a proposed framework of self-regulation in the media that could be included in the constitution.

Tsedu said the "usual suspects" had come forward but urged all South Africans, edi-

tors and journalists, who had not come forward, to do so.

In a later statement the Presidency urged media and analysts to be open minded and avoid stereotyping.

"In this way the South African public will be better informed about the actions, decisions and policies of government."

It said it had noted with "great concern" the coverage of President Jacob Zuma.

"When the President considers all aspects of matters placed before him to take an in-

formed decision, the media accuses him of being indecisive.

"When he acts, he is accused of taking decisions vindictively, informed by the ANC elective conference that is scheduled to take place."

The Presidency emphasised that Zuma made decisions independently, informed by facts before him.

"The pigeonholing of the president that has become prevalent misleads the public and also kills critical thinking in the public space," it said. – Sapa