

Deyda Hydara
16 December 2004
Kanifing, Gambia

DEYDA HYDARA

‘[HE] HAD ALWAYS WANTED TO BE THE VOICE OF THE VOICELESS’

IT WAS 16 DECEMBER 2004, and editor and journalist Deyda Hydara had just left his office in the Gambian capital of Banjul. He was on his way to celebrate the 13th anniversary of the independent newspaper *The Point*, which he had co-founded with his friend of 35 years, Pap Saine. The two had planned to meet at the ceremony of a wedding they had both been invited to. But Hydara never arrived, and when Saine tried to call him, his phone was turned off. Later, Saine received a call informing him that the friend he’d had since childhood had been shot and killed.

Born on 2 February 1946, Hydara was one of Gambia’s most distinguished journalists. He had worked as a reporter in Senegal and as a correspondent for the French news agency AFP for 33 years before his murder. But it was his more subversive work at *The Point* that is likely to have gained him his most powerful adversaries. He was a thorn in the side of the government at the time, led by former president Yahya Jammeh, who has been in exile in Equatorial Guinea since January 2017.

Saine and Hydara had grown up together, entered journalism together and in 1991 had gone on to create *The Point* together. Saine, who continues to run the newspaper along with Hydara’s son, says that the late journalist had always wanted to be the voice of the

voiceless. Hydara had felt the need to educate and inform the people of Gambia, which he did most notably through his subversive column ‘Good Morning Mr President’. The column was addressed directly to President Jammeh, who had seized power in a coup in 1994. Jammeh was not a fan.

Yahya Jammeh’s 22-year rule was marked by widespread abuses against critics and political opponents, which included forced disappearances, extrajudicial killings and arbitrary detention. But it was the media that Jammeh and his government were the most averse to, as Saine explained from his home in Banjul. ‘They were watching us, monitoring us. They were not press-friendly; whatever we did that time they would take note. During Jammeh’s time, they were on the [case of] journalists who ran away; some journalists were killed; some were tortured. They did everything possible to discredit you,’ he said. ‘For 22 years, it was a nightmare for a journalist ... there was self-censoring – you had to be



The place where Deyda
Hydara was murdered,
Banjul, Gambia

careful what you say, what you write and everything, so there was self-censorship [and] there were the draconian laws.’

But despite the threats to his safety, Hydara had continued to fight against the country’s repressive government. He was notably outspoken on the issue of press freedom and was in the process of taking the government to court over the new anti-media laws it was trying to impose. It was just two days after the court hearing that Hydara was killed. According to Saine, he had received a number of threats: ‘He knew that they were after him. One day in the office he told the staff, “I am wearing bulletproof. I know these people are waiting for me and want to kill me any time”.’

Saine said that the combination of his column and the court challenge was the reason for Hydara’s murder, and that he, too, had reason to fear for his safety. As soon as Saine got the call to say that Hydara had been shot, he went straight to the hospital where Hydara’s body had been taken. Saine said that while he was at the hospital, government agents had warned him that he was also in danger. The next year, a high-ranking government official told him to stop the column, which he had continued in his friend’s honour; it was an order from Jammeh, declared Saine.

Hydara was a role model to many and a fierce proponent of press freedom, and his death left something of a vacuum in the Gambian media, Saine said. ‘Everybody was traumatized and surprised he was dead. A man helpful to international development killed like that. [His death] affected many young journalists

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or those who wanted to join the field to be journalists. After his demise, parents would not want their children to join the field,’ Saine revealed.

While Saine’s own friends and family asked him to stop working as a journalist, out of fear for his safety, others have encouraged him to carry on the fight: ‘Some friends convinced me and said to me that I must continue the struggle and the legacy of Deyda and press freedom in this country.’

Under Jammeh’s rule, Saine was arrested many times, including once in 2009 when he was jailed alongside members of the Gambia Press Union (GPU) for putting out a statement asking the government to speed up its investigations into Hydara’s death. The government claimed that the group had accused it of being behind the death. As a result, Saine and his fellow GPU members were sentenced to two years in prison, but fortunately they were let out after a month.

It wasn’t until Jammeh’s fall in 2017, after he lost the December 2016 election to Adama Barrow, that the ‘Good Morning Mr President’ column was reignited. The column is a legacy of Hydara’s that his family was keen to see continued, and is an important way of remembering all that the journalist had fought and died for. And, in recognition of Hydara’s sacrifice for press freedom, the front cover of every issue of *The Point* carries his portrait.

The GPU also celebrates and remembers Hydara every year. The union’s secretary-general, Saikou Jammeh (no relation of the former president), said there is no doubt as to who is responsible for Hydara’s death: ‘Jammeh was so bitter with people having a dissenting opinion, he wanted to suppress the press and suppress the citizens and the best way to do that was to curtail media freedoms. He attempted that but didn’t succeed. He found the person between him and that stupid goal was Deyda.’

Hydara’s family went to the Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States over his death. In 2014, the court found that the Gambian government had failed to meet its obligations by not conducting a thorough investigation of the journalist’s murder. The court also found there was a climate of impunity in the Gambia, ‘stifling freedom of expression’. Hydara’s family was awarded US\$50 000 as compensation for the government’s failure to effectively investigate the death and a further US\$10 000 to cover legal costs. So far, only half of the compensation has been paid out.

In 2017, arrest warrants were issued for the two suspects in Hydara’s murder – Sanna Manjang and Kawsu Camara. Both Manjang and Camara were former members of the armed forces, as well as members of the so-called Green Boys, a militia that carried out dirty jobs for Jammeh. However, both are now living outside the Gambia and therefore have not yet been arrested.

On 5 October 2018, the Gambian Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission was launched to look into alleged human-rights violations that had taken place during Jammeh’s rule. It began its hearings in January 2019. Supported by this new atmosphere of reconciliation, Pap Saine and Saikou Jammeh claim it is now a lot easier and safer to be a journalist in the Gambia. However, Hydara’s legacy and dedication to press freedom serves as a reminder of why the public need to support a free press and why the anti-media laws still on the books in the Gambia need to be opposed. ●

