

media maestro

Kaitira Kandjii heads up the Media Institute of Southern Africa as its regional director, supporting journalists in danger and ensuring that freedom of speech remains free. By KERRY DIMMER

Let us reflect on the power of the media

on democracy. Consider that it can shake the very bedrock of governments, that it is one of the most effective agents of change and that it enables the process of decision-making. This is a great power indeed, and it is for this reason the media is both feared and loved.

It is certainly feared by those dictators who have crippled African countries by limiting freedom of expression, resulting in the arrest, harassment and even torture of journalists and media presenters who dare challenge their authority, leadership and corrupt practices.

Threatened and frustrated journalists are virtually powerless. This is why an organisation like the Media Institute of Southern Africa (Misa), which provides assistance to those who are gagged, is so crucial to the survival and maintenance of freedom of speech.

'How much more effective is an African media with the backing of an organisation that advocates and promotes the free flow

of information, one that is prepared to act on media freedom violations, provide education and training, legal aid, finance and support in the dissemination of news throughout the region?' asks Misa's regional director, Kaitira Kandjii.

'Take Zimbabwe for example, possibly the most plagued media in Southern Africa. Journalists have problems surviving there. Part of Misa's mandate is to provide them with safe havens, supporting them and their families until their lives have stabilised. The same is true of Tanzania. When a newspaper was closed down, Misa stepped in and helped those affected to rebuild.'

Kandjii knows all about rebuilding. As a proud Namibian Herero, his schooling in the late 1970s and early '80s was during a time of a highly revolutionised political system. 'South Africa and Namibia were emerging from the dark days of apartheid. I was forced to leave my country to continue the liberation struggle within the ranks of Swapo in Angola when my schooling was completed in 1983.'

For a young guerrilla, repatriated back to an independent Namibia six years later, there were shocks. What did he know of business and career-building?

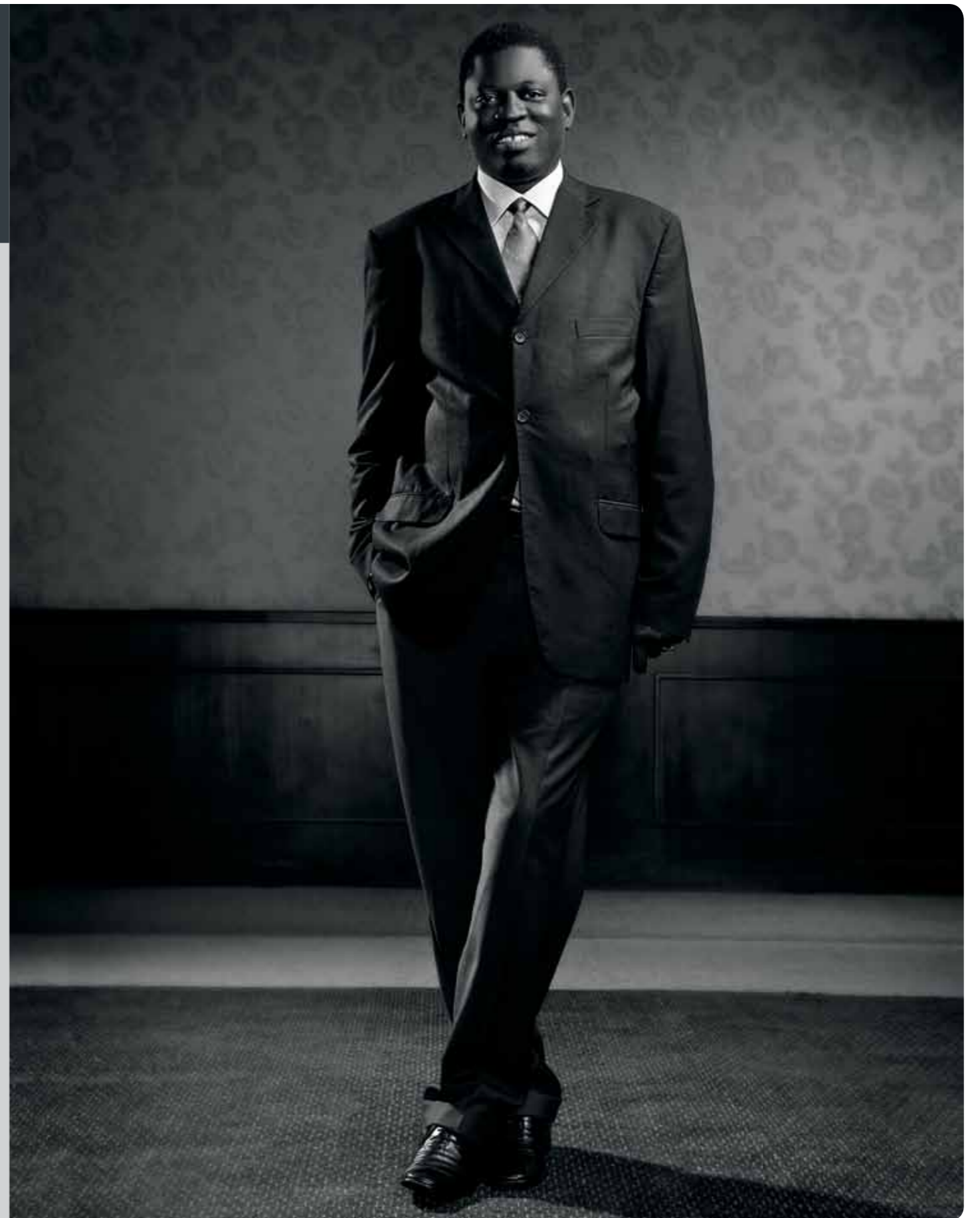
'We were all left to find our own way. I found my path at the University of Natal in South Africa. Media studies gripped me, and I achieved both my honours and master's degrees.'

However, becoming a journalist was not entirely tempting. Kandjii had enjoyed a stint as a crime reporter for the Afrikaans newspaper *Die Republikein* in Namibia but, having unearthed his love of academia, aimed to establish a media department at the University of Namibia.

'But a university position does not guarantee a good income and despite my passion for teaching I needed to get on my feet.'

Misa was well-known to Kandjii when he joined in 2000 as its media officer. The NGO had been started by four progressive Southern African journalists, and in the same way that the media had exposed

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the frustrations of colonialism in the past, the Misa group realised that the impending abolishment of apartheid would result in an opening up of the media sector across the southern continent.

When the Windhoek Declaration was signed at an Unesco seminar in 1991, essentially outlining principles of press freedom, Misa was ready to grow and lift the spirit of the Declaration.

By the time Kandjii had been promoted to regional director of Misa's head office in Namibia, 11 of the SADC region countries hosted chapters. These included Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

'This is not to say that we ignore other nations in the southern districts,' says Kandjii, 'but we have focused on the predominantly English-speaking countries, given the bilingualism, multicultural nature and multi-ethnicity of the area, and our limited capacity. However, we collaborate and partner with related organisations of external member countries when needed.'

Misa is more than just a support system for journalists and has grown a number of arms, one of which provides entrepreneurial training to journalists who need to develop business techniques.

'This is a premier training programme that provides the skills to manage the business side of media. It is undertaken by the University of Cape Town, under

the guidance of our Botswana chapter,' says Kandjii.

'Thereafter we're able to provide finance to make media businesses effective or for the creation of new organisations. We have, for example, helped with the establishment of *The Post* in Zambia, the *Public Eye* in Lesotho, the *Daily News* in Zimbabwe and radio stations in Zambia and Botswana.'

But as Kandjii points out, 'It is pointless to have good and enabled journalists in an environment of restrictions or to advocate media freedom if a media house is unable to enjoy the essence of those rights.'

He's also concerned about the commercialisation of media groups who are driven by strong communities and affected by their host governments.

'When this happens, we don't get to hear the voices of the people. Africa is full of vibrant societies that need to share their experiences, their anxieties, their hopes and their challenges.

'What we often see are commercially viable media businesses that are actually so weak that they are pandering to the powers that be – be those politicians or the big corporates that drive advertising, providing the funding for operations. This is why the news is so swamped with political stories and scandals.

'But there are other things we need to get across. People are suffering in Africa. The ideal media needs to find that balance combined with excellent journalistic skills.'

The potential influence of African governments is precisely why Misa is funded largely by donations from Scandinavian countries such as the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark and Sweden. The balance is sourced from the EU, the African Capacity Building Foundation, the Open Society Initiative and Misa's membership base.

'You have to bear in mind,' says Kandjii, 'that most of our membership is the private media, those that tend to be critical of ruling parties. We would be compromising the free flow of information and become lackeys if we accepted funding from any African government.'

Misa membership may have declined from 10 000 to 5 000, but this is symbolic of a good thing in Kandjii's opinion. 'This translates into the relaxation of media restrictions in the area. You have only to look at the media freedoms that Angola, Zambia and Mozambique now enjoy. On the other hand, we still have Zimbabwean journalists flocking to Misa because they are under constant threat.

'Media is a catalyst for people to enjoy rights and must simultaneously be the tool that holds government to account for their actions, while also addressing the issues that affect the daily lives of Africans.

'Gone are the days of the media being simply a watchdog. That is now the role undertaken by Misa, a formidable ally in the struggle of our media to stem authoritarianism.' **AD**