

SLAJ's "Press Champion" award to the President undermines their independence!

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The Sierra Leone Association of Journalists' award to the President as "*Champion of Press Freedom*" was an act dictated by impulse rather than due regard for the sacred role of the media as watch dogs over the power-filled levers of government. President Bio may well be a 'Champion of Press Freedom' but we would only truly know after his 5 or 10 year-tenure as president. The award was therefore precipitous and serves no basis other than denting the sagging image of independence of the institution. If SLAJ has already characterised the president as 'champion of press freedom' it undermines those 'other voices' who hold a slightly differing view or who would want to scrutinize the president on his act, laws or policies which affect press freedom or freedom of expression and access to information. President Bio kept his manifesto promise when he repealed Part V of the Public Order Act 1965. It was a great show of leadership but that should not be deserving of an accolade from SLAJ. We have a booming industry of awards in the country and I have no doubt that the many outfits dishing awards left, right and centre would overwhelm the President with their products. It must never be SLAJ's business to give a sitting president superlative awards such as 'champion of Press Freedom'. If anything, it is government that should recognise those journalists who braved it for many years demanding a repeal of those obnoxious provisions. We don't give awards to our leaders for only doing their work—certainly not from the institution that bore the huge brunt of the evils of those laws.

Nasralla (De Monk) is one of my favorite big brothers and I have no doubt that he has employed his journalistic skills and satirical platform to hold past and the current governments to account. But on this one, he, as President of SLAJ, showed poor leadership. But this does not certainly alter my esteem of him. I have only learnt to be honest with my friends who hold public offices because that is the only way I can be honest with their opponents too.