

National assembly approves controversial information bill

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Reporters Without Borders is very disappointed by the South African national assembly's adoption of the new version of the Protection of State Information Bill (POSIB) yesterday with 190 votes for, 73 against and one abstention.

An earlier version was already adopted at the end of 2011 (<http://en.rsf.org/south-africa-will-secrecy-law-approved-by-22-11-2011,41436.html>) but, in response to demands for changes from the opposition, the National Council of Provinces (the South African parliament's upper house) made a number of minor amendments. These concessions still fall far short of what is needed.

Reporters Without Borders urges President Jacob Zuma not to sign the bill into law as it poses a serious threat to transparency, freedom of expression and accountability.

"The government has insisted on pushing this bill through parliament, turning a deaf ear to the many objections that have been raised since it was first submitted five years ago," Reporters Without Borders said.

"We are concerned that journalists will have less leeway to work if this bill becomes law and we therefore have no hesitation in adding our voice to the national and international protests, and the reservations expressed by the UN Human Rights Committee. The South African 'regional model' is in danger."

In the view of the South African media, opposition and many anti-POSIB campaigners, the bill would undermine freedom of information by exposing journalists to draconian penalties and forcing them to censor themselves. Sentences of up to 25 years in prison for revealing classified state information would pose a major threat to journalists, who often base their stories on leaks.

The bill's opponents say it was designed to prevent or dissuade journalists from investigating allegations of corruption within the government or ruling African National Congress or President Zuma's circle of associates.

South Africa has fallen 19 places in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index since 2009 and is now ranked 52nd out of 179 countries.

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