

Freedom with a Caveat. Barbara Nimri Aziz

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Does Uhuru, 'freedom' in Swahili, apply in the United States?

It depends. It depends on how the First Amendment is interpreted; it depends on how cunningly the term terrorism is applied in these tenuous fearsome times; it depends on how determinedly people fight to protect and restore their democracy. Doubtless, a few institutions committed to [protecting the U.S. Constitution](#) will [continue to defend the first amendment](#) and expose its erosion. They have an uphill struggle as the outcry against Israel's genocide of Palestinians persists, and as skittish editors, wary politicians and security officials challenge hitherto secure press freedoms. The erosion of free speech is so subtle, it eludes most of us.

Earlier this month, supporters cheered a judgment in favor of Omali Yeshitela, 83, and his co-defendants, all members of the [African People's Socialist Party and the Uhuru Movement](#). Their trial ended with the accused receiving no jail time. But was it really a victory for free speech and free association?



[Yeshitela's group avoided jail](#)—certainly worthy of celebration. But they were free on three conditions: they must have no contact with Russian nationals or organizations; they are on three years' probation; they are sentenced to 300 hours of community service. The Florida trial judge rejected the state's claim that the accused's actions constitute a *national security threat*, a clause increasingly used to silence free speech. He concluded: "no crime had been committed and the group's conduct was rooted in political speech." So why any sentence or probation at all? It suggests that even a tenuous alliance with Russia today is anathema, and a threat to USA. Just as the government views former senior marine officer and political commentator [Scott Ritter](#). (The FBI seized his passport and raided his home 5 months ago.)

However welcome The Uhuru Movement's acquittal is, it does not assure true freedom. First it imposes limits on the group's speech. That and the sentence of community service,

however mild, serve as warnings to others. Though dissimilar in scale to the freedom secured for Wikileaks founder Julian Assange, it is gripped by the same subtle process through which liberty is granted. Freedom with a caveat.

Image: Assange addressing committee of the Council of Europe Tuesday (PACE) (Source: [Consortiumnews](#))



“I am free today after years of incarceration because I pled guilty to journalism... seeking information from a source,” stated Assange in October 2024. It was his first public statement, delivered at a [European Human Rights Council](#) meeting, since his release from England’s Belmarsh Prison.

Julian Assange’s ‘freedom’, however welcome and fêted by his legal team and tens of thousands of supporters worldwide (after a long, determined campaign) remains to be tested. First, Assange is prevented from seeking compensation from the U.S. and U.K. governments for their years of persecution, imprisonment and mistreatment. Going forward, it is uncertain what Assange will be permitted to do:- as an advocate for free speech, as a writer and as a publisher.

Daily, we witness increasing numbers of journalists intimidated, detained and arrested – in the U.S. and U.K. Cases- many barely publicized – indicate that the noose smothering civil liberties tightens week by week. Trump’s election notwithstanding, this began months ago in the U.S. and U.K. as well as across Europe, India and elsewhere.

We have recently watched helplessly while well-known independent British journalists were detained and harassed. In August, first [Richard Medhurst](#), then [Sarah Wilkinson](#) and [Asa Winstanley](#) were threatened with arrest. (Others who were actually arrested are awaiting trial.) Medhurst and Wilkinson were essentially terrorized by authorities under the obscure Article 12 of the U.K. terrorism law. Their computers, phones and other materials were seized. Though not charged and free to return to their homes, both are uncertain if they can resume their journalistic work. After their release, both publicly detailed their detentions. Yet to date, neither – Wilkinson as a critical source on the Gaza genocide, and Medhurst as a commentator and reliable source on Israeli, U.S. and U.K. military policies – has resumed their reporting. They may be ‘free’, for the present; but they remain under threat of more severe actions. Thus, first their voices, unmatched in independent media, have been effectively silenced; second, their detention serves to chill others, especially well-informed independent journalists, who know the truth but have become wary about exposing it.

This situation is doubtless due to a determined ugly [campaign to thwart all credible](#)

[reporting on the reality of Palestinian lives](#), the crimes of Israel and its backers. ‘Pro-Palestinian’ is being interpreted in some quarters as a threatening identity. If what brought us this point continues, ‘Pro-Palestinian’ will be outlawed as terrorism. Suppression on the subject is already underway on [campuses and in workplaces worldwide](#). University students, faculty and other staff returning to a new academic year learn of onerous new regulations in place. At some universities, if an employee or student does not sign an agreement to desist from joining non-violent and other actions relating to Israel’s ongoing Palestinian Genocide, they face disciplinary action – termination of employment and expulsion. While student groups are invoking legal means to resist, colleges pass new laws that greatly curtail their freedom of speech. Teaching faculty everywhere feel their jobs threatened; enough have been fired to freeze the actions of colleagues. This situation is well-known but glossed over by the press. If it’s reported at all. In Europe, especially in France and Germany, [blanket laws are being passed](#) to shut down ‘designated’ free speech by anyone. A colleague who had worked for city government reminded me decades ago: “Once such laws, though precipitated by a short-term single crisis, are in place, they are almost impossible to remove, and are applied more widely in new circumstances.” Remember the USA Patriot Act of 2001 enacted in response to the 9/11 attack. It is regularly [renewed](#) with barely any debate.

Freedom with a caveat!

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