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## **South Africa: ‘Dark day’ for free speech as secrecy bill is passed**

The South African parliament’s approval of a draconian secrecy bill which could see journalists and whistleblowers in prison for investigating state wrongdoing is a worrying development for the country, Amnesty International said today.

The bill, which could see journalists facing up to 25 years in prison for publishing information which state officials want to keep secret, was overwhelmingly approved in parliament, with 229 votes to 107.

Black-clad activists across the country have staged protests condemning the bill. In Johannesburg, demonstrators picketed the headquarters of the governing ANC, calling for “the right to know”.

“Today is a dark day for freedom of expression in South Africa. This fatally flawed bill, which is totally at odds with the South African constitution, takes us right back to the apartheid-era restrictions on free speech,” said Noel Kututwa, Amnesty International’s deputy director for Africa.

“If the upper house of parliament doesn’t throw this bill, out, South Africa will be left with a law which severely limits the crucial right of journalists and whistleblowers to expose corruption. The upper house must safeguard the media’s right to criticize the country’s leadership and vote against this proposed law,” he said.

Before becoming law, the bill still has to be passed by South Africa’s upper house, known as the National Council of Provinces, likely to happen next year.

The African National Congress party, which backed the Protection of State Information bill, says the new bill is not about “covering up corruption” or targeting the media but is being introduced to address threats of “foreign spies”.

Information which is currently available to the public under the Freedom of Information Act could be classified as “secret” by low-level officials, if the bill becomes law.

State Security Minister Siyabonga Cwele has argued that the bill is necessary to overhaul outdated apartheid laws. He has also raised the possibility that activists who have held peaceful demonstrations against the bill are being “used” by South Africa’s enemies.

“If the upper house passes the bill, journalists and whistleblowers could potentially be branded as criminals. If they were to be imprisoned under this law, Amnesty International would regard them as prisoners of conscience, imprisoned solely for exercising their right to freedom of expression,” said Noel Kututwa.

Activist groups have vowed to challenge the proposed law before South Africa’s highest court.