



## Press Statement

### Negative fallout of South African Secrecy Bill could affect entire continent: CIVICUS

**Johannesburg. 9 June 2011.** If the South African Parliament pushes through the highly controversial Protection of Information Bill, the negative fallout in the region could be immense, said CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation today.

“We are witnessing a pervasive crackdown on the freedoms of expression, association and assembly across the African continent,” said Netsanet Belay, Policy and Research Director at CIVICUS. “At present, South Africa remains an island of democracy. But if the draconian secrecy bill is passed, this will change and further encourage authoritarian leaders in the region to inhibit democratic freedoms.”

The Protection of Information Bill is currently being discussed in committee by the South African Parliament. It contains a number of problematic provisions, establishing serious hurdles for the media and civil society to obtain information about official corruption mismanagement and government service delivery issues. The Bill gives government officials wide powers to prevent disclosure in the interests of “national security” which is broadly defined to cover a vast array of information.

“Passage of the Bill will lead to increased opaqueness in the functioning of government departments, making it extremely difficult for citizens to identify bottlenecks in the official machinery, inhibiting their access to constitutional entitlements and services,” said Dale McKinley of the Right 2 Know Campaign. “South Africa has a constitutional commitment to ‘accountability, responsiveness and openness.’ This bill goes a long way in negating these values for which the struggle against apartheid was waged and upon which the edifice of South African democracy stands.”

The Bill applies to all organs of the state, which includes national and provincial government departments, independent commissions, municipal and local councils and forums. It empowers the Minister of State Security to “prescribe broad categories and sub-categories” to classify information to prevent it from entering the public sphere. The heads of government departments are further empowered to put in place departmental policies, directives and categories for the purpose of classifying and declassifying information.

The Bill also contains draconian punishments ranging up to 25 years in prison for a host of offences, including obtaining, possessing, intercepting and disclosing classified information. South African journalists and civil society activists are extremely anxious about their ability to pursue their quest for the truth in the future. Notably, the bill has no clause to protect the disclosure of information in the ‘public interest.’

CIVICUS calls upon the South African Parliament to reject this “anti-people” bill in its totality. “It not only negates constitutional freedoms at home but also tarnishes South Africa’s reputation as a leading democracy and emerging voice of conscience from the global south,” said Belay.

*CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation is a global movement of civil society dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society across the world. CIVICUS is part of the [Right 2 Know Campaign](#), a coalition of people and organisations united in the struggle for the right to information and opposed to the Protection of Information Bill, which threatens hard won constitutional rights including access to information and freedom of expression in South Africa.*

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