

Journalists Call for Media Deregulation

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Media workers hope MDC inclusion in government will usher in new era of freedom of expression in country.

Journalists here are calling for the media stranglehold in the country to be relaxed following the signing of a power-sharing deal between the ruling party and the opposition.

Under the agreement signed by President Robert Mugabe and the leaders of both factions of opposition party the Movement for Democratic Change on September 15, all parties have pledged to recognise the importance of the right to freedom of expression and the role of the media in a multi-party democracy.

Since the arrival of the MDC on the political scene in 2000, Mugabe has tightened control of media in the country by introducing heavily restrictive press and security laws.

Legislation such as the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, AIPPA, the Broadcasting Services Act, BSA, and the Public Order and Security Act, have resulted in the closure of independent newspapers and radio stations, and prompted hundreds of journalists and other media workers to flee the country.

The majority of Zimbabweans shun the state-run media, preferring to install expensive satellite dishes and buy foreign newspapers, particularly those from neighbouring South Africa.

Yet the signing of the power-sharing deal appears to have buoyed the jittery media sector.

In interviews with IWPR, media stakeholders have called for the new government of national unity – which is to be formed following the signing of the agreement – to move rapidly to deregulate the sector.

Loughy Dube, chairman of the Zimbabwe branch of the Media Institute of Southern Africa, MISA, said the onus is on the new government to transform state broadcasting company the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, ZBC, into a truly independent public broadcaster.

“The signing of the [power-sharing] agreement should be seen as a development that ushers in a new era of tolerance and diversity of views underpinned by fundamental reforms that respect the rights to freedom of expression and access to information by citizens,” said Dube.

He said that the media – particularly radio and television, because of their wider reach – would play a critical role in creating a platform for national dialogue and promoting national reconciliation and economic development in the country.

Dube said MISA-Zimbabwe was calling for the new government to prioritise turning ZBC into an independent outlet.

“The role of a [public service broadcaster] is to enhance the national collective responsibility of engaging the people of Zimbabwe to actively participate in national discourse by freely expressing...and accessing information through the broadcaster, irrespective of one's political affiliation, religion, ethnicity, colour or creed,” he said.

By signing the agreement, ZANU-PF and the two MDC factions have committed themselves to free media.

In the text of the agreement, they note that while the BSA permits the issuing of licences, only one has been given to the public broadcaster. Independent media have blamed the BSA for the perpetuation of the ZBC's monopoly of the airwaves.

“Desirous of ensuring the opening up of the airwaves and ensuring the operation of as many media houses as possible, the parties agree that the new government shall ensure the immediate processing by the appropriate authorities of all applications for re-registration and registration, in terms of the BSA as well as AIPPA,” said the agreement.

Steps should be taken to ensure that the public media provide balanced and fair coverage of the legitimate political activities of all parties, continued the agreement.

Irene Petras, executive director of Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, ZLHR – an organisation which has represented more than 1,000 journalists arrested by the Mugabe regime since 2000 – said the authorities must restore the credibility and independence of the state media so that they function in the public interest.

“The parties to the agreement must immediately commence processing of applications for commercial and community broadcasting licences, finalise the long-standing application for re-registration of the Daily News and remove the punitive duty being charged on foreign publications, which are meant to restrict their circulation within Zimbabwe,” said Petras.

The Daily News, the country's only independent daily newspaper, was closed down in September 2003.

Dube said the African Charter on Broadcasting, which was adopted in Windhoek in May 2001, could be used as a benchmark when creating new media legislation and policies.

He said that appointing an independent board would stop the state broadcaster being influenced by political or economic interests that compromise its public service mandate.

“The ZBC should therefore be run by an independent board representative of civil society, the media, churches, labour and the business community, among others,” he said.

Yet not all media workers are optimistic following the signing of the agreement.

One Zimbabwean journalist exiled in the United Kingdom told IWPR that he is in no hurry to return home.

“I would rather give it time until the rule of law is back,” he said.

He pointed out that there was still much uncertainty surrounding the future of Zimbabwe’s media.

“What is going to happen to the media: the banned papers, those taken over by the intelligence?” He asked. “What’s going to happen to [the state paper] The Herald and others in the same stable that have been turned into mouthpieces for Mugabe and ZANU-PF?”

Jabu Shoko is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe.

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