

Civil society body bars state journalists

By Gregory Gondwe: @Kalipochi

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Civil society organisations in Malawi received a whiplash on Tuesday, 14 February 2012, following a decision to send away journalists of the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), who had come to cover a news conference they were hosting.

Commentators have said civil society organisations, whose mainstay is to protect the rights of the people, should have been the last to indulge in violation of freedom of the press.

Civil society leaders were addressing reporters on the arrest of prominent lawyer, Ralph Kasambara, whom the law enforcers charged with abetting assault after his guards overpowered two men suspected to have been sent to petrol bomb his offices. The Malawi Chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA-Malawi) came hard on the civil society bodies describing their decision as disturbing.

Barring media

The civil society organisations, led by civil rights umbrella body, Human Rights Consultative Committee (HRCC), refused to allow reporters from MBC to attend or cover the conference. Soon after the incident, MISA-Malawi chairperson, Anthony Kasunda issued a statement condemning the actions by the civil rights bodies.

"The development was confirmed to MISA-Malawi by one of the organisers of the news conference, who said MBC was barred because of its biased reporting in favor of government. He said barring the reporters was one way of advocating for change at the national broadcaster," Kasunda said.

Acting national co-ordinator of HRCC, reverend MacDonald Sembereka confirmed in an interview with Zodiak Radio, that they had barred the state media from covering the news conference.

"Yes we chased them away and we will continue doing this until they change their style of reporting. Every time they cover us they twist things and do propaganda," said Sembereka.

Advocating change

MISA-Malawi has said civil society organisations need to adopt constructive strategies in advocating for change, rather than being at the fore in infringing on the Republican Constitution, which clearly provides for journalists' right to access information.

"Much as we agree with civil society organisations on MBC's bias towards government, we believe Malawians are rational and capable of judging for themselves whether a media house is biased or not. Barring reporters from covering a news briefing is retrogressive and unwarranted in any democracy worth the name," he said.

MISA-Malawi adds that civil society bodies should be in the forefront, promoting and defending constitutional guarantees and not flouting them.

"Barring some sections of the media from covering functions could easily be construed as lack of tolerance and deliberate and strategic to deny Malawians access to opposing and critical information on our actions and plans," said Kasunda.

He added that such actions could further mean that civil society organisations only want to deal with media outlets that promote their cause, which is unhealthy and regrettable in a democracy.

"Malawians need all sides to an issue to make informed decisions and true democracy depends on the extent to which leaders tolerate opposing views," he said.

Biased reporting not encouraged

MISA-Malawi does not condone biased reporting and neither does it encourage irresponsible journalism and if barring reporters from covering functions has anything to do with professional misconduct, they are more than willing to mediate.

"We are therefore appealing to civil society leaders to exercise contact and dialogue with media houses, as well as media bodies that represent the interests of journalists, whenever disagreements arise, rather than proceeding to breach provisions of the Constitution," he said.

While MISA-Malawi is further appealing to civil society leaders to respect media freedom and freedom of expression, which includes the right to be accorded the fullest possible facilities for access to information they also did not spare the media.

"We would also like to appeal to journalists both from public and private media to remain professional and avoid serving the interests of one section of society," said Kasunda.

A member of the civil rights bodies in the country has also condemned the actions of his colleagues.

Executive director of Child Rights Information & Documentation Centre (CRIDOC), George Mwika Kayange said much as he agrees that MBC has been a disgrace for those who truly treasure professionalism but he nevertheless argued that two wrongs will never make a right.

He said MISA-Malawi has always needed strategic partners who would add value in its campaign to have the access to information bill enacted, and one would think of civil society organisations as logical and almost natural allies in this noble cause, considering the critical watchdog, sensitization and empowerment roles they play in society.

"I'm now beginning to shudder at the imagination the effects of today's events will have on the campaign itself if the ones we should entrust with such a gargantuan responsibility are the ones actually to be targeted with sensitization messages on the same. It just doesn't look good enough," he said.

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