

ZAMBIA: Media resists calls for state regulation

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LUSAKA: After almost a decade of fighting for self-regulation, the Zambian media may finally have its wishes entrenched with constitutional protection. The new draft constitution of the country prohibits legislation that would undermine media freedom and administrative behaviour that could hinder the development of the sector.

Press Association of Zambia (PAZA) vice-president Amos Chanda told IPS that separate provision is made that "categorically" safeguards the freedom of the media while clauses in the current constitution on freedom of expression are also retained.

Just fewer than 500 representatives from all sectors of the Zambian population who are working in 11 commissions are drafting the new constitution. Changes being considered include a new electoral system, an independent electoral council and greater control by parliament over the government. The National Constitutional Conference (NCC) will convene a plenary discussion on its proposals in May 2009 and is expected to hold a referendum on a final draft by December.

"The NCC is to date the greatest window of opportunity for the country to begin repealing, amending and enacting progressive legislation in tune with credentials of a rather robust democracy that Zambia has become in the last 18 years of plural politics," said Chanda.

PAZA is elated that over 90% of its submissions to the Constitution Review Commission are reflected in the draft document.

But there are still parliamentarians on both sides of the political divide who would prefer for the media to be regulated by the state. The calls intensified in the wake of accusations of media bias during the last presidential election.

The opposition United Party for National Development MP, Brian Ntundu, told parliament that some media organisations are disregarding journalistic ethics and had reduced them to campaign managers for some parties.

"Clearly, the media has failed to regulate itself, and I've got difficulties defending them," the United Liberal Party's Sakwiba Sikota lamented.

Information and Broadcasting Services Minister, Ronnie Shikapwasha, also railed against the media. "Even some people that supported self-regulation of the media can no longer do that because in the last few months, some media organisations have shown that they cannot regulate themselves."

In a joint statement, PAZA, the Zambia Media Women Association (ZAMWA), Zambia Union of Journalists (ZUJ), the Press

Freedom Committee (PFC) of The Post and Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), lashed out at what they see as attempts to muzzle the media.

"We condemn the calls for such regulation because media freedom and the public's right to know, which is the cornerstone of any vibrant democracy, cannot be regulated through a statutory body as this will stifle freedom of the media, an important platform on which the Zambian people express themselves," the statement read.

The journalists have urged politicians to use the channels provided for in the Electoral Code of Conduct to address their allegations of unfair treatment or coverage during the Presidential poll. Parties are entitled to lodge complaints in writing with the Electoral Commission of Zambia and could request offending media to correct misrepresentations in their coverage.

The debate on the media even cracked a mention in President Rupiah Banda's opening of parliament address this year. He expressed his administration's preference for media self-regulation and pushed for all media houses to affiliate to the non-statutory, self-regulatory Media Ethics Commission of Zambia (MECOZ) that was formed in 2002.

MISA Zambia has appealed to media institutions to heed President Banda's call for a single media regulatory body. But *The Post*, the leading privately owned newspaper in the country, has received President Banda's comments with suspicion.

"There is no way the same government can say it supports media self-regulation and at the same time force media houses to join MECOZ.

Forcing the media to join MECOZ amounts to regulation. The moment threats are applied it becomes regulation. So for us, we'll not do that," *Post* news editor Chansa Kabwela told IPS.

"We don't need to belong to MECOZ because we always regulate ourselves on a daily basis. We get a lot of information, stories and even letters and we try as much as possible to pick from what we have and that in itself is regulation. If the government is truly committed to self-regulation by the media, then joining MECOZ should be voluntary."

MISA chairperson, Henry Kabwe, bemoaned the "disunity" in media ranks that he ascribed to the "lack of common ground" on ethics and professionalism. He said the current state of affairs was sending the "wrong messages" to Zambians who rely on the media for credible and accurate information.

Kabwe said that MISA is "disheartened" that citizens had "little knowledge" of the ethical codes on which the media operates. "This has made it hard for the ordinary citizen to seek redress... because they do not know what to base their complaint on."

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