

# Talk show format change slammed in Namibia

Watchdog organisation claims that national broadcaster's planned format change to call-in radio programme is "an attempt to stifle public debate".

WINDHOEK - The Namibian minister for information and broadcasting has announced that top management at the Namibia Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), the country's national broadcaster, has taken the decision to change the format of the call-in programme on national radio, according to a 30 April 2007 *New Era* newspaper report. The statement comes 10 months after the current NBC director general went on air shortly after being appointed to the office to call on listeners and phone-in callers to "act responsibly."

MISA-Namibia has issued a statement in which the organisation strongly opposes any attempt to control or censor information in the public domain and expresses the view that the proposal by the NBC management unhealthy for a growing democracy such as Namibia.

The organisation says it has spoken at length about the enormous value of call-in programmes in that "they allow ordinary people to raise issues of concern that might not otherwise come to public attention, including issues in the remotest parts of the country about which journalists at the NBC, the print media or any other media outlet might never come to hear".

Namibia is a democratic society and democratic societies do not inhibit critical debate -they tolerate and protect it. The right to speak freely without fear of government reprisal is at the very heart of democracy.

Freedom of speech rests upon political dialogue, not upon a monologue of orthodoxy.

## **"Lack of respect" for Nujoma could be reason for decision**

According to Information Minister Netumbo Nandi Ndaitwah, the decision of the NBC management is aimed to stop abuse by callers. Comments back in 2006 by Ndaitwah suggesting that the media and public were displaying a "lack of respect" for former president Dr Sam Nujoma were met with great alarm.

The organisation believes that public officials deserve less, not more, protection from public commentary than ordinary citizens because, by accepting to serve the common wealth in a public office, they have implicitly agreed to greater public scrutiny than an ordinary citizen would be subjected to.

Democracy and economic prosperity are not possible without the public accountability of a nation's leaders, transparency in its transactions and vigorous public discussion of issues and choices. In this light, MISA views the format change as a thinly-veiled and contemptuous attempt by NBC management to stifle public debate, which cannot be seen in any other light

than the NBC heeding the call of its master.

In its *State of the Media* report on Namibia, to be launched on World Press Freedom Day (3 May), points out that Namibia, which was once regarded as a pacesetter on media freedom, is increasingly seen to be lagging behind in several crucial areas. It noted in particular that the NBC remains directly accountable to the Ministry Information and Broadcasting, in defiance of both the African Charter on Human and Peoples'

Rights and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Culture, Information and Sport, which stipulate that state-funded media should operate independently of government. The NBC is still showing all the signs of being a state broadcaster rather than a public service broadcaster.

The organisation says in its statement that it hopes that this issue will continue to receive public scrutiny and form the basis of continued and vigorous debate, and it "calls on all Namibians to jealously guard their rights to hold opinions and express such opinions freely".

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