

## Namibian chat show muzzled after Nujoma 'collaborator' issue aired

Change in format to popular show coincides with callers demanding that the country's founding president, Sam Nujoma, explain his alleged links with the CIA and a claim that he collaborated with South Africa during the liberation struggle.

Windhoek – The Namibian government's interference in the format of two popular and long-running radio phone-in programmes has provoked anger from listeners and criticism from free-speech organisations, which contend that the meddling is little more than censorship.

The morning programme, *Chat Show*, broadcast on the national radio service of the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), and *Open Line*, its sister programme in the evenings – both presented in English – have allowed the public to air their grievances and opinions on any topic they chose, provided the discourse was polite and without any profanity.

Both programmes have been running since Namibia gained independence from apartheid South Africa in 1990, but a few days ahead of World Press Freedom Day on 3 May, Information and Broadcasting Minister Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah told parliament that the programme's format would be changed because of instances of abuse by some callers.

"A topic will be given every programme by the radio presenter, and listeners who phone in may comment on that topic only," the minister said while presenting her department's budget.

### 'Veiled attempt' to curb public debate slammed

In response, the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), which has its headquarters in the Namibian capital, Windhoek, issued a statement, saying, "The right to speak freely, without fear of government reprisal, is at the very heart of democracy."

"This veiled attempt by the NBC management [to curb public debate] is therefore contemptuous and cannot be seen in any other light than the NBC heeding the call of its masters."

The change in format coincided with uncomfortable topics being raised on the NBC's Oshiwambo-language phone-in programmes, in which a succession of callers demanded that the country's founding president, Sam Nujoma, explain his alleged links with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), America's secret service.

### Nujoma collaborated with SA?

The questions were sparked by a series of critical articles on Nujoma's autobiography, *Where Others Wavered*, written by human rights activist Phil ya Nangoloh and published in the local weekly newspaper, the Windhoek Observer.

According to Ya Nangoloh, the allegations of Nujoma's links with the CIA were gleaned from the recently published autobiography of Magnus Malan, a defence minister of apartheid South Africa, who wrote that Nujoma had been of "great value" as an informer or collaborator of South Africa during Namibia's liberation struggle.

"The real reason behind the draconian measure to muzzle the call-in radio programmes is to suppress criticism of Nujoma the run-up to the congress of the ruling SWAPO party later this year," said ya Nangoloh, who is executive director of the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR).

"The citizens' right to free, vibrant and natural, open and critical debate, as is necessary under our system of democracy, has been dealt a lethal blow by Minister Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah. This is bound to be challenged," he said.

"When citizens are now being told what to say and when to say it, on the one hand, and what not say and when not to say on the other, then we should be sure that unacceptable restrictions have arrived," ya Nangoloh commented.

Freedom of expression is enshrined in the Namibian constitution, and Ya Nangoloh said the inference by government was "totally unconstitutional".

## **Hosts unable to handle abusive callers**

Paul Helmut, a community activist and regular contributor to the phone-in programmes, said this was "a step backwards" for democracy. "Under apartheid rule we could not say what we wanted, but for 17 years since independence we could discuss issues in those programmes, which I call the 'people's parliament'," Helmut told IRIN. "Now our own government has taken this platform away from us."

After the format changed, Bob Kandetu, director-general of the NBC, said while he was a studio guest on the programme that part of the blame regarding the "abuse" of some callers resided with the radio show's hosts. "Some were inexperienced and did not know when to stop a caller, or how to handle him when the contribution got off the track," he said.

The NBC's nine different language services all have call-in programmes, but only the Afrikaans and German services will continue broadcasting them with the format unchanged.

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