

Media bills in final stages of approval

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Senators in their plenary session last Thursday [10 May 2012] reviewed media bills including the draft law regulating media, draft law on access to information and another one regarding the responsibilities, functioning and organisation of the Media High Council (MHC).

The bills were taken to the senate after that the Low Chamber of Deputies had adopted them last month.

Dr Alivera Mukabaramba, minister of state in charge of community development and social affairs in the ministry of local government, also caretaker of information, explained that the bills still wait to be discussed by senate standing committees

Globally, the draft law regulating media saw a lot of changes compared to the current one into force. For instance, Mukabaramba explained, the draft provides media practitioners with responsibility to regulate themselves; except electronic and internet media that will be regulated by Rwanda Utility and Regulatory Agency. Currently all media are regulated by Media High Council, a government organ.

This clause still rise a debate among senators questioning about the self-regulation allowed only for a part of media practitioners; but the ministry stays with an optimistic view on that the first attempt will determine how they will move on; given that the local media is not yet mature enough.

"The ideal should be to allow self-regulation for all, but we should go about it step by step," said Mukabaramba, adding that state intervention will also be provided when necessary.

On the other side, some articles will be removed from the current media law with the aim to bring about liveness in favor of people in media industry.

The current media law, which is to be modified, was signed in 2009, but got quickly criticized by some of the journalists and activist groups due to some of its articles that were still a burden for some of the beneficiaries. It was the second one after that the first ever one was established in 2003 when media pluralism was allowed after the 1994 genocide against Tutsi.

Evidently such a controlled situation was due to worries caused by "hate media" that had played big role in the genocide.

Apart from the self-regulation, the draft also provides many more forms of flexibility. For instance, investors in the industry will be allowed to own shares in more than one electronic media house which is not allowed now. Also foreign journalists wishing to operate in the country will no longer seek permission from MHC as there will no need to have a certain amount

for start-up business.

The new bill doesn't oblige journalism qualification degrees, but also anyone from other fields will have the right to practice journalism as far as he will be interested and trained on basics of the profession. In addition to this, permission to start a media house as well as press cards will be issued by an accepted media organ rather than MHC.

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In total, once signed 16 articles will be removed from the current media law while it will gain a new one concerning the self-regulation.

Obviously these changes oblige the restructuring of the MHC that has responsibility to promote and regulate media industry.

The state minister said that the new structure of the council was desired by both journalists and experts who have been criticizing the two main inconsistent duties to promote and regulate the industry done by one organ.

"Most of the journalists were not comfortable with the MHC," Mukabaramba said. "They often see it as an organ aimed at penalizing them rather than promoting them."

For this reason, she added, the MHC will remain with responsibility of building capacity of journalists by providing them with trainings and other kinds of support.

Another bill is about the draft law on access to information which is new in the history of media in Rwanda. The state minister explained that the idea to draft the bill resulted from the 6th Leadership Retreat held in Rubavu in 2009 after realizing that there were some public officials who were reluctant to deliver information. This will not only serve journalists, but also any citizen wishing to know any information from public officials and certain private bodies that carry any business in relation with general interest, or with rights and freedom of people.

Therefore, the draft requires all public and concerned private institutions to appoint officers in charge of information; meaning that in his absent the institution will be obliged to nominate any other one to replace him.

"We hope that the enforcement of the right to access information will bring about transparency since all people will easily be able to know what will be going on in their institutions," said the state minister, adding that those who will fail to comply with the provisions will be penalized by the penal code.

Source: allAfrica.com

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