

MISA hails Banda's media stance

By Gregory Gondwe: @Kalipochi

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The Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) has hailed Malawian president Joyce Banda for meeting media managers, owners and media organisations at her Sanjika Palace in Blantyre on 25 June 2012, where she pledged to look into some of the challenges the media face in the country.



L to R: Zoe Titus and Rev. Patrick Semphere

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Zoe Titus, MISA regional director and Anthony Kasunda, MISA-Malawi chairperson, were part of the delegation that met president Banda, said they congratulated her for the key decision to repeal [Section 46 of the Penal Code](#), a piece of legislation that previously allowed a cabinet minister to ban any publication deemed not in the public interest.

Banda got a thumbs up from the media managers for another positive development that was noted is the [removal of value-added tax](#) (VAT) on newsprint which has prompted newspaper companies to reduce copy price for newspapers.

Relevant key issues

A statement issued on Wednesday, 27 June 2012, indicates that the meeting drew the president's attention to several other key issues that are relevant to how the media in Malawi can function more effectively in the nascent democracy.

These include the passing of an access to information law, a draft bill of which has been under consideration for the past eight years; the removal of customs duty on broadcasting equipment; broadcast reforms at state broadcaster, Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC); re-constitution of the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA) board; and improvement of the conditions under which media conferences are held.

Soon after meeting the president, the media gurus convened a press conference where Titus said the delegation was very pleased with the engagement with president Banda and was optimistic about the future of media freedom and freedom of expression in Malawi.

"We got the impression that president Banda is very open to pushing an agenda for media reform," said Titus.

Positive developments



Anthony Kasunda

Kasunda added that they had received several assurances from the president, a positive development given the country's recent history.

One such assurance, Kasunda said, was that journalists would be able to choose the conditions under which the president would hold media conferences. Previously, journalists have been intimidated and heckled for asking 'the wrong questions' at presidential media conferences.

The statement further stated that MISA thanks president Banda for her expression of sincerity towards the need for a free and independent media in a democracy and also in fostering a consolidated development agenda in Malawi.

"We believe that this is a great first step and we encourage the president to follow through the assurances she has given" reads the statement.

The body pledged to continue engaging all relevant stakeholders in order to ensure that the media in Malawi, and the rest of the southern Africa region, are free.

However, MISA further said in the absence of clearly-defined and progressive legislation such as an access to information law, development in Malawi will be long in coming and democracy will be perpetually under threat from a political class that is afraid of scrutiny and intent on keeping the citizenry - the actual beneficiaries of promotion of access to information - in the dark.

"MISA will continue to engage all relevant stakeholders in order to ensure that the media in Malawi, and the rest of the southern Africa region, are free," it says.

Banda's willingness to engage the media

Addressing the same press conference, Rev. Patrick Semphere, chairperson of Media Council of Malawi (MCM) said the president has shown willingness to engage the media in all sectors of development.

"As media practitioners we appealed to the head of state to have listed outstanding concerns looked into as a matter of urgency," he said.

Semphere said the president asked for more time to look at the issues raised and see how she can address them.



Tikhala Chibwana

Also part of the delegation was, Blantyre Newspapers Limited general manager, Tikhala Chibwana who said he was particularly happy because the president conceded that any vibrant democracy requires a free media.

"We were also happy that we finally met the president considering that for 18 months we had tried in vain to secure an audience with the former president, the late Bingu wa Mutharika," he said.

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