

Accreditation dropped from SADC Media Award

The accreditation of journalists and the authorization of news houses are two criteria that have been dropped from the South African leg of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Media Awards following pressure from media and freedom of expression bodies including the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) and the Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI).

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The SADC Media Awards were established under article 19 of the Protocol to "encourage and recognize the work of journalists that promote regional integration in the fields of print, radio, television and photojournalism."

Adverts for the local leg of the competition were published this week without mention of the controversial conditions that were included in some SADC countries' award rules. The accreditation and authorization criteria stem from Article 22 of SADC Protocol on Culture, Information and Sport that calls for the establishment of a "regionally and internationally recognized SADC accreditation system or procedure for media practitioners with specific guidelines in order to facilitate the work of such personnel in the rest of the world."

Critics raised the alarm that the issue of accreditation remained on the table while in Zimbabwe, the use of the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act forced all media organisations and journalists to seek accreditation from the Media and Information Commission and had been used as a premise to shut down the Daily News.

Chair of the South African National Adjudicating Committee (NAC) Charlotte Mampane said the requirement for "journalist accreditation" and the "authorization of media houses" were deleted due to dissatisfaction from members of the organizing task team and national adjudicating committee. Mampane said she regarded the dropping of the offending requirements as a step forward for the hosting of the South African leg of the award for the first time. She believes the Media Awards' Regional Adjudicating Committee has a much different view of accreditation than that espoused by media freedom organisations.

In the Southern African context, more often than not, the licensing, registration or "recognition" of journalists by state appointed bodies provides a tissue of an excuse for governments to gag the media and restrict the free flow of information in society.

MISA is a vocal critic of the Protocol and its Article 22 on the grounds that it is not conducive to "the promotion, protection and enforcement of freedom of expression, freedom of the media and the free flow of information in Southern Africa". Accreditation of journalists and media houses is an unnecessary and unfair restriction of the public right to exercise media freedom. The sanction of an accrediting mechanism by SADC has the potential to declare persons employable or unemployable as journalists. This negates the rights of citizens who wish to earn a livelihood as a journalist, which is a serious violation of fundamental principles enshrined in Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Technically, the requirement shouldn't exist either, as there is no structure in SADC set up to accredit journalists or media houses and several SADC countries do not have a registration requirement for journalists as this negates the principle of media freedom.

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