

Malawi opposition radio station still off the air

A magistrate in Malawi should allow an opposition radio station sealed by police during general elections on 19 May 2009 to reopen, the Committee to Protect Journalists said today. CPJ also called on authorities to drop criminal charges against two station presenters.

The magistrate, sitting in the commercial city of Blantyre, postponed a ruling today on a petition calling for police to unseal Joy Radio, a station with ties to former president and opposition leader Bakili Muluzi, according to Joy's lawyer, Jonathan Kara. Speaking to CPJ today, Malawi National Police spokesman Willie Mwaluka declined to comment.

On the first day of polling for president and parliament, police raided Joy Radio and detained staffers for airing a critical 2008 political program.

"The arrest of the staffers and the continued sealing of Joy Radio are utterly disproportionate to the alleged charges against the station," said CPJ Africa Program Coordinator Tom Rhodes. "The elections are over. Authorities should allow Joy Radio to resume broadcasting."

Lloyd Zawandah, Joy's head of news and current affairs, said the 2008 program accidentally aired because of a computer problem during a period when the station was unstaffed and was supposed to be playing music. Police detained presenters Mary Chande Mhone and Obrien Nazombe and technician Abdulrazaaq Telela for questioning. Telela was released after a few hours, but Mhone and Nazombe, presenters of entertainment programs, were held for four days.

They are facing charges of contravening a provision of Malawi's Parliamentary and Presidential Elections Act, which prohibits campaigning within 48 hours of elections, according to Kara. If convicted of charges, the journalists could face up to two years imprisonment, he said.

Source: Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) via APO