

Malawi: Immigration authorities search Joy Radio station and threaten to deport manager

On 10 July 2008 immigration authorities raided Joy Radio premises, searching for foreigners allegedly employed by the station. The incident happened after State House PR officer, Chikumbutso Mtumodzi warned the station against "embarking on a disinformation crusade, airing libellous and slanderous programmes and playing derogatory songs" against the president.

Mtumodzi, a former journalist, has also alleged that the station's manager, Peter Chisale, is a Zambian national and threatened to deport him. However, Chisale has refuted the State House's claims, arguing his station abides by the Code of Conduct as stipulated in the Communications Act and that he is a bonafide Malawian citizen who only stayed in Zambia in exile, just like other Malawians, including President Mutharika and some of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party's senior officials. Chisale said he holds a Malawian passport, issued in Blantyre, and challenged Mtumodzi to cross check with immigration.

Chisale confirmed that immigration authorities went to the station looking for foreigners. He further said the authorities had also said they wanted to verify his (Chisale's) citizenship.

"Yes, indeed, immigration people came here at around 4pm but they did not get me. I understand they said they wanted foreigners working at our station, but they were told there were no foreigners. They then demanded to verify my citizenship, but the people they talked to told them I was not around. I understand they said they would come back but I have not seen them," said Chisale.

According to Chisale, the authorities also went to his home village on their verification exercise. When contacted, immigration public relations officer, Prudensia Makalamba asked to be called later.

In a 9 July press statement, Mtumodzi also accused the opposition United Democratic Front (UDF), its chairperson, former president Bakili Muluzi, and Chisale of being architects of the alleged disinformation campaign against the president and ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

Mtumodzi alleged in the statement that Chisale is not Malawian but Zambian. "We wish to inform Malawians and the international community that President Mutharika has always been a firm defender of press freedom and the right to freedom of speech and association. However, the President likewise firmly believes, as Mr. Muluzi and the UDF may be aware, that freedoms go with responsibilities. Suffice to put it on record today that the station manager at Joy Radio - one Peter Chisale - is behind the chaotic, savage and politically offensive material aired on Joy Radio. We are warning Chisale and a number of Zambian nationals employed by Joy against meddling in politics because they risk being deported at the

stroke of a minute," read the statement in part.

Joy Radio vice chairperson, Tony Mita has issued a statement condemning Mtumodzi, arguing his station handles issues in a balanced and professional manner.

"By threatening the radio station, State House wants to intimidate, and deny it the freedom of expression which Malawians fought for and got through the democratic change in 1994, which ushered into Malawi multiparty politics...Finally, with due respect again, we would like to request State House to honourably desist from muzzling the independent radio and interfering with other arms of government - that is what democracy demands," reads Joy Radio's statement in part.

MISA Malawi chairperson, Martines Namingha also condemned State House for intimidating Joy Radio, explaining that Mtumodzi is aware of institutions such Media Council and the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA), which are mandated to handle complaints against the media.

He said State House should have complained to such institutions instead of issuing threats.

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