

Presidency vs *M&G*: a breach of trust?

The Presidency has been accused of acting improperly and discrediting itself after leaking the *Mail & Guardian's* lead story to South Africa media late last week.

 Bylssa Sikiti da Silva 7 Dec 2009

“By giving an oblique answer to the question by issuing a public statement, the Presidency has acted improperly and broken the convention and seriously damaged relations with the particular newspaper.

“It also posed problems which can only damage relations between the Presidency and the media as a whole,” Raymond Louw, deputy chair of the SA Chapter of Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), told Bizcommunity.com yesterday, Sunday 6 December 2009.

“And because of the precedent it has set in public affairs, it raises serious concerns about the effects on relations between the media and the public, institutions and business,” Louw pointed out.

The Presidency has breached the constitutional rights of freedom of expression, freedom of the media and freedom to gather and impart information, which it purports to subscribe to, he said.

The Nkandla conundrum

The newspaper's lead story, an investigative story written by Mandy Rossouw, depicted how construction work has gathered momentum on President Jacob Zuma's new compound in Nkandla, Kwazulu-Natal, where houses, a police station, visitors centre, hospital and a helipad, among others, are being built to the tune of R65 million.

M&G reported that a large chunk of the bill is being footed by taxpayers.

On Thursday afternoon, Bizcommunity.com - along with other media houses - received a statement from the Presidency, admitting the facts but saying the bill is being footed by the Zuma family, an act many believe was an attempt to 'limit the impact' of the newspaper's story.

An angry Nic Dawes, *M&G* editor-in-chief, issued a statement on Friday, saying the Presidency's move seriously damaged working relationship with journalists.

Louw said: “I would guess that if trying to lessen the impact was intended, it failed because the story has not only been given wider currency but the Presidency has been seen to have discredited itself.”

William Bird, head of Media Monitoring Africa (MMA), said yesterday: “What is clear here is that the Presidency certainly robbed the *M&G* of its scoop, and in so doing gave the impetus to Government rather than the story appearing potentially as a scandal as they could give it whatever spin they wanted to.

“This means the *M&G* had to counter that instead of it being the other way around.”

A short-term win - for a long-term cost?

Some believe the Presidency will live to regret its 'mistake', which will have serious consequences on the

accuracy of future presidential media reports.

Bird said: "I think the repercussions of the Presidency's decision will be felt for a very long time and certainly some media will be loathe to approach them in the same way in the future."

He added: "I think from the Presidency's perspective they managed to do a good job of limiting potential negative impact, but the question though is, is this short win worth it given that the *M&G* will be sure to be less open in the future with exactly what they are dealing with."

Louw, who is also the editor and publisher of *Southern Africa Report*, said the proper procedure would have been for the Presidency to have issued a response to *M&G* and enabled it to publish the statement as part of its story in its next edition.

"Only then was the Presidency freed of its obligation to respect the convention that its dealings were with *M&G* alone.

"The convention of requesting before publication a response from the subject of a news story is to ensure that misconceptions or errors are corrected beforehand or a context explained.

"The Presidency chose to ignore that facility and has now posed all media - not just the *M&G* - with the serious question whether information should be referred in future to the Presidency for comment before publication.

"Each media will decide what course of action it adopts in relation to the story it intends publishing, but it is aware that the Press Code states that reference to the subject need not be done where the publication has reasonable grounds for believing by doing so it would be prevented from publishing the report or where evidence might be destroyed or witnesses intimidated."

ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.
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