

Pule, the SABC's puppeteer?

The rules governing executive appointments at the SABC are headed down the road of more government control rather than much-needed independence.



Dina Pule: Aiming to be the sole authority to make top appointments? (Image: GCIS)

Communications minister Dina Pule recently announced that she would be seeking changes to the articles of association which determine the appointing authority for the three executive management positions of chief executive, chief financial officer and chief operating officer at the SABC. This follows a series of crises at the national broadcaster, including the resignation of most of the board earlier this year.

The changes will give the minister the sole authority to make these top appointments.

It is doubtful that this will result in her stated intention of stabilising the broadcaster.

Around the world various national broadcasters appoint their boards using a variety of methods but the objectives are the same: to provide an independent national service of informing, educating and entertaining the public.

Government needs to let go

Media Development & Diversity Agency (MDDA) CEO and former SABC board member Lumko Mtimde says government needs to relinquish control of the SABC's executive management to another independent authority representing the full spectrum of society.

"In certain jurisdictions around the world the board is solely responsible for the appointment of executive management," he says. "That seems to work well because the lines of accountability are very clear.

"The best public broadcasters are those that are fully publicly funded in order to meet a public service mandate without compromising their priorities because of commercial interests," he says.

Mtimde points to the UK's BBC, which is almost entirely funded from viewers' licence fees. It is also independent from government intervention as its activities are overseen by the BBC Trust (formerly the board of governors), which appoints the executive team.

The SABC, in contrast, is funded mostly from advertising revenue, which raises the question of its independence.

In addition, though the SABC's non-executive board is appointed by parliament in a transparent public process, the appointment of the executive management is not clearly defined, leading to confusion and instability.

The Broadcasting Act states only that the SABC should have an executive team consisting of a CEO, CFO and COO.

No clarity on who has the final say

The SABC's articles of association stipulate that the non-executive board members should interview candidates for these three positions and the minister may concur. However, there is no clarity on who has the final say.

Currently, the only position that is filled permanently is that of CEO Lulama Mokhobo.

CFO Gugu Duda has been on suspension since September 2012 following allegations of irregularity in relation to procurement of services.

Acting COO Hlaudi Motsoeneng was released from the role in March after a drawn-out battle to have him placed in the job permanently, despite his lack of qualifications and due process.

Of even greater concern is the high turnover rate of the SABC's board; some insiders cite political meddling and a lack of protocol in decision-making as causes.

Too political

University of Pretoria journalism professor and former SABC board member Pippa Green says the SA public broadcasting system is too political.

"But we need to note that there is a lot of political interference in other countries, not just SA," she says. "In France, for instance, when a political party takes office executive changes inevitably happen in the broadcaster.

"SA is not the best or the worst, but what needs to happen is that the integrity of the SABC needs to be protected," she says.

Save Our SABC coalition organiser Sekoetlane Phamodi says the best governing systems are those of the Australian Broadcasting Corp and the BBC.

"They have managed to be entirely publicly funded and receive huge support from the public," he says. "This has made them valuable public assets with strict checks and balances to protect them."

He says the minister's changes will take away the SABC's independence and give government undue control.

"She has executive authority to change the articles," he says. "She would have to make a presentation to parliament to ensure that everything speaks to the broader public service mandate and the constitution, but she gives a good enough argument she'll have full powers over the executive."

The changes are expected to take place some time in the 2013/2014 financial year.

Source: Financial Mail, via I-Net Bridge

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