

Journos threatened at Mutharika's 'press rally'

 By Gregory Gondwe: @Kalipochi

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For the umpteenth time, Malawian journalists on 21 November 2011 had to suffer hostility that was full of scorn and intimidation from ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) cohorts in the presence of leader and state president Bingu wa Mutharika, who was returned from a ten day holiday in Hong-Kong at the Kamuzu International Airport in Lilongwe.

Every other time Mutharika returns from a foreign trip he organises, what purportedly would have been, a Press Conference but in Malawi cycle, it has lost this name and is now called 'Press Rallies' since it is done in the presence of political party cohorts who heckle journalists whenever they ask questions they deem is in bad taste.

Party followers outnumber journalists on many occasions, but on Monday media practitioners had to seek protection from the Police after party officials wanted to turn violent.

President Mutharika made matters worse, he intimidated journalists in his response amid booing and chanting of songs that carried threatening messages to deal with journalists who were trying find out from the president if he had solutions to the economic woes affecting the country.

Pilirani Phiri of Zodiak Broadcasting Station (ZBS) questioned the president if he would end forex and fuel shortage that had rocked the country but Mutharika responded: " I want to ask you that how would you suggest that we solve this problem?"

Contrary to what government officials told the media, Mutharika still in control although he was out the country needed to go through the files awaiting him on his desk and then he will call for a media briefing on all the matters.

Mutharika also went to town tearing apart what he called negative approach by the Malawi media.

Write stories on development, not gossip

"You are not focusing on development oriented stories, we would like you to write developmental stories. After writing two gossip stories, write one developmental story," said Mutharika.

President Mutharika proceeded to Hong Kong, following a Commonwealth meeting in Australia, but his whereabouts were kept under wrap by government officials suggesting that he was ill.

"There were rumours that I was sick and I was in coma and later they said I am dead. I am not dead unless probably I have

forgotten my casket at the airport," said Mutharika.

It was for this reason that party followers, many of them who were youth and women clad in the DPP blue party colours, started saying journalists should not ask questions. They also sang songs that vilified the media for what they said - that the president will not return.

Police protects journalists

With such hostility about 20 armed police officers were called to protect journalists after Mutharika had departed as the party cohorts still bayed for the journalists' blood.

The Malawi chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA-Malawi) has said the manner at which the president conducts his meeting with the media lives a lot to be desired.

"MISA refuses to accept what happened at the airport as a news conference, it is very unfortunate that the president has chosen to ignore our pleas to hold news conferences in the VVIP and address the party supporters afterwards," said MISA Malawi chairperson Anthony Kasunda.

He said, as MISA-Malawi, they observed that the situation at the airport was very intimidating and hostile. Kasunda continued to say that MISA-Malawi holds the president responsible for inciting his supporters to boo journalists because of his direct attack at the media in his speech.

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