

Journos could boycott Mutharika's presser

 By Gregory Gondwe: @Kalipochi

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Malawian journalists are considering whether or not to boycott president Bingu wa Mutharika's organised press conferences, called 'Press Rallies', since it is done in the presence of political party cohorts who heckle journalists whenever they ask questions.

Mutharika organises meetings with the media when he returns from a trip. At the moment there is a divided opinion between journalists on whether or not to boycott such 'press rallies' to force Mutharika to change the way the conferences are organised.

While the media are unhappy over the treatment they receive during 'press rallies', the

While the media has always been grumbling over the treatment they experience during such press conferences. A rally in [November 2011](#), sparked the debate on what measures needs to be taken. The media suffered hostility from ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) cohorts in the presence of its leader and Mutharika who returned from a ten-day holiday from Hong-Kong at the Kamuzu International Airport in Lilongwe.

The argument

Freelance journalist, Sly Gwaza argued in an op-ed [opposite the editorial page] with government journalist, John Mchilikizo, chief information officer responsible for press and managing editor at Malawi News Agency (MANA), on whether or not journalists should boycott Mutharika's press rallies. Gwaza says journalists need to boycott badly organised press conferences because they violate press freedom.

"The treatment of journalists at presidential airport press conferences continues to be a disgrace. What happened in Lilongwe on 21 November on the arrival of the president from his holiday is a stark reminder that press freedom in Malawi is still under siege," argued Gwaza.

Mchilikizo says no boycott should be encouraged because it will take the media nowhere.

"To begin with, we say the press is a fourth estate, meaning they are an arm of government. Just as members of parliament, the duty of journalists is to provide checks and balances to what the executive is doing," says Mchilikizo.

On that day, Gwaza says journalists from independent media were booed and intimidated by the assembled DPP party zealots whenever the scribes wanted to ask questions.

"Even worse, the president himself scathingly attacked the media as irresponsible, thereby setting an intimidatory tone to the press conference," he observed.

Gwaza said this kind of media treatment calls for a boycott of all government functions by independent journalists.

"Giving government a total media blackout is the only way of ensuring that the state should start appreciating the role of the media," he says.

He says the presidential and other government functions are by their nature prominent events, and all media are naturally interested to cover them. In this way the government gets free publicity which it would seriously miss if there was a private media blackout. Government forgets this. Gwaza argues that it is not easy for government to fill any vacuum created by a private media blackout.

"For starters, government cannot compete in the newspaper business which is dominated by two private, and so far independent companies," he says.

Secondly, he says government's Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) radio is increasingly facing stiff competition and getting fewer and fewer listeners because of its lack of news credibility.

"The MBC TV is the last frontier for government propaganda, and will soon be submerged once new TV licences are inevitably issued," he says.

Gwaza observes that 'these ill conceived presidential press conferences have long been condemned by the media industry'.

He recalls that Mutharika's predecessor Dr. Bakili Muluzi is being perfected by Mutharika.

Safety of journalists

The private media is of the view that the industry and the setting of such press conferences should consider safety of journalists, especially on who attends such events, and what venues are appropriate and acceptable.

"Certainly putting journalists in an open space surrounded by a narrow-minded mob of fanatical party zealots is not the solution," said Gwaza.

He said the way these press conferences are arranged is a violation of freedom of the press and expression, and threatens the personal security of journalists.

"It is difficult for journalists to perform their basic political duty of demanding accountability from public officials in such settings and it only works to the advantage of government officials because they get away with their mistakes and incompetence," he observed.

Gwaza then says clearly, the current government would like the media to be timid and not ask critical questions.

"In this way all media would become public relations parrots for the government. But this can only be wishful thinking and misplaced nostalgia for [the first President] Dr. [Hastings Kamuzu] Banda's dictatorial days."

Mutharika's argument has been that the Malawi media only concentrates on the negative and ignores the positive developments in the country.

Gwaza says the president's point is worth considering, but it cannot mean that journalists should become government public relations officers.

"Neither patriotism nor professionalism calls for that kind of journalism; government has so many channels for announcing its successes. But its shortfalls can only be exposed by a diligent and fearless independent media," he adds.

Gwaza further noted that government never appreciates the positive contribution of the independent media, but only concentrates on what it sees as negatives. In this way government also is failing in its responsibility.

By extension, Gwaza says the insults and intimidation directed at journalists by party zealots are similarly insults to the people of Malawi whom these journalists represent.

"In a democracy," observes Gwaza, "it is the responsibility of journalists to demand accountability from public officials on behalf of the people."

He however knows that it is possible that government would use to its own advantage any boycott by the private media.

"Government could hold fake media conferences with its own state and affiliated media. They would stifle the life out of private media by withholding adverts," he says. "But this would only further expose the state's disregard for constitutional freedoms and provoke dire consequences at international level."

Gwaza says a private media boycott would work very well if it was accompanied by a mass audience switch-off of all state affiliated propaganda mouthpieces.

Government provides adequate security

Mchilikizo says no Malawian will want to see a repeat of what happened on 21 November 2011, not even government.

The senior government journalist says government will ensure that those journalists are respected first and foremost because they are human beings and secondly because of the nature of their job.

He says journalists have a duty to bring government to account by reporting its activities and this they can do responsibly by asking government officials, cabinet ministers including the president questions which are pertinent for the well-being of all Malawians, without fear or favour.

Mchilikizo says government realises that journalists have a very important duty of informing and educating the nation so that ordinary Malawians are well informed of what is happening in the country in order for them to make informed choices and decisions and participate meaningfully in national development.

"Government will also ensure that journalists are well protected and are not subjected to any form of unwarranted intimidation, torture or harassment in course of carrying out their noble duty," he says.

Mchilikizo says that the government will always provide adequate security for everyone and journalists in particular, at public functions, not only at the airport but anywhere else so that they undertake their assignments freely.

"It is also common knowledge that due to the nature of their job, journalists are misunderstood and sometimes mistaken for dissidents. This mainly stems from the fact that not many people really understand the role of journalists in society and how they are supposed to discharge their duties," Mchilikizo says.

Adding that this is the more reason why journalists should always avail themselves to public or presidential functions being it at State House, the airport or a community ground and ask questions or bring to the attention of the powers that be about the issues that of importance or will contribute to the transformation of the living conditions of most if not all Malawians for the better.

Finding a solution

"In times of misunderstandings or potential danger or tension between the state and the media, I think the best is to engage one another to get to the root of the problem and together find a lasting solution to it through appropriate channels," he says before adding, "I believe the media through organisations such the Media Council of Malawi and Media Institute of Southern Africa have engaged government before on issues relating to media freedom."

He says government's doors of dialogue are wide open and that the media should continue engaging it on things the media feel are not going on well between the two sides. He says the incident in November last year should help all of both government and the private media to reflect on what might have gone wrong.

"It should also help us collectively work hard in finding solutions to our differences and together forge ahead for the good of our nation. Boycott will take us nowhere!" he says.

He could however not say what should happens now, since most of the time the party followers outnumber journalists and at the November incident, the media had to seek assistance from police from party officials who wanted to turn violent.

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 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.

When all is said and done, the journalists seem to fail to agree on one thing. A lack of consensus on what has to happen clearly puts the media in a difficult situation, says Steve Zimba, a journalist working at a privately owned radio station.

"There is no assurance as to what exactly should be the feelings when we are going to such press conferences. Look at what happened when the president was returning from the ANC centenary celebrations, private media practitioners stood aloof and left the show for the state media who ask obvious questions," he said.

He said journalism will go down the drain when journalists asks the head of state how much he has enjoyed his flight, as the state media does.

"Will such questions bring real and pertinent issues that the people would like their leader to dwell on?" questions Zimba.

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