



MISA-Zimbabwe's position on the licensing of newspapers

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MISA-Zimbabwe welcomes the Zimbabwe Media Commission's (ZMC's) approval of applications for three new newspapers, re-registration of the banned *The Daily News* and the weekly publication of *The Worker*.

The ZMC approved applications submitted by Alpha Media Holdings to publish the *NewsDay*, Modus Publications for *The Daily Gazette* and *The Mail* to be funded through Youth Empowerment Fund.

ZMC Chairperson Commissioner Godfrey Majonga confirmed that the statutory regulatory board granted all the applicants registration after consideration during the three-day strategic planning workshop that ended on 26 May 2010 in Harare. He said that the licenses would be issued 'immediately' and those whose applications were approved could start publishing.

This is a welcome development as the subsequent publishing of these papers will provide Zimbabweans with more sources of daily information, alternative presentation and interpretation of the national discourse. It will also create employment for scores of journalists that were made redundant by the forced closure of four newspapers seven years ago and those graduating from journalism schools in the country.

However, the licensing of newspapers is a mere step in the route to comprehensive media reforms that would promote freedom of the expression and freedom of the press as envisaged in Zimbabwe's global political agreement and provided for in regional and international instruments. The same repressive legislative framework, which is the source of the country's media woes is still intact; despite the new licenses journalists and media houses still have to comply with the repressive provisions of Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act and Criminal defamation laws that impose severe penalties, that include jail terms.

Journalists and media houses are still subjected to stringent procedures for registration and accreditation; only Zimbabwean citizens are allowed to own media services, foreigners are precluded from holding shares in mass the media and can only do so the at Minister's discretion; this provision makes it difficult for local media to seek foreign funding. Furthermore only citizens and permanent residents can be employed as journalists in Zimbabwe; non residents can only be accredited by the ZMC for not more than 60 days.

The broadcasting sector in Zimbabwe still remains dominated by the state broadcaster, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC). With the repressive Broadcasting Services Act still in place stringent requirements for establishing broadcasting stations still remain.

There is no progress at all in the establishment of the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe to register prospective broadcasters despite the coalition principals' pledge to urgently constitute it.

It is against this background that MISA-Zimbabwe is calling for more tangible steps to compliment the licensing of the new papers and genuinely democratise the media sector. MISA-Zimbabwe calls for:

- The recruitment of untainted individuals to run the administrative arm of the ZMC secretariat
- The repeal of AIPPA and all laws that stifle the free flow of information and impinge on Zimbabweans' right to freedom of expression
- The repeal of ZMC's registration requirements and their replacement with democratic ones that are compatible with the best practice in media regulation stipulated in regional and international instruments on freedom of expression.
- The urgent establishment of the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe and licensing of prospective broadcasters
- The restoration of ZBC's public service mandate

Background

The approval of applications by the ZMC was preceded by the gazetting of registration fees for media houses and accreditation of journalists on 30 April 2010. The ZMC started receiving applications for registration by media houses on 4 May 2010.

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MISA-Zimbabwe Chairperson