

Opening of airwaves remains elusive

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In October 2007, ZANU-PF Politburo members Sikhanyiso Ndlovu and Jonathan Moyo sat in the same committee room at Parliament where backbenchers challenged the State's monopoly on the airwaves.



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At the time, Ndlovu was the minister of information and Publicity, while Moyo was a member of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Transport and Communications then chaired by former ZANU-PF Makonde Member of Parliament, Leo Mugabe.

During that Parliamentary hearing, committee members expressed concern over government's failure to open up the airwaves, forcing Ndlovu intervene by saying that the authorities' were not opposed to pluralism, but were in fact committed to allowing more players in the broadcasting sector.

Despite the assurance, in February 2009, at the formation of the inclusive government, Ndlovu left the ministry, leaving things as he had seen them when he came in 2005, with the State's monopoly fully intact.

Just lip service

His successor, Webster Shamu made the same pledge of freeing the airspace during the life of the inclusive government, but once again this proved to be just lip service.

"Government remains committed to ensuring that multiple voices are given an opportunity to express themselves through the registration and licensing of more players in the industry, including the electronic sub-sector of the industry," Shamu said in October 2010, exactly three years after his predecessor had made a similar pledge.

In September this year, Shamu said goodbye to the ministry. Following agitations for more private broadcasting players, only two licenses were awarded - one to State run Star FM and the other to ZiFM owned by ZANU-PF's Nyanga MP, Supa Mandiwanzira who is now the Deputy Minister of Media and Broadcasting Services, headed by Moyo.

For Moyo, now the new captain of the media ministry, it remains to be seen whether he will heed the reformist voices of his then fellow committee members who were with him at Parliament Building's 4th floor six years ago on that hot October day to press Ndlovu on the need for plurality in the broadcasting sector.

Now that he is on the spot, will he play ball?

Some of the committee members who were present during the deliberation such as Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) former Zengeza MP Goodrich Chimbaira are waiting anxiously for the minister's next move.

Not moving a single step

"At that time, everyone including those in ZANU-PF wanted the airwaves to be opened up, but somehow when it came to implementation we did not move a single step. Even Moyo and Leo supported the opening of the airwaves," Chimbaira recounted to the Financial Gazette this week the thinking and mood in their committee during that era.

"I remember, during one meeting the two (Moyo and Mugabe) clashed over the unbundling of the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings and Moyo ended up saying to Leo it's your uncle (President Robert Mugabe) who sent me to do the things that I did. Up to now, I don't know if he was joking or serious."

But one may ask: with so many pledges from different ministers and even ZANU-PF lawmakers; why has it proved to be a tall order for government to facilitate the opening up of the airwaves 33 years after independence? Does this point to a deficiency in will power?

Possible reasons

On Monday, political analyst Ricky Mukonza, offered possible reasons.

"Within an undemocratic system like the one in Zimbabwe, information is a very important resource; therefore it needs to be controlled. ZANU-PF government has to continue controlling the content of what gets into public domain, which might not be the case if they free the airwaves. All this is being done to keep a tight grip on power," said Mukonza.

Be that as it may, those opposed to pluralism have blamed the current analogue system for failure to open the airwaves saying plurality would only be possible if the country migrates to digitalisation.

But history and facts may yet show that such an excuse has been used as a smokescreen to maintain the status quo for in 2011 Shamu said the current system could accommodate six community radio stations, but nothing came of it.

According to the Media Monitoring Project of Zimbabwe (MMPZ), the country is capable of carrying as many as 70 or more local radio stations on the present analogue system and there's nothing to stop that from happening -- except for the existing restrictive laws and absence of political will.

Controlling vs regulating media activity

MMPZ said existing media laws, especially those relating to broadcasting are clearly in conflict with the new Constitution and urgently need to be amended as they seem to control and not regulate media activity.

Under the current set up, the intention is seen as maintaining a tight grip on the airwaves.

"As for community radio broadcasting, there is absolutely no chance of this happening without the ministry having an overbearing influence on who will represent those 'communities'. So if community radio broadcasting is allowed to go ahead at all, chances are it will be done with the close supervision of government. This of course does little in enhancing access to information if citizens get more of the 'same'," MMPZ said.

Numbers alone do not guarantee pluralism as "more of the same" stations coming for perceived ruling party members or sympathisers defeats the whole tenets of media diversity.

Some months ago, Zimbabwe Newspapers (Zimpapers)' former chairperson Paul Chimedza, who is also ZANU-PF's Gutu South MP announced that after setting up Star FM they would be expanding their media empire by establishing a TV station. Some pundits contend that with the current setup that appears to favour those connected to the state or ZANU-PF, it was not far-fetched for Chimedza to say so.

The Media Institute of Southern Africa local chapter's director, Nhlanhla Ngwenya, said unless the new government reconstitutes the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe and ensure that there is an independent regulatory board in place, whatever reforms in that sector will forever remain mired in controversy and perceptions of bias.

"There is need to assess who will be given TV licenses considering that we have heard in the past former Zimpapers chairman Paul Chimedza saying they intend to expand the media empire by also establishing a TV station. In fact, rumour has it that they are already putting up a station and have recruited some individuals to put everything in place. Why would they hastily do that, if they aren't sure they will get it?" Ngwenya said.

Prospective radio stations

At present, more than 20 prospective radio stations are waiting in the wings to be granted operating licences. Sixteen of those initiatives fall under the Zimbabwe Association of Community Radio Stations (ZACRAS), which has been in existence since 2003.

This week, ZACRAS national coordinator Vivienne Marara, said her organisation welcomes engagement meetings that Moyo and Mandiwanzira have held.

"It is our hope that the minister will take on board the views and issues raised by various media representatives during the meetings, so that his ministry positively contributes towards the development of the media sector in Zimbabwe," said Marara.

"It is high time that community radios are given licenses to operate, so as to accord communities a platform to discuss issues pertinent to them."

The ZACRAS national coordinator said media law reform, guided by the new constitutional provisions, remains at the top of the agenda as this would go a long way in the creation of a conducive media operational and policy environment that will go a long way in promoting the flourishing of a media sector which holistically contributes to democratic processes and development in Zimbabwe.

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