

Government condemns *Sunday Times* assessment

By Gregory Gondwe: @Kalipochi

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The Malawian government has yet again launched an attack on *The Sunday Times* newspaper for coming up with a cabinet assessment that has labeled the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government a total failure.

Every year the newspaper assesses the presidency to see how they are fairing, and in each case the government finds a fault in the given verdict.

Government spokesperson, Patricia Kaliati, in a veiled admission said that indeed her government is fairing badly said 'he who comes into equity must come with clean hands'.

"The company that publishes *Sunday Times* [Blantyre Newspapers Limited] just retrenched over hundred workers recently and this is a clear show that it is also being badly managed, so why should they be picking on us," argued Kaliati.

Assessment of the cabinet

The newspaper carried a special 8-page *Cabinet Assessment* supplement inside its 26 February 2012 edition which rates the president, vice-president and the 17 cabinet ministers on a scale of 1-10.

Kaliati, the information and civic education minister, scored 2, and she was very angry that she could be rated this low.

According to the newspaper, a score of 1-2 means 'give it up' and that the minister should seriously consider giving up their ministerial job while a score of 9-10 indicates 'excellent, and that such official deserves another term'.

3-4 means 'pull up your socks please; 5-6 'ok, but you can do better'; 7-8 'you are a star'.

President Mutharika has scored 4, but Kaliati challenged that the newspaper has no credibility to judge others.

Is the government meeting objectives?

The newspaper adds justification on each and every minister's score by listing what is expected of them and how they are delivering.

For example, Kaliati's mission is to develop, promote, coordinate and regulate public information programmes through the development and utilisation of innovative information and communication technologies and other services to ensure a well

informed and knowledgeable nation for accelerated socio-economic growth and development.

"One of its objectives is to create free flow of information by developing policies and legislations for a conducive media and communication sector," adding that her ministry also aims at promoting distribution of publications and strengthening of regulatory framework to facilitate free flow of information.

Finding faults

Then it [the assessment] starts pointing out where she stumbled, "...Kaliati has little to show for achieving both the mission and objectives." Since taking over from her predecessor, whom it says also fared no better, Kaliati shows incompetence.

"Instead of putting a positive spin on the image of the regime, Kaliati is all over the place picking fights with donors, the media, the opposition, civil society organisations and anyone who holds dissenting views about the current regime, sometimes using the most uncouth of languages," says the paper.

The information minister is also lauded for knowing how to speak 'fast' but the newspaper says she usually lacks substance and grace in her public speaking.

Her attempt to be the jack-of-all-trades, where she speaks for any government department, including other ministries and the police, has endeared her to the media, eager for a hilarious sound-bite.

"It had done little to hide the fact that lack of substance and moderation are her Achilles' heel," it says.

MACRA's involvement

Kaliati is also blamed for letting the Malawi Communication Regulatory Authority (MACRA) which is under her ministry hog the limelight for wrong reasons.

The *Sunday Times* observes the battle late last year between MACRA and mobile telecommunication operators over the purchase of the Consolidated ICT Regulatory Management System ([CIRMS](#)) where she has yet failed to resolve the matter.

While MACRA said the machine will monitor fraud, revenue assurance and quality control, operators contended that it was in fact supposed to invade people's privacy contrary to the Republic Constitution.

"Kaliati's response was to threaten the operators with revocation of licenses for attempting to override MACRA," observes *The Sunday Times*, adding that she made no public attempts to understand the public furore surrounding CIRMS and why the government, as the licensor, had an obligation towards the operators other than just disconnecting them.

The other case in point where the information minister is asked to resign, is where the newspaper says MACRA revoked Joy TV licence but last October the [Zambian government granted one to Joy TV](#) to broadcast from the border town in Chipata.

Individuals and organisations related to president Mutharika were granted multiple TV and radio licenses at the expense of experienced operators in the media, *The Sunday Times* says Kaliati explained away the anomaly by saying the licenses were only for phase one when no such arrangement existed during the application process.

The paper says MACRA has also blotched Kaliati's scorecard by routinely censoring private radio stations, especially for airing programmes critical of the regime.

Is MANA also failing?

Kaliati has also been taken to task over her failure to make the Malawi News Agency (MANA), which has footprints across

the country, relevant. The newspaper observes that MANA's only achievement has been to waste tax payers' money.

"The agency has failed to take advantage of its wide coverage to boost its revenue through subscriptions," observes the newspaper, although with reservations as it adds, "But, to achieve that, MANA needs to be restructured and depoliticized so that its stories can be trusted and used by the private media - a huge, ready market."

Kaliati is also being accused of continuously attacking the private media by challenging its credibility and operations when it reports anything that government views in negative shade.

As information minister, she is said to have also failed in controlling the hostile environment for presidential press conferences and briefing for the private media.

She has also failed to champion the access to information bill: "One wishes she were as peremptory in pushing the enactment of the Access to Information Bill, which has been gathering dust for over five years now. But she hasn't."

Should Kaliati resign?

Based on this, the newspaper has asked her to resign, saying, "That, and everything else she has failed at leaves her clutching at the straws for survival. And we haven't even bothered to talk about the nauseating propaganda, mayhem and confusion at MBC Radio, TVM or [MBC-TV](#) or whatever it is that it's called. What has become of the famous merger, madam Kaliati?"

In defense, Kaliati reacted, "They should answer those questions themselves. If they think I am editor at *The Sunday Times* let them fire me, but I cannot resign because a certain unsuccessful newspaper says so."

She said the newspaper has no business looking at the cabinet when it is a failure as a media company.

Foreseeing such a reaction, *The Sunday Times* published in the same edition that it was against a backdrop of discontent and complaints about how the DPP government is fairing, that it assessed the president and his cabinet.

"That this cabinet has flunked should come as no surprise, really, because it has presided over the meltdown of the Malawian economy - which is currently on its knees - but has then failed to formulate a coherent, tangible and viable plan to get the country out of this crisis," the paper reported.

It was also stated that there is also an assault on people's civil liberties, with the recent case of the police blatantly disregarding two court orders to release lawyer-activist, Ralph Kasambara, which seems to suggest a total breakdown in the rule of law.

"Added to the woes of this cabinet is the dysfunctional presidency, where vice president Joyce Banda has been rendered virtually redundant and is now an outsider, even though she still clings to the title and the perks," it says.

Is the cabinet just observing?

In 2011, *The Sunday Times* says Malawi experienced rising violence and threats against human rights activist, lawyers and journalists. The past year is also when the University of Malawi was brought to a standstill for eight months as lecturers fought for academic freedom and the cabinet largely watched. The same scenario is currently repeating itself, with judiciary workers on strike for two months now and the cabinet largely acting as spectators to the drama.

"Nothing illustrated the frustrations of the people more than the mass action they took on July 20 last year to demonstrate against rising cost of living, against corruption and intolerance by the government," it says.

It further observes that the country continues to experience chronic shortages of foreign exchange, medicines and fuel

and, besides the stop-gap measure of borrowing to buy these essentials, there is very little happening to inspire confidence in the Malawian people.

Reality check

The assessment is a reality check of what this cabinet has done so far and one hopes it spurs ministers towards working for a more prosperous and just Malawi and 18 journalists from the publication went to work to come up with the scorecards for the president and his cabinet.

The newspaper noted in an editorial, "We all can do better", where it said the assessment of how the cabinet has performed last year to date is a chilling reminder to everyone concerned that this country is going through turbulent times and needs to have all hands on deck to fix the myriad of problems facing this country.

"It is with no particular pleasure that we have presented a cabinet that has largely dismally failed to perform its duties to deliver its mandate. We would have been happier to assess a cabinet that passed with flying colours, indicating that all is well and Malawians are a happy lot. But sadly, it is not so,"

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