

Experts slam proposed media reforms

Media experts have bemoaned the retention of a statutory body regulating the conduct of journalism despite constitutional guarantees for freedom of the media in the draft charter.

Media reforms were one of the key reforms ahead of elections, but media experts fear that the new constitution was giving with one hand while taking with the other.

Media Institute of Southern Africa - Zimbabwe (MISA), director Nhlanhla Ngwenya said while there were positives to draw out from the charter, the entrenchment of the Zimbabwe Media Commission (ZMC) contradicted the spirit of democracy.

"The entrenchment of a statutory media regulatory board, the Zimbabwe Media Commission, posits contradictions to the spirit and letter of media freedom and access to information, the draft seeks to promote," he said.

Ngwenya said what was worrying was that the commission could "take disciplinary" action against journalists it deemed to be errant.

"The commission retains the powers to take disciplinary action against journalists deemed to have violated ethical conduct," he said. "In a democracy, the duty of a media regulator is not to discipline journalists or media houses but to secure an environment that would promote free media activity."

The MISA director said if the authorities thought there was need to have a regulator, then the commission should be for the sole purpose of regulating the broadcasting sector's finite frequency spectrum.

Ngwenya said he was also worried that there was a perpetuation of state ownership of the media, yet the charter says these outlets should be independent of editorial control, impartial and present divergent views, arguing that this was a contradiction in terms.

"Only a genuinely publicly-owned media whose governance structures are transparently established; representative of the public; accountable to parliament and adequately insulated from political control and manipulation can fulfill the obligations spelt out [in that section]," he said.

Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe (VMCZ) executive director, Takura Zhangazha echoed similar sentiments, saying the provisions for ZMC were most unfortunate.

"It is not preferable to have such regulations," he said. "Such provisions criminalise the media."

Zhangazha lamented that ZMC was a product of the much loathed Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and its retention was cause for concern.

"We do not see the democratic rationale of such media provisions," he said. "The media should be free to express themselves."

VMCZ is advocating for voluntary media regulation rather than a statutory commission. The council said its board was yet to meet to come up with a position on the draft.

Zimbabwe's media laws have often been derided for being too harsh and stifling free speech.

It is hoped that the new constitution will unshackle the media from the clutches of the state and allow for journalists to carry out their jobs freely.

Source: [allAfrica](#)

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