

State blocks Kadaga media campaign

A campaign waged by a group of youths in Busoga to promote Parliament Speaker, Rebecca Kadaga, as future president has caught the eye of government and ultimately run into trouble.



The campaign spearheaded by a group calling itself, 'Kadaga; Uganda's Angela Merkel' (KUAM), has used Jinja-based journalists and radio stations to rally people to support a probable bid for president by Kadaga.

In the last one week, (KUAM) has collected at least 1,000 signatures and plans a countrywide campaign to get more, which the group plans to use to persuade Kadaga that her candidacy would be popular. But The Observer has learnt that state machinery has been called upon to put pressure on journalists and radio stations in Busoga to drop the campaign.

One of the campaigners, Tony Wantimba, a presenter of a morning talk show on Jinja-based Baba FM, told The Observer yesterday that he has been warned by his programmes director not to discuss Kadaga's candidacy on air.

"My co-host Alton Kasolol and I have been told by our programmes director not to open debate on any controversial topical issue which puts Kadaga in the limelight, and since then I am supposed to exercise reasonable restraint," he said.

States interest spells doom for the campaign

The campaign, which started in Jinja and Kamuli districts, is expected to roll out across Uganda. However, the state's interest spells doom for the campaign which has thrived through media debate.

"Obviously this is against the spirit of the media because ideally we are supposed to be a platform for all views but this is subject to the owners' interests and as employees we have to comply. The presenter, who now fears for his job, claimed his boss had read to him a letter said to have been written by UCC and demanding professionalism. "After that, he told me to take caution," Wantimba said.

Innocent Anyole, who hosts a political talk-show on the same radio station, also told The Observer that he had been warned by his programmes director.

"I was told not to invite people who are promoting the Kadaga presidential bid; besides, if I am to invite opposition figures, they have to be moderate in their views," he said.

Interviewed for this story, Mathias Kabeera, the Baba FM programmes director, said his presenters had not been stopped from talking about Kadaga or opposition-related issues. "What I know is that they have been warned to be professional while on air," he said.

Asked about the accusations of partiality and unprofessionalism, Wantimba said these were false.

"We are professional in our programmes and I don't think that it's unprofessional to talk about Kadaga's achievements and potential," he said.

Recordings to be provided

According to Stephen Balyeku, the radio manager, UCC, which is the regulator of the broadcasting industry, has requested Baba FM to provide recordings aired since the beginning of December. "We were requested by UCC to avail them with the recordings which we did and since then we have not heard from them," he said.

Other radio stations have reacted to Baba FM's woes by being more cautious. Robert Musulo, a reporter at NBS radio, said his bosses had asked him not to cover KUAM.

The Observer was unable to reach Medd Dhakaba, the NBS radio manager, for a comment on that claim. Meanwhile, Kadaga has distanced herself from the activists.

"I cannot comment on their actions because they have not talked to me about them. I came to know it from the media; so, it will be premature to comment," she said.

KUAM speaks

Solomon Baleke, the KUAM spokesperson, decried attempts by the state to block its campaign.

"We know they will look for possible charges against us; some of us will be arrested or dealt with in any form," he said.

"But I want to remind them that they will not win the hearts of Kadaga followers, notwithstanding the level of intimidation against the campaign promoters."

Contacted, the UCC spokesperson Fred Otunnu said he was not aware of the regulator's intervention.