

Govt to repeal oppressive media law

By Gregory Gondwe: @Kalipochi

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President Joyce Banda announced on Friday, May 18 2012, that her government will repeal a piece of legislation that was meant to oppress the media which was being championed by the late president Bingu wa Mutharika.

In her inaugural state of the nation address as she opened parliament, president Banda announced that her government will loosen grips on state owned Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) as it is set to become a public broadcaster.

She said one such bad law is Section 46 of the Penal Code, which gives the information minister absolute power to ban any publication, which in his or her views would injure the public.

Malawi's new vision on ICT

As if the new developments are not enough, she also unveiled Malawi's vision on the information and communication technology (ICT).

In what she described as a dream, president Banda declared, "I see opposition leaders on Malawi Broadcasting Corporation TV... We have opened up the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation to cover all Malawians including opposition parties and to act as a public broadcaster other than a mouth piece of a ruling party."

Turning to what she called Human Rights, Rule of Law and Access to Justice, she said her government is committed to the promotion these three as provided for in Malawi Constitution.

She said with respect to the rule of law, during the 2011/2012 fiscal year, the country experienced a deterioration of human rights, rule of law and governance and due to poor political and economic governance donors withdrew while others suspended aid to Malawi and the investment climate worsened.

"Court orders were not complied with and many repressive laws were passed in this august house," she said.

The repeal of laws

She said as a result of protest after some laws were duly passed by parliament and she said as a matter of urgency these laws have to be referred back to the Malawi Law Commission to be repealed.

The Malawi Chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA-Malawi) said the media fraternity is excited with

President Banda's announcement after crying for a long time in the wilderness.

"The new government has heard our cries," said Anthony Kasunda MISA-Malawi chairperson, "Our appeal goes to MPs [Members of Parliament] because they hold an important card for all the repeal of bad laws."

Kasunda said he hopes parliamentarians will support the government initiative to have Section 46, both the amended and the old version, removed from the Penal Code.

The state of ICT

On information and communication technology (ICT), president Banda said considering that the global community has become an information society thriving on generation, sharing and utilisation of up-to-date knowledge in all spheres of life, Malawi does not want to be left out.

She said countries the world over are able to make remarkable developmental strides due to their capability to harness information through modern media and it is for this reason, that the Malawi government wants to continue placing strong emphasis on the deployment and use of ICT as a key catalyst for the economic development of the country.

She said this will facilitate informed and results-oriented decision-making.

"Malawi needs a strong Telecommunications, Information and Technology (TIT) Platform in order to launch its industrial programme," declared President Banda.

She added that Malawi's TIT Platform will be able to integrate security, banking and insurance, taxation, deeds office, immigration, courts, traffic licensing, business registration, national register, education and health sectors in order to realise integrated planning and monitoring.

Building telecommunications infrastructure

The TIT programme, according to her will, take a long term view to support initiatives to change the structure of the economy.

"Government will take deliberate effort to build telecommunications infrastructure in the rural areas to support rural development initiatives and broaden the formal economy," she said.

The head of state said in order for the country to fast track the achievement of its national development goals, the government is enhancing e-government service in order to coordinate and manage national and public sector ICT development and utilization aimed at improving public service delivery.

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Countries the world over are able to make remarkable developmental strides due to their capability to harness information through modern media and she said it is for this reason, that Malawi will continue to place strong emphasis on the deployment and use of ICT as a key catalyst for the economic development.

"This will facilitate informed and results-oriented decision-making," hopes Banda.

Improving of ICT services in rural communities

In this regards she disclosed that the country has set its vision in improving of ICT services in rural communities and other areas lacking ICT facilities, during 2011/2012 fiscal year.

She said government established seven community telecentres in Ntcheu, Mwanza, Neno, Mangochi, Mulanje, Phalombe and Nsanje under the Infrastructure Services Project, bringing to 51 the number of telecentres in the country.

"Government, in collaboration with the Government of the Republic of Tanzania, will continue to implement Regional Communications Infrastructure Project," disclosed Banda.

Connecting Malawi to the world

Once completed, she said the project will connect Malawi to the rest of the world through a fibre network cable in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

"This will complement the other fibre cable network connecting this country to the world through Mozambique," she added.

President Banda government will specifically focus on 12 areas, chief among them the restructuring of the telecommunications industry.

She said this will be achieved by establishing a public limited company that can drive infrastructure development in rural areas as well as pioneering technological advancement and inviting a strategic private sector partner for technology, skills transfer and private capital.

"Priority will be given to the establishment of the optic fibre across the country besides giving free bandwidth access to universities, colleges and research centres to enable them digitize their records, access and disseminate data easily," she said.

In exchange, universities and colleges she said will be expected to digitize all their collections and make them available online. Government says it will also ensure the provision of postal services to rural areas by restructuring the postal services to become drivers of internet access and information management centres.

President Banda said they will re-negotiate existing telecommunications agreements to introduce more competition and accelerate access to telephones, internet and information technology in general throughout the country.

A catalyst for advancement

She said government is also set to open up issuance of radio, TV and Wi-max licences to increase competition which may lead to reduced prices.

"Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government has prioritised ICT as a catalyst for advancement," said Banda, who added that to this effect, government has lined up a number of initiatives in intends to promote.

Such initiatives included the expansion of the access to computers and cell phones and the internet for the rural population as well as knowledge of computers and cell phones through educational systems.

She also said government will not only install computer and cell phone centres in rural areas but computer and cell phone laboratories as well in secondary and technical schools and universities.

"Technology incubators will be introduced to academic centres to link them to problems of real industry," she said.

Establishing computer and cell phone assembling plant that can progress to higher level manufacturing she said will be achieved by entering into joint venture with one of the major computer and or cell phone manufacturing companies in the world.

Her government is also set to motivate for the establishment of venture capital by linking those with capital to those with

ideas.

"Government will build engineering capacity in computers, cell phones, printers, TVs, faxes, fridges through science fairs and encouragement of Cottage Industries for Assembling and Service Plants," she said.

ABOUT GREGORY GONDWE: @KALIPOCHI

Gregory Gondwe is a Malawian journalist who started writing in 1993. He is also a media consultant assisting several international journalists pursuing assignments in Malawi. He holds a Diploma and an Intermediate Certificate in Journalism among other media-related certificates. He can be contacted on gregorygondwe@gmail.com. Follow him on Twitter at @Kalipochi.

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