

ANC, SABC: divorce on the cards?

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Observers and independent analysts have reacted cautiously to the ANC's warning to the SABC that it should cease its role of party's propaganda machine and opt for a neutral approach. *The Sunday Independent* reported yesterday, Sunday, 3 February 2008, that CEO Dali Mpofu was summoned to the party's headquarters and told that the public broadcaster should stop pushing the party line and operate professionally.

"It sounds that we can applaud the message from the ANC leadership to the SABC, but one has to ask if it is appropriate for the SABC leadership to allow itself to be summoned to party headquarters for close-door meetings," Prof Anton Harber of Wits University's School of Journalism, told Bizcommunity.com.

Severely deteriorated

The relationship between the ruling party and the public broadcaster has severely deteriorated in the past few years amid accusations by Jacob Zuma supporters, which includes Zwelinzima Vavi-led Cosatu, Fikile Mbalula-led ANC Youth League (ANCYL) and Buti Manamela and his Young Communist League (YCL), that Mpofu and head of news Snuki Zikalala are biased against Msholozzi.

Some observers believe that the 'marriage', which has lasted for more than a decade, might be heading for a 'painful divorce'.

Prof Harber said: "Things are topsy-turvy. Normally, political parties try and seduce the media and journalists play hard-to-get.

"But here the SABC has stripped off its clothes and it is parading around naked, and the political party is begging them to dress to get dressed."

Must be embraced skeptically

One analyst, who prefers not to be identified for fear of being victimised, told Bizcommunity.com that this new development stinks and must be embraced sceptically.

"I think what the ANC is trying to say is that Mpofu, Snuki and their acolytes must dump the 'powerless' and outgoing Mbeki and shift their support to Zuma, who is now in command of the deeply divided ANC, or face the music."

Prof Harber warned the SABC against such a move, saying: “The worse thing the SABC can do is to shift their loyalties from losing faction to winning faction.

“Hopefully, they will have seen the folly of playing factional party-politics and strive for greater neutrality. And above all, focus on the quality and depth of their reporting, which has suffered in recent months.”

Furthermore, *The Sunday Independent* reported that Khanyisiwe Mkhonza, chairperson of the new board – controversially appointed by Mbeki (Zuma's party rival) – was also warned by the Chief Albert Luthuli House's new bosses to toe the party line.

Many observers are now watching Mkhonza with an eagle's eye to see if she can be trusted, rescue the organisation from a potential freefall, deliver the goods and bring the organisation to its winning ways.

Surprise support for Mkhonza

Surprisingly, Prof Harber came out in support of Mkhonza. He said: “Although the new board has been tainted by the improper process which led to their appointment, the new chair appears impressive.

“She comes with a good record from the MDDA, where she was chair and her response to this latest report indicates sensitivity to the need of the SABC to treat all political parties and factions neutrally.

“Hopefully she will impose this ethos on SABC management,” Prof Harber added.

So far, Mkhonza has declined to be interviewed by Bizcommunity.com, citing a busy schedule and having ‘plenty of things to sort out’.

ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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