

Local newspaper questions MACRA

 By Gregory Gondwe: @Kalipochi

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Sunday Times newspaper, owned by Blantyre Newspapers Limited (BNL), has through a recent issue, questioned the conduct of the Malawi Communication Regulatory Authority (MACRA).

This is after MACRA summoned Capital Radio over the programme, 'Straight Talk', a no-holds-barred talk show hosted by Brian Banda, which it wants off the air for its content seen to be hurting the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government.

Is MACRA the regulatory body?

In an article titled 'Is Macra a censorship board?', the newspaper said, "We are getting worried of developments between MACRA, the communications regulatory body, and independent radio station Capital FM over the 'Straight Talk' programme."

MACRA used its powers of the law to summon Capital Radio over the content of an edition which featured the ruling party's out-of-favour legislator Lifred Nawena.

In the programme, the legislator accused president Mutharika of surrounding himself with sycophants as cabinet ministers who were misleading him and described it as the president's inner circle which is a composition of "handclapping" people who are giving the president bad advice and cannot argue with him.

MACRA, an active watchdog

The newspaper reported that MACRA was accused of not only acting as a regulatory authority on communications, but as an active watchdog of the ruling political party and government after details emerged of what actually went on at a meeting between MACRA and Capital Radio earlier this month.

Sunday Times observed that MACRA had summoned the radio for a second round of talks over the programme which it thinks was the opinion of one the MP, who used his constitutional right to freedom of speech.

"This was a live programme and there was no way the radio could have edited the programme on the spot. What Nawena said was far from being labelled seditious because we believe his sentiments were within the bounds of accepted decency and journalism ethics," the editorial says.

It further says, although MACRA can be justified to use its legal powers to revoke a licence of any infringing station or communications player, it was felt that the regulatory body's role in this case went beyond that of a regulator.

"The government controlled body has become the censorship board itself, trying to tell people what to say, or getting annoyed with any utterances against government," observed the paper.

The newspaper argued that MACRA cannot be everything: a regulator, police, court, censorship board, judge, jury and overseer of journalism standards.

"Could they have the expertise to handle all these issues independently?" questioned the newspaper.

Sunday Times reported that it is almost apparent that MACRA is under mounting pressure from the authority aimed at cracking down on voices critical of government and the ruling party leadership.

At the meeting, MACRA is said to have expressed its displeasure at the remarks Nawena had made on talk show programme describing it as indecent and capable of breaching peace and tranquility in the country.

MACRA is said to also have questioned the hosting on the talk show of another politician, Harry Mkandawire, who is the ruling party's former governor for the North, but now deputy secretary general in vice president Joyce Banda's People's Party (PP).

Mkandawire is accused of looking down on Mutharika and his brother Peter, who he described as characters that are out of touch with reality and problems effecting Malawians because they have over stayed outside the country.

Another meeting scheduled

Since the radio refused to discuss the issue over the particular edition of the programme, which was now included on the summons, MACRA has rescheduled for another meeting, raising eye brows as to whose interest the regulatory body is serving.

Capital Radio lawyer, David Kanyenda and head of news, Dennis Mzembe described the meeting with MACRA as fruitful since it ended amicably. They said the meeting ended without further repercussions.

The *Sunday Times* reported that MACRA was challenged not to play watchdog of politicians.

The radio is said to have beseeched MACRA to work towards providing a platform for a diversified opinion for the Malawian public by freeing the media.

A Capital Radio delegate told MACRA that it is veering off the role of regulating the communications industry into that of a policeman, judge and jury of the private media. The regulator was quizzed why it has never summoned state controlled Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MACRA) which blatantly vilifies opposition leaders some of whom have sought relief in courts.

Radio station has an individual licence

MACRA, the paper reported, argued that each radio station has an individual licence and the other radio stations would not have known whether MBC had been summoned or not.

Minister Patricia Kaliati said private radio stations have been deliberately provocative at times in the name of offering platform to public opinion. Adding that as much as she cannot back MACRA on everything, she is aware that private radio stations sometimes attract MACRA's attention because they behave as if they are battlefields where politicians go to settle personal scores.

Kaliati said she has spoken with Capital Radio owner Al Osman on this.

"I don't think MACRA would take them to task if their content was within editorial or journalistic ethics that you people say you are guided by," Kaliati is reported as saying.

Immediately after the Tuesday meeting, *The Sunday Times* said MACRA should not embarrass itself to get involved in issues that are not competent to deal with.

"Are they the authority on journalism standards and ethics? Can they interpret freedoms enshrined in the constitution? Are they the aggrieved party in the Nawena case? Who is really complaining?" wondered the newspaper.

It said in the eyes of the international community, a country is also judged by the way it wants to restrict the operations of its private media, respected as the fourth estate in any functioning democracy.

"We wish to advise MACRA not to be influenced by powers that may be to muzzle the media, as this would only get us a bad name and roll into the mud our democratic credentials," said the paper which urged MACRA to let democracy flourish in Malawi through the media.

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