

Malawi's journalists kick-start Press Freedom Commemoration



By [Gregory Gondwe](#)

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Although the World Press Freedom Day Commemoration falls on 3 May every year, Malawi media started commemorating the day on 23 April 2011.



Journalists in the southern region of Malawi started the commemoration in the country's commercial city of Blantyre with a march along the Chipembere Highway and Haile Selassie Road from Kamuzu Stadium before ending it at the Blantyre Sports Club, where the debate took place.

The Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) Malawi Chapter announced that this year's celebrations of the World Press Freedom Day (WPF) will take place in all the three regions of the country with the main event in Mzuzu, on Saturday 7 May.

The celebrations will be held under the theme: *21st Century Media: New Frontiers, New Barriers* and seeks to cast the spotlight on the importance of new media in promoting transparency and exchange of information even in societies that do not promote free expression.

Since the march was supported by the US government through its embassy's Public Affairs Section in Malawi, public affairs officer Benjamin Canavan said before the march that his government cares about freedom of expression, which helps educate the public besides shaping the national discourse.

Hot debate

After marching on Saturday, the journalists went into a hot debate under the topic *State of Freedom of Expression in Malawi: Are Citizens Free to Express themselves?*.

Malawi's BBC correspondent Raphael Tenthani, who was one of the panellists during the debate, observed that it looks like Malawi is running in circles in as far as freedom of expression is concerned.

"If we analyse events starting from the early 1990s when we switched from one party to a democracy; instead of improving on the gains that we made at that time, we, as a nation, are sliding back to old days such that people who want to express displeasure of any kind of issues risk the wrath of the authorities," he said.

Another panellist, lawyer Mandala Mambulasa, said recently government arrested people for expressing their view on governance and this raises questions on whether or not Malawi can say it has freedom of expression.

A church clerk was arrested last year after chastising government during a funeral sermon; he was vilified by government officials before being arrested and charged with sedition. This was also followed by the arrest of four security guards of Group 4 who were nabbed after expressing their opinions while at their workplace.

Media trainer Grey Mang'anda said although the media in Malawi has been vigilant over the years, but it could lose its vigilance due state pressure.

"We have all kind of threats. They are still ongoing and cannot spare the media. The media has been vigilant and I encourage the spirit that has been in the media," he said.

Freedom of expression under threat

In his contribution, Capital Radio managing director Al Osman, warned that with repressive media laws been enacted freedom of expression is under threat.

"The country's democracy is fragile with the repressive laws such as Section 46 of the penal code which empowers the information minister to ban newspapers," said Osman.

He said the media just provide a platform and that freedom of expression is not exclusive to the media.

"Our role is to provide a platform and give questions to the people we have elected. We are in a democracy and it is in the public interest," he said.

One of the government journalists at the debate, however, argued that Malawi is enjoying the freedom of expression now than before.

"Freedom of expression has improved in the last ten years," argued Edson Mwamvuni, southern regional information officer, "however; freedom of expression has to look at the responsibilities as well."

The next commemorative activities take place this Saturday 30 April in Capital City Lilongwe where journalists will also march along the Paul Kagame Highway before settling down at Silver Club Conference Hall to debate on a topic; *Access to Information and New Media: Opportunities and Challenges for Malawi*.

The main and final event will take place four days later than the designated 3 May day when on 7 May, journalists in the north will march in the streets of Mzuzu City before assembling at St. John of God Complex Hall where a debate titled *New Media and Millennium Development Goals: Opportunities and Challenges for Malawi* will follow.

This will be followed by a gala dinner at Mzuzu Hotel where speeches, dinner, an assortment of performances, and media awards will be given to the most outstanding journalists in the year 2010.

ABOUT GREGORY GONDWE

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