

Chapter 4

The Role of the Media

The Malawi media is slowly emerging from three decades of being rigidly confined to promoting the views of the Government of Malawi and the ruling MCP. During that time, the government-owned and controlled Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), through its radio service, developed into a powerful propaganda vehicle for the one-party state on which alternative political opinion rarely found voice. There was no television service, save, more recently, for global satellite TV which only major hotels and the rich could afford. Two newspapers, *The Daily Times* and *The Malawi News*, were published during these years and they and the government-owned Malawi News Agency (MANA) offered only pro-government and pro-MCP news and views.

The role of such tightly controlled media in a one-party state cannot be overemphasised and public distrust of the MBC ran deep. As control of the media was relaxed in the last two years, there was a virtual outbreak of journalistic fervour in the print media. Up to 20 newspapers were being published at one point reflecting all shades of political opinion, vigorously and sometimes recklessly expressed. Radio remained firmly in MBC hands.

The Electoral Commission explained to us that, given the past bias, it was clear to them from very early on that some form of regulations for the conduct of the media, especially radio, during the election period was necessary to enable all participating parties to obtain fair and equal access to the media. It was also felt that the media was a means of promoting awareness and knowledge of the elections among the public. Particular attention was to be paid to the MBC.

Regulations for the Conduct of the Media

The Electoral Commission gave one of its members responsibility for media and information matters. It also requested the Commonwealth Secretariat for a Media Adviser to assist it, among other matters, with the drafting of guidelines for the media. The Commonwealth was happy to provide the services of such a person in the form of Tim Neale of Britain whose valuable contribution was warmly commended by the Electoral Commission. We noted the observation made by the Commonwealth Media Adviser in his report that the Commission had succeeded in securing a "large measure" of editorial independence for the MBC "by using the power of the Commission to dictate the entire pattern of election broadcasting". This power was given the Election Commission under the Parliamentary and Presidential Elections Act 1993.

The Electoral Commission issued guidelines for media coverage (see *Annex XIV*) whose purpose was "to ensure that full and fair coverage is given, without censorship, to the campaigns of all registered political parties during the period of campaigning and up to the close of the poll in the parliamentary and presidential elections". The Electoral Commission told us that control of all radio political broadcasts was in its hands.

The guidelines required the MBC to provide fair and balanced reporting of campaigns and political events of all registered parties. The MBC was also to arrange with the parties special election programmes, including public debates and interviews with party leaders. The guidelines spelt out in detail the format the debates should take. All parties were to be given equal treatment and the same editorial balance and fair dealing were to apply as in news bulletins and news reports. The Commission made the Head of News at MBC responsible to it for maintaining balanced and equal coverage.

In addition, the Electoral Commission ruled that the political parties could not buy airtime from the MBC for political advertisements. Instead, the MBC was to provide a specified number of time-slots for free party political broadcasts (PPBs) "of an equal number, frequency, maximum duration and equitable time placement" for each party. The parties

were to record the PPBs free from MBC or any other editorial control and subject only to the Electoral Commission's scrutiny for breach of the law or the Code of Conduct.

The MBC was also required to undertake voter education programmes, monitor itself to ensure balance and maintain full records of news bulletins, PPBs as well as recordings of all other programmes related to the elections.

The print media, which by its new-found diversity already offered a variety of political opinion, was required under the Electoral Commission's guidelines to undertake to inform and educate readers about the elections in a way that did not "further the electoral prospects of any party". Both broadcast and print media were urged to use the results of opinion polls only if there was reason to believe they were statistically sound. The organisation which conducted or commissioned the poll had also to be identified. No opinion polls were to be published in the 48 hours between the time campaigning ended and the polls closed.

The Role of Radio

Under the prompting of the Electoral Commission, the MBC transformed its news and current affairs programmes into a form few Malawians could recognise. One media observer told us that after 30 years of functioning as a tool of the governing party, it came as a shock to the MBC to find itself presenting rival political ideas. Radio listeners must have been equally surprised. In addition to the pre-election debates and PPBs, the MBC organised, at the prompting of the Electoral Commission, phone-in programmes on which Commissioners could explain the electoral process to members of the public. Parties were also invited to send information to a *Campaign News* programme. A *Know Your Candidate* programme featured people from all the contesting parties. Some Independent candidates complained to us, however, that they had not been provided any airtime. We noted that the MBC's regulations under the new arrangements did not provide for airtime being granted to Independent candidates.

The Commonwealth Media Adviser reported that by the end of the campaign period, the MBC would have broadcast 2,500 PPBs of one to four minutes duration, six public political debates, eight in-depth interviews with political leaders, two phone-ins and many voter education programmes. This intensive schedule, he added, had created an atmosphere of free speech unprecedented in recent years. We were pleased to note the Media Adviser's observation that the public debates were recorded all over the country with invited audiences of party supporters and members of local church and community groups. "It has been an eye-opener to people to see rival politicians sitting alongside each other on the same platform," he stated. "The debates are much discussed after each broadcast."

We noted the reported disappointment of the people of Malawi when they learnt that the eagerly awaited debate between the presidential candidates of the parties in Blantyre had to be called off because only two candidates, Mr Chihana of AFORD and Mr Kalua of the MDP, turned up. Attempts by the Electoral Commission to reschedule the debate for the MBC to record were unsuccessful. We were more heartened to learn that the earlier Presidential Nomination Ceremony had attracted a large audience and that the Commonwealth Media Adviser had commended MBC for its professionalism in handling coverage of that event.

Despite the watchful eye of the Electoral Commission, there were occasions on which the MBC was not always even-handed in its coverage. On Kamuzu Day, the annual national celebration of the President's birthday which fell on 14 May, much airtime was given to the celebrations in Blantyre, which many saw to be a MCP rally. The UDF complained that a much bigger political rally organised by them the same day in Blantyre was given no coverage. Many felt that the MBC's coverage of election issues and activities was patchy.

We noted, however, that a report from the International Centre Against Censorship, an organisation monitoring the media in Malawi, said issues pertaining to the elections were discussed in many MBC programmes as well. The Centre also reported that civic and voter education was carried out through special programmes. In considering these programmes as well as the special political broadcasts and reports, we were aware that the reach of radio was limited.

The MBC broke new ground by providing continuous coverage of the count and announcing results as they were released by the Electoral Commission. When these results were slow in coming, it broadcast results as picked up by its reporters on the ground. Malawians were glued to their sets by this innovative approach, although many would have wished that the MBC had offered its listeners more frequent and clearer updates of the tally of votes.

The Print Media

The proliferation of newspapers in the run-up to and after the June 1993 referendum had allowed the public to sample an astonishing array of political opinion, much of it built around personal attacks of the most scurrilous type on one candidate or another. There was only one daily newspaper, while some published two or three times a week and others weekly. Many columns were filled with accusations and descriptions that would prompt lawsuits elsewhere. In some cases, there was an attempt at more thoughtful analysis. One paper carried the text of the media analysis of the International Centre Against Censorship.

With the illiteracy rate estimated at about 70 per cent, it was doubtful that the newspaper readership reached more than a handful of the population, confined primarily to urban areas. The circulation of *The Daily Times* and *The Malawi News* had been estimated, perhaps generously, at about 25,000 when they were the only newspapers publishing. We were told, however, that newspaper readership had not grown but had simply been redistributed among the new papers. *The Daily Times* and *The Malawi News* lost circulation and the new newspapers rarely sold more than a few thousand copies each.

The Electoral Commission received a number of complaints about newspaper coverage, most relating to personal attacks and accusations which were claimed as false, and one accusing a newspaper of trying to whip up anti-Muslim sentiment.

We were left in no doubt that the major political parties had access to one newspaper or another to get their message across. Although we fully understood the journalistic enthusiasm that followed the relaxation of media controls, we regretted only that a more serious examination of the personalities and the issues was not possible.

Commentary

We believe that the Electoral Commission's guidelines for media coverage were effectively implemented. There was a clear improvement in the balance of coverage of campaign activities by the radio and all political parties participating in the elections were able to express their views on the air.

The proliferation of newspapers and the range of political opinion they offered were a further demonstration of the beginnings of press freedom in Malawi.

We firmly believe that the action taken by the Electoral Commission to ensure fair and equal access for all political parties to the media, particularly the broadcast media, contributed greatly towards the success of the elections and enhanced public confidence in the entire electoral process.