

Mutharika singles out Zodiak following attacks

President Bingu wa Mutharika whose government is under pressure to stop a second planned demonstration against his government slated for Wednesday 17 August 2011 has singled out Zodiak Broadcasting Station (ZBS) for perpetrating violence.

 By Gregory Gondwe 15 Aug 2011



In a state of the nation address on Sunday 14 August 2011, Mutharika made an attempt to discourage people to demonstrate against his government and singled out "Zodiak and other hostile" media houses for orchestrating the riots and violence that accompanied the nation-wide demonstrations on July 20, in which the Malawian police service gunned down 19 young men.

President Mutharika also accused unnamed "foreign elements" and "European governments" of plotting with civil society and opposition leaders to overthrow his government.

He said his government has information that the organisers of the demonstrations had been paid sums of money, by foreign elements, to disturb the government and to force unconstitutional regime change.

Previous demonstrations

Prior to the 20 July demonstrations, ZBS suffered attacks where masked thugs smashed and burnt two vehicles belonging to the radio station. Within 24 hours, Malawi had been engulfed with tension with a planned mass demonstration on a protest of bad governance and poor economic situation.

At around midnight on 18 July 2011 masked men descended on the radio's headquarters, in the capital city Lilongwe, where they set a vehicle on fire.

In the special address to the nation which had been broadcast on state television and radio, President Mutharika's mentioning of the radio station was seen as inciting whoever was behind the first attack to unleash the fresh attacks on the radio.

The radio management is yet to respond to the accusations coming from wa Mutharika, an economist-turned-politician.

Direct attack on media freedom

Following the first two attacks, ZBS managing director Gospel Kazako issued a statement where he said the two malicious property damage attacks bear common marks, and said they were being organised by a well-resourced central command centre.

"We call upon the police to protect Zodiak, track the shameless perpetrators of the crimes and bring them

justice," Kazako said.

He said the motive of the criminal, vicious and barbaric attacks remains a mystery and it will remain so until civilized engagement is initiated between Zodiak and whoever is financing the barbarism.

"ZBS is disturbed by the course of events and believes that the current political and institutional instability does not justify vandalism of Zodiak's private property," he said.

He said Zodiak in the strongest possible terms condemns the vandalism that is clearly aimed at impeding Zodiak's civic duty to inform Malawians without favour.

"The attacks are a direct attack on media freedom and freedom of expression guaranteed by the Constitution of the Malawi Republic," said Kazako. "The attacks are also an inhibition of entrepreneurship and private sector investment which are the hallmarks of a thriving economy. As an investment Zodiak demands protection and calls on the leadership of this country to condemn the attacks and ensure that a secure and free Malawi exists for the communications sector players," he added.

Besides Zodiak, President Mutharika also attacked unnamed European governments that he alleged are using foreign non-governmental organisations, registered in Malawi, as conduits for bringing money into the country to pay the organisers of the demonstrations. Mutharika said this explains why these organisers continue to be so stubborn in having the demonstration even though the issues they raised were already being addressed.

Spokesperson of the upcoming demonstration, Robert Nkwezalamba, who is also secretary general of the Malawi Congress for Trade Unions, has insisted that despite all kinds of ill talk the president is going to illustrate, Malawians will still stage vigils in all the cities and districts across the country.

Media under siege

In his address Mutharika said civil society and opposition leaders are hiding behind the fuel and foreign exchange shortages and gay rights issues "to overthrow my popularly elected government".

He said since he became President in 2004 there is no political prisoner in Malawi's jails, and that no Malawians have been killed or assassinated for holding differing political views and for criticising the head of state as was the case in the past.

"The economic problems currently besetting the country have also emerged elsewhere and cited the downgrading of United States debt rating and economic turbulence in European countries like Portugal, Greece, Spain, Italy and France," he said, insisting that "Malawi is therefore not an exception."

He pleaded with Malawians not to go back to the streets on 17 August 2011 as planned, saying he only received their 20-point petition on July the 20th.

"They presented their petition on the 20 July 2011; do they seriously think all those issues would have been resolved within three weeks? Would they, if they were sitting in my position, have brought in foreign exchange, fuel, electricity supply within three weeks?" asked the president.

Government addresses issues

Mutharika assured that he and his government are acting in absolute good faith and in the genuine belief that they are effectively addressing all the issues affecting Malawians at all levels. He nonetheless said these measures cannot come to fruition all at once, since they take time, and therefore the country needs to be patient.

After the first two attacks on Zodiak, the Malawi Chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA-Malawi) said it is disturbed with the recent events where ZBS has twice been attacked by unknown masked thugs in the Lilongwe.

"To all media houses and media practitioners, these are signs of times and we should all tread carefully without losing our professionalism. This is a clear sign that the media is under siege but let us all remain calm as we discharge our duties as watchdogs of the society," said MISA-Malawi acting chairperson Anthony Kasunda in a statement.

The ZBS management has indicated that it is living in fear with the scathing remarks from the President as believes they are not justified considering how professional the radio is doing its job.

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