

Zambia suspends Licenses of three broadcasters

Zambian regulators should immediately reinstate the broadcasting licenses of three media outlets it revoked, and police should drop all charges against four media workers arrested when police sealed the offices of the country's largest privately owned television station, the Committee to Protect Journalists said.



Zambia's Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), on August 22, suspended the licenses of Muvi TV, the country's largest privately owned television station, as well as Komboni Radio and Radio Itezhi Tezhi, which are also privately owned. It alleged in a statement that the three were guilty of professional misconduct and "posed a risk to national peace and stability" before and after the August 11 presidential election, according to media reports. It did not provide further details.

Milner Katolo, a lawyer for Muvi TV and Komboni Radio, told CPJ that police arrested four Muvi TV workers. They were arrested after the police and officials from the Zambia Information and Communications Technology Authority (ZICTA) took control of the station's office in Lusaka on August 22. They were charged with "criminal trespassing," he said.

Costa Mwansa, managing editor at Muvi TV, told CPJ that those arrested were John Nyendwa, Mubanga Katyeka, Joe Musakanya, and William Mwenge, and that police released them, but that they still face trespassing charges.

"Cancelling the licenses of some of Zambia's leading broadcasters on such vague grounds as preserving 'national peace' smacks of censorship," CPJ Africa program coordinator, Angela Quintal said.

"The arrest of four media workers on charges of trespassing on their own premises would be laughable were it not so outrageous. We call on Zambian regulators to return Muvi TV, Komboni Radio, and Radio Itezhi Tezhi to the airwaves immediately, and drop the spurious charges against John Nyendwa, Mubanga Katyeka, Joe Musakanya, and William Mwenge."

Katolo, the lawyer, told CPJ that the IBA gave his clients no justification for suspending their licenses. "We do not have sufficient particulars to respond to a charge of unprofessional conduct," he said.

IBA chairwoman Josephine Mapoma rejected allegations that the IBA's actions were politically motivated or that it had acted unlawfully

The lawyer said the IBA Amendment Act, which details the regulator's procedures, requires the IBA to give broadcasters notice of a complaint and to give them an opportunity to respond before suspending their licenses. He said the IBA had told him that the broadcasters would be able to present their case on September 14.

Katolo said Muvi TV and Komboni Radio would appeal to the Ministry of Information based on the IBA Amendment Act, though no minister of information has been appointed, pending the resolution of a court case disputing the outcome of August 11 presidential election. Since his clients did not have "the luxury of time," he said, he was also preparing court papers.

IBA chairwoman Josephine Mapoma rejected allegations that the IBA's actions were politically motivated or that it had acted unlawfully.

She told CPJ that she could not disclose details of the violations until the broadcasters appeared before the IBA, as she did not want to be seen to prejudge the issue. Given the gravity of the alleged infractions, she said, the IBA had invoked Section 29(1) (j) of the IBA Amendment Act which allowed it to suspend licenses pending a hearing, she said.

The decision to shut down the three broadcasters follows the June closure of the independent Zambian newspaper *The Post*, ostensibly because of a tax dispute - a move CPJ considers a politically motivated attempt to silence criticism ahead of the election, which was tainted by violence and allegations of voter intimidation.

The opposition United Party for National Development (UPND), has challenged the outcome of the election in court, alleging the country's electoral commission had manipulated the results. The court challenge has delayed the inauguration of president-elect Edgar Lungu who, according to the official results, won 50.4% of the vote against UPND leader Hakainde Hichilema's 47.6%.