

# *Ugandans to the rescue*



1/26/2011

Posted by Musa

I was appalled by recent reports in the media that nine radio stations had refused to run Inter-Party Cooperation (IPC) presidential candidate Kizza Besigye's campaign adverts because the stations are owned by NRM "big boys".

The banning of Dr Besigye's radio adverts on some private FM stations has been a typical NRM character since 1990s, and in all fairness, this should not be part of us anymore as a growing democracy.

As some of you may be aware, in 1993, the government stopped government offices from giving any advertisement business to the Monitor newspaper, just because they wanted to run it down, which some in the NRM call 'dying naturally due to mismanagement'.

The Monitor lost about 70 per cent of its advertisement revenue until this decision was reversed in 1997. So, saying it is 'free will' for private radio stations to reject Besigye's adverts is a nonstarter. We should encourage radio owners to contribute to the fairness of these elections by according all candidates the same level of exposure to the voters as much as possible.

There is no harm in this as long as they are not breaking any laws in the process. Radio discrimination by private owners has no place in a genuine democracy. What these radio stations are doing is unacceptable. It's like opening up a shop and deciding to sell goods only to a specific ethnic group or individuals.

All these forms of discriminations by private enterprises should not appear to be promoted by the political elite in our country as the head of NRM campaign Communications Bureau, Ofwono Opondo, was doing in an NTV YouTube video released recently. Even the chairman of the Electoral Commission, Dr Badru Kiggundu, appears to disagree with what these private stations are doing. The fact is that we should cherish and guard the right of free speech in Uganda. We must always be willing to defend people's right to say things we deplore to the ultimate degree. That is the way forward!

In USA, they have got the "fairness doctrine" introduced, I believe, in the 1940s and it requires broadcasters to cover important controversial issues and to provide an opportunity for contrasting views on those issues. The rules state that radio or TV stations that sell airtime to a political advocate must give free airtime to an opponent to respond. This was rectified by the 'Cullman Doctrine' in 1960s which holds that a station broadcasting a sponsored advertisement or programme on one side of a controversial issue, thereafter may not refuse to present the opposing viewpoint merely because the station could not obtain paid sponsorship for the opposition presentation. The Americans have also got the 'equal time' rule which requires radios and TVs to give equal time to qualified candidates for public office.

What Ofwono Opondo was talking about in the video, of radios or newspapers endorsing candidates in developed nations, is true, but it has no relevance to the radio discrimination going on in Uganda at the moment. By the way, even newspapers that have endorsed candidates are required by law to give space to the opposing views in these countries. For instance, in the UK, the Daily Mail is a known Conservative newspaper but it always finds space for the Labour candidates because the law requires them to do so.

Finally, the State should start taking their Access to Information Act (2005) seriously to help bridge the gap between the government and Ugandans. Any information from government and non-governmental organisations should be made public to avoid more surprises.

This encourages openness and transparency in public institutions. For instance, here in the UK, we have

Help is on the way

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got the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and Data Protection Act 1998 under the office of the Information Commissioner who reports directly to the Parliament, and it is helping everybody.

I have got as much right to know how any ministry is being run as anybody else in the country. Of course, they are some exemptions, but most of this information is not concealed to anybody in the UK. This should be the same in Uganda as it will also help in reducing the levels of corruption in the state system.

There is no point carrying out all this public inquiries into the deaths of big personalities and now we are doing the same with the burning of the Kasubi Tombs, but the public never gets to know the findings. We should have transparency in government dealings.

Mr Semuwemba lives in the United Kingdom

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