

Move to merge state broadcasters

The cabinet has approved draft legislation that intends to convert Swaziland's two state broadcasters into one national broadcaster, according to local media reports.

The *Swazi Observer*, a state-owned daily, says cabinet passed the Swaziland Broadcasting Corporation Bill 2012 and the Swaziland Broadcasting Bill 2010 on Thursday, 21 February 2013.

The Broadcasting Corporations Bill "is mainly for the establishment of... amalgamating the operations and resources of the two existing broadcasters," says the daily. The Corporation Bill, therefore, will provide the framework and funding from which the national broadcaster will begin operating, if passed by parliament.

Swaziland's airwaves and television sets are heavily censored. The state-owned and controlled radio station, under the authority of Swaziland Broadcasting and Information Service (SBIS), and Swazi TV, under the Swaziland Television Authority (STVA), act as government departments and citizens need approval from their respective chiefs before speaking on radio.

In the media reports government spokesperson Percy Simelane is quoted as saying that the proposed broadcasting legislation seeks to "safeguard, enrich and strengthen the cultural, political, social and economic fabric of Swaziland; contribute to democracy, development of society, gender equality, nation building, and provision of education".

Many commentators might question how a new national broadcasting corporation can contribute to democracy when democracy does not yet exist: political parties are banned, freedom of speech is strangled, and peaceful meetings are often interrupted by police who tell those gathered to move on.

The media report also says the legislation aims to "harmonise the broadcasting industry" while "strengthening the spiritual and moral fibre" of the nation.

The two bills, if passed by parliament, are said to be ushering in a more open, fair and diverse broadcasting sector. The legislation, if passed and properly implemented, is "expected provide for maximum availability of broadcasting to the people through the three tier system of public, commercial and community broadcasting services". On the face of it, this three-tier plan is encouraging.

However, it is not yet clear whether any meaningful attempt will be made to actually convert the state-broadcasters into a genuine public-broadcaster. The concern is that the two state-owned and controlled broadcasters simply merge into one 'super state-broadcaster', in which case freedom of speech and choice will remain curtailed and limited.

The Swazi chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA-Swaziland) has been calling for the government to free up the airwaves for over a decade. Most recently MISA supported the Times of Swaziland's push for more open broadcasting.

If this current move by government leads to a more diverse and truly public broadcaster (for TV and radio) then MISA-Swaziland will be encouraged. However, if the state continues to use the broadcaster as its exclusive domain, and continues to invoke notions of "spiritual and moral fibre" as an excuse to suppress speech, then MISA-Swaziland will continue calling for meaningful change.

No date has been set for two pieces of legislation to go before parliament for a vote.

Source: [allAfrica](#)

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