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SOUTH AFRICAN MEDIA IN THE TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY.

PAPER TO BE DELIVERED ON BEHALF OF SUZANNE VOS, EXECUTIVE MEMBER OF THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE, INKATHA FREEDOM PARTY, CHAIRPERSON, MEDIA PORTFOLIO, UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE, JANUARY 31, 1992.

I would like to thank the organisers of this conference for the opportunity of having this paper delivered on my behalf and that of the Inkatha Freedom Party at this important forum and wish you all well in your deliberations.

I write as a journalist of 25 years standing; as someone who has always loved her craft.

I am mindful, the Inkatha Freedom Party is mindful, of what has happened to the Media in Africa and elsewhere around the world during times of transition and thereafter.

We believe, therefore, that nothing complicated needs to be said about the role and the rights of the media in our country in the period of political transition in which we all find ourselves.

The issue, in our view, should be summed up as follows: one either has a free Press or one doesn't. The slightest infringement on that freedom, restrictions however cleverly worded and with the noblest intentions are, nevertheless, restrictions.

There should be no legal and other impediments on the media and those that do exist should be dispensed with immediately.

Our message to you is to insist on total and absolute freedom of the Press. Do not allow yourselves to be used and then perhaps abused by accepting self-imposed limitations now (however well-meaning they may be couched) for the ultimate advantage of political parties.

It is your job to communicate directly to the people of South Africa. Continue to do so. Don't be manipulated.

Inkatha does not believe that certain sections of the media in this country, or indeed certain journalists, are ethical, fair or responsible. The IFP has been the victim of biased and untruthful media coverage over a long period of time from some quarters and we have suffered greatly because of it.

Having been wounded by the slings and arrows of those in the media with specific anti-Inkatha agendas, we still find ourselves implacably opposed to political parties, as some are now doing, trying to strike deals with the media in seeking some sort of accommodation during the run-up to free and fair elections in South Africa.

Indeed, Working Group 1 at CODESA will no doubt be looking at the role of the media very closely. It is no secret that certain organisations can't wait to get their hands on the SABC; others may foolishly think they can demand equal air time on radio and television and that newspapers and magazines will give them equal space alongside others. Separate but equal time and column coverage, perhaps? Ring a bell? Will some be more equal than others?

A letter inviting me to this conference asked me to consider how the media "as a democratic tool" can play its role in facilitating the widest possible debate and free flow of information during the transitional period. This conference, I am told, will consider measures to promote high standards of journalistic ethics during the transitional phase.

Good for you! Keep it in-house! You are right. You do need to address these issues as a matter of urgency. Do something about your standards (at last), do something about ensuring that all views are fairly articulated. You do it. That's your job.

You are also going to discuss the "de-politicisation of the electronic media". In other words you (the media, with input from political parties and others) are going to try to find a way to nobble the SABC democratically and no doubt in the best interests of "the people."

Here my plea is for reasoned debate and I attach as an appendix to this address some views with regard to the print and electronic media.

The "steps to be taken" by you, as envisaged by the convenors of this conference, should be extremely well considered. And whatever steps you decide upon, make sure your feet are in shoes of your own design that take those steps.

There is a rocky road ahead for all of us. We must all be sure-footed, steer our own paths if necessary.

Do you need politicians to tell you what you should do? I can tell you how truly ghastly I think some of you are. Some of you do not deserve, I believe, the badge of honour that acclaims membership of the Press fraternity. That's my problem. I am free to say so. You are free to do something about my concerns, should you wish to do so, and to keep on making my life a misery.

According to some surveys journalists are held in low esteem by the public in South Africa. I don't have to wonder why. It has been my experience that the managements of media groups hold many of you in low esteem too. That is another matter and equally troubling.

Something is wrong but nothing can or will convince me that any political party has the right to go any further than asking from you the same standards that you yourselves proclaim to be your credo.

I have recourse to the law, to turn to an independent judiciary, should I believe the injury is sufficient to do so or that I have no other option. You do too.

Times of change are always times of danger.

I have been mandated to sound a very big and a very loud alarm bell at this conference. To warn of dire consequences should you allow yourselves to be manipulated by the political process.

In the negotiations ahead which will have far-reaching consequences for us all, the media must triumph unfettered from the power-plays and the compromises others may have to make for party political gain or for the sake of consensus.

The media is special and it must remain so. You all must soar free and unrestrained and beyond the grasp of endeavours to clip your wings. You are all birds of a different feather but I say quite simply that if you allow one of your flock to be plucked, your own plumage may be the next.

I thank you.
