

Guidelines and Principles for Broadcast Coverage of Elections in the SADC Region, adopted September 2005 at the annual general meeting of the Southern African Broadcasting Association (SABA) in Arusha, Tanzania.

Preamble

We, the Chief Executives of public broadcasting services in the Southern African Development Community (SADC),

Guided by the laws of our individual countries and the protocols, conventions, guidelines and treaties endorsed, signed, and/or ratified by our governments in the region in their desire to ensure the success of democratic processes, and in particular: the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa (2002), the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections (2004), the SADC Protocol on Culture, Information and Sport (2001) and the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development (1997)

Determined to create regional principles to guide coverage of elections,

Dedicated to highlighting the duty of all broadcasters, large or small, rich or poor, to contribute to and ensure free, fair and transparent elections in any way they can,

Hereby agree on and adopt the Guidelines and Principles for broadcast coverage of elections in the SADC Region as follows

A. Editorial Guidelines and Principles

Article 1

The aim of election coverage is to ensure that the electorate is empowered to make an informed choice.

In light of this, the public is entitled to accurate, fair, impartial and balanced information about the election procedures, and the positions of political parties/independents and/or candidates on issues. Broadcasters are therefore committed to make every effort to present all available and relevant information to the public.

Broadcasters will further ensure that coverage of the elections will be designed to emphasise the relevance of elections and encourage participation by all citizens in the election process.

Article 2

Broadcasters will ensure that they focus on issues of relevance and interest to citizens and not purely cover events of political parties/contestants.

Article 3

Broadcasters will provide opportunities for the public to take part in political debates on election issues. Participants of such broadcasts must be as representative as possible of different views and sectors of society.

Article 4

Broadcasters have the responsibility to treat all political parties/contestants equitably. They shall to this end facilitate fair play.

Equitable treatment does not mean equal treatment nor does it mean that broadcasters will abandon their news values and/or processes. Equitable treatment means fair treatment in both news, current affairs and discussion programmes. Fairness is achieved over time. It is unlikely to be achieved in a single programme. Broadcasters will be consistent in their treatment of political parties/contestants.

Broadcasters will not only rely on political parties/contestants to bring information but will proactively seek out information and participation in discussions.

Article 5

In an election campaign there is a risk of incumbents trying to use their position to advance their election prospect. Broadcasters should regard with caution any statement or action by an official of an incumbent party and need to check thoroughly whether for example public appearances of government officials are strictly on government business or part of their election campaign.

Article 6

Broadcasters will make sure that any impression of one-sidedness is avoided in all programming. They must act and be seen to be acting in a fair and independent manner and not be influenced by political or other interests.

Staff members who hold political office, and/or are office bearers with a political party, and/or active in political campaigning and/or standing for parliament, will not be allowed to broadcast and/or participate in editorial decision making during the election period.

Staff members, in the execution of their duties, will not wear or exhibit symbols or colours or appear with clothes or insignia associated with any political party or contestant during the election period.

Broadcasters and their staff members will not accept gifts, favours or special treatment by political parties or other interests that compromise their professional integrity.

Article 7

Broadcasters will afford political parties and/or candidates the right of reply where a report aired under the editorial responsibility of the broadcaster contains inaccurate information or unfair criticism based on a distortion of facts. The opportunity to reply must be given within at least 24 hours in a programme of similar weight and audience. Broadcasters should in this regard take special care immediately prior to the election date in order to ensure timely correction of such distortions.

In instances of conflict about this right of reply, broadcasters shall ensure timeous independent arbitration.

Article 8

Broadcasters shall not broadcast views that could incite violence or advocate hatred that is based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion or political conviction, and that constitute incitement to cause harm.

Article 9

Public opinion polls should be treated with caution and in reporting the findings of such polls broadcasters shall inform the public on the source of the poll, the commissioning agency, the period of time over which it was conducted, the sample size and the likely margin of error. Similar care must be applied when dealing with exit polls.

Article 10

Broadcasters have an obligation to inform the public of the election results, as they become available. Special care should be taken to ensure the accuracy of all results broadcast.

B. Guidelines on party election broadcasts and political advertisements

1. Definitions

1.1 Party election broadcasts are free time slots allocated to political parties/contestants to inform the electorate of their policies.

1.2. Political advertisements are paid for advertisements intended to advance the interests of any political party.

2. Guidelines

2.1 Broadcasters shall where applicable in terms of country laws afford political parties/contestants equitable and fair access to party election broadcasts and political advertisements.

2.2 Broadcasters shall ensure in such instances that they develop transparent formulae for calculating the allocation of air time, including the amount of time and the time of broadcast, to be provided to individual political parties/contestants.

2.3 Broadcasters shall timeously develop guidelines on submission of such party election broadcasts and political advertisements including details of the required formats and technical standards. Broadcasters shall publish them widely.

2.4 Broadcasters shall develop transparent mechanisms and procedures to ensure that political advertisements and party election broadcasts are not unilaterally edited or amended without consent of political parties and contestants. Such alterations are only possible if such advertisements or broadcasts do not comply with reasonable technical standards, laws of the country or any electoral codes.

2.5 Should a political party or contestant in such instances refuse to edit or amend such advertisement or broadcast, the broadcaster has the right to refuse to air it. Broadcasters should be indemnified by political parties/contestants against any cost, damage or loss incurred or sustained as a result of any claim arising from such broadcasts or advertisements.

C. Implementation of these Guidelines and Principles

In order to effect implementation of these guidelines and principles, broadcasters will:

1. Develop editorial codes and policies or review existing codes using these guidelines as minimum standards, and ensure awareness of such codes.
2. Publish these guidelines and any other internal codes to enable the public to monitor the performance of the broadcaster and hold it accountable.
3. Establish internal complaints procedures to channel and resolve complaints from the public. Broadcasters will encourage aggrieved parties to use existing independent arbitration mechanisms.
4. Ensure proper planning and resource allocation for election coverage.
5. Ensure that staff members are adequately trained in order to fulfil obligations as required by these guidelines and principles.

D. Requirements for the implementation of these Guidelines and Principles

In order to adhere to and implement these guidelines and principles, broadcasters require:

1. To be allowed to operate in an environment free of violence and intimidation. All electoral stakeholders must respect the rights of broadcasters to cover the elections. Any electoral institutions shall make all stakeholders aware of the role of broadcasters.
2. Adequate, additional state funding for coverage of the election period through government, parliament, and or any electoral commission.