



**SPEECH BY MALAWI ELECTORAL COMMISSION CHAIRPERSON,  
JUSTICE ANNABEL MTALIMANJA DURING OFFICIAL OPENING  
OF MEDIA AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION ANNUAL  
CONFERENCE**

**26 SEPTEMBER 2024**

**LILONGWE**

- **SALUTATIONS**

Good morning

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

It is my honor to address you today as we gather for this important National Conference on Media and Access to Information During Elections. The theme, "**Promoting Free Flow of Information Towards the 2025 General Elections**," could not be more relevant and timely. The value of the right of access to information and the free flow of that information in a democratic society cannot be overstated, especially during an electoral period when citizens need access to accurate, timely, and reliable information to make informed decisions. Therefore, as the electoral cycle culminates into the 2025 General Elections, it is imperative that we pause and reflect on how access and free flow of information can be promoted, and I add, protected.

Before delving into the conversation, allow me to congratulate the Media Council of Malawi and the Malawi Human Rights Commission for taking the leading role in organizing this Conference. I should also appreciate the Chandler Foundation, the United States Embassy, the Central Medical Stores Trust, the Malawi University of Business and Applied Sciences, the Malawi Revenue Authority, the National Economic Empowerment Fund, the Green Belt Authority, the National Oil Company of Malawi, the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority, the Electricity Supply Company of Malawi and indeed all the partners that have contributed towards this conference. Without this support, this great initiative could not have materialised.

Today, as we look towards the upcoming 2025 General Election, with exactly 355 days to go, I start by stating the obvious: for elections to

be free, fair and credible, the electorate must have access to information at all stages of the electoral process, thus underscoring the indispensable and paramount role that information plays in electoral processes. Therefore, the media, as a key conduit of information, has the critical responsibility of ensuring that the electorate receives accurate and unbiased information. Apart from the media, the responsibility extends to the electoral management body, MEC for present purposes, political parties and candidates, civil society organisations, media regulatory agencies, law enforcement agencies, online media platform providers, among others. At the same time, access to information laws, transparency from public institutions, and collaboration between stakeholders form the backbone of a free and fair election.

### **The Free Flow of Information as a Pillar of Transparent Elections**

Ladies and gentlemen, one of the hallmarks of a transparent electoral process is the free flow of information. For an election to be truly democratic, voters must have access to comprehensive, accurate, and timely information about political candidates, parties, policies, and the electoral process itself.

The free flow of information is a prerequisite for ensuring that the electorate is empowered to make informed decisions. Where citizens have limited access to reliable information, elections risk being skewed by misinformation, propaganda, and disinformation. When the electorate lacks the information necessary to make informed choices, democracy itself is heavily compromised.

As the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC), we are keenly aware of our responsibility to ensure that all stakeholders—voters, political parties, media outlets, civil society, and election observers—have access to the information they need. This is why we have prioritized transparency and timely communication at every step of the electoral process.

Looking ahead to the 2025 General Election, our commitment to transparency will only grow stronger. We will continue to provide regular

updates and briefings to ensure that the public is fully informed. Furthermore, we will ensure that all our communication channels, from press releases to social media platforms, are open and accessible to everyone.

### **The Critical Role of the Media in Disseminating Information**

As we delve into the role of the media, it is essential to acknowledge that media practitioners are not just passive observers of the electoral process; they are active participants who have the power to shape public opinion and influence voter behavior. In this regard, the media is one of the most powerful tools in any democracy.

The media serves multiple functions in elections. Firstly, it disseminates information that helps voters make informed decisions. This includes coverage of political parties, candidates, manifestos, and the electoral process. Secondly, the media acts as a watchdog, ensuring that all electoral activities are conducted transparently and fairly. Thirdly, the media fosters public debate, offering a platform for diverse opinions to be heard and scrutinized.

However, with this great power comes great responsibility. As media practitioners, you have the duty to provide accurate, impartial, and balanced coverage of electoral processes. You must strive to present all sides of the story and avoid sensationalism or bias. Whereas sensationalism will sell papers fast and garner likes and followings, it certainly harnesses more harm and good. In an era where misinformation and disinformation can spread like wildfire through social media and other digital platforms, the role of the media in countering false information is more critical than ever.

To counter these challenges, as we approach the 2025 elections, MEC will intensify its efforts to train and capacitate media practitioners in election

reporting. So far, we have trained over 300 journalists. We want to ensure that journalists are well-equipped to cover the elections professionally and ethically, and that they are able to navigate the challenges of reporting in a politically charged environment.

### **The Importance of Robust Access to Information Laws**

Ladies and gentlemen, while the media plays a critical role in disseminating information, it is equally important that the information they access and report on is transparent, reliable, and readily available. This is where robust access to information laws come into play.

In Malawi, the Access to Information Act (ATIA) represents a significant step forward in empowering citizens and media practitioners to seek and obtain information from public institutions. This law is crucial not only for the media but for all citizens, as it enhances transparency and accountability in information holders.

By facilitating access to public information, the ATIA allows media practitioners to conduct thorough investigations, report accurately and time, and hold information holders accountable. It also enables citizens to engage more meaningfully in the electoral process, as they can access important information on political parties, their policies, ideologies and manifestos, candidates, political party financing and the conduct of the elections.

However, for access to information laws to be truly effective, they must be implemented in a way that ensures that public institutions are open, transparent, and responsive. As the MEC, we are fully committed to upholding the principles of transparency and accountability. To buttress the point and perhaps beat our own drum, the MEC was the first institution

to appoint an Information Officer in accordance with the Access to Information Act. The MEC is a four-time recipient of the Golden key Award by the Media Institute of Southern Africa for being most open public institution. In 2022, MEC was crowned as the Access to Information (ATI) Most Compliant Organisation in Malawi. In 2023, MEC was recognized as one of the five best public institutions that are complying with the implementation of the Access to Information Act. With this record, we will continue to work closely with all stakeholders to ensure that all election-related information is made available to the public in a timely and accessible manner.

In stating this, it must be emphasized that access to information is a fundamental right that is enshrined in the Constitution of Malawi, and it is a right that must be protected and promoted at all cost. Only by ensuring that all citizens have access to the information they need can we truly build a democratic society. This being so, all information holders are beholden by the law to give effect to the spirit of the Constitution, the ATI and indeed Malawi's obligations under international and regional instruments such as the African Charter on Human People's Rights.

### **Collaboration to Combat Misinformation**

Ladies and gentlemen, as we move closer to the 2025 elections, one of the greatest challenges we are facing and we will continue to face is the spread of misinformation and disinformation. In an age where information travels at lightning speed, false information can have devastating consequences. It can confuse voters, undermine trust in the electoral process, and even incite violence. As a matter of fact, we experienced this in the recently concluded pilot voter registration, where some Wards were falsely informed that the pilot voter registration was a rigging exercise by

the Commission. Regrettably and very unfortunately, this resulted in some citizens shunning the pilot.

To combat this, it is essential that all stakeholders work together to create a conducive environment for the free flow of accurate information. The Malawi Electoral Commission cannot do this alone. We need the active collaboration of the media, civil society organizations, political parties, and all other stakeholders to ensure that misinformation is quickly identified and addressed.

Voter education will be a key component of this effort. By providing voters with accurate and comprehensive information about electoral processes, the effects of misinformation can be countered. Voter education initiatives should focus not only on the mechanics of voting but also on the importance of electoral integrity, the dangers of false information, and the role of the media in promoting transparency.

In this regard, MEC will be working closely with media bodies such as the Media Council of Malawi (MCM) and the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA Malawi) to develop comprehensive voter education programs. We will also be engaging with civil society organizations to ensure that voter education reaches every corner of the country, particularly rural and marginalized communities.

## **Conclusion**

Ladies and gentlemen, as I conclude, I wish to emphasize that the success of the 2025 General Election will depend on our collective efforts to promote the free flow of information, uphold transparency, and ensure accountability at every level of the electoral process.

The role of the media and access to information is central to this effort. By working together, we can create an electoral environment that is

characterized by trust, integrity, and inclusivity. We can ensure that every Malawian has the information they need to make informed choices, and we can safeguard the democratic values that underpin our Nation.

Again, thank you Media Council of Malawi, thank you Malawi Human Rights Commission and all partners for supporting this cause.

And I should thank you all present here for your commitment to this cause, and I wish you a fruitful and productive Conference. Together, let us continue to work towards a brighter and more transparent future for Malawi.

With these remarks, I declare the Conference officially opened.

Thank you for your attention.