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PRESS STATEMENT FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

‘Grow thicker skins’, NMT tells politicians

Freedom of speech must be protected at all costs as a fundamental right which is entrenched in our constitutional bill of rights.

While the Namibia Media Trust (NMT) actively discourages the proliferation of hate speech and/or incitement to violence on or offline, it nevertheless cannot agree with the tenor of the statement issued by the Minister of Information and Communication Technology (MICT), Mr Stanley Simataa, in which he “urges citizens to refrain from insulting ... the Head of State, Cabinet members and the entire government”.

Simataa was reacting to what he referred to as “a deluge of derogatory and insulting messages” currently circulating on social media. He requested that views and criticism be exercised using “language which conforms with the decorum befitting the stature of those being criticized”.

Politicians, in particular elected officials, and others who have placed themselves in the public eye, can and should expect more public scrutiny than the average person would face, and therefore cannot expect to be immune from even the most vigorous criticism and even insult at times. Such critique cannot and will not necessarily conform to government’s definition of being ‘constructive’, and this politicians will need to accept.

Just as people should not be punished for speaking the truth, no matter how ugly it may be, it is vitally important to protect free speech and opinion so that they may speak freely without fear of reprisal.

The Minister reminded Namibians that government would continue to resist what he called attempts to get it to react in a “heavy-handed manner”, but he did warn of “consequences” if such attacks continued. Again, we would remind government, and politicians - as the elected leaders of the people - of their commitment to accountability to citizens, rather than vice versa, and that they should, at all costs, refrain from retributive measures against those they see as responsible for what they perceive to be transgressions.

Several African governments have recently resorted to the draconian measures of shutting down or curtailing access to the internet, and social media in particular, an unacceptable practice which must be roundly condemned wherever such excesses occur.

There are legal avenues for redress and recourse for those individuals who feel they have been maligned or defamed on social media or elsewhere without government seeking to limit freedom of speech and expression for all.

We would therefore urge the Namibian government and elected officials, from the President down, to develop thicker skins and allow people to exercise their free speech and opinion without being subject to threats.

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