

LUSAKA, 13 Jun 2006 (IRIN) - Zambia's approaching general elections have increased pressure on the government to enact the Freedom of Information bill, more than three years after it was withheld for "wider consultation".

If passed, the bill would compel public officials to release information being sought, and enable a petitioner to go to court if they refused.

Parliamentarians, media practitioners and other interest groups have warned that further delay would stifle media freedom to expose shortcomings in government operations and the process of holding democratic elections, scheduled for later this year.

Legislators have cited the lack of information on President Levy Mwanawasa's recent illness as an example of when the freedom of information law would have been handy for journalists attempting to access news of the head of state's health.

Members of the opposition contended that Zambians had the right to know about the president's illness to help them make informed decisions about the coming elections. Mwanawasa has resumed light duties after reportedly suffering a minor stroke in April.

"If the president is on a drip, tell us he's on a drip - and, as government, you have a duty to convey this information to the people," said opposition MP Chrispin Sibetta during a debate in parliament last week.

. Government spokesman Vernon Mwaanga pointed out that the impact of the bill would not be restricted to the media, but would also affect the public at large and required wider consultation.

According to Mwaanga, 40 of the 191 United Nations' member countries had freedom of information legislation in place and Zambia was among 80 countries in the process of developing it.

Isabel Chimangeni, chair of the Zambia Union of Journalists, reiterated the demand to enact the bill, and asked the government to ensure that the elections and media coverage of the process would be free and fair.

Mwaanga said although there were identified cases of irregularities in parliamentary and local government elections, there were no proven cases of rigging at the presidential level in the courts of law, and hoped that this year's polls would not damage the country's reputation for conducting free and fair polls.

Despite recommendations by his doctors that the Zambian leader remain on light duty, Mwanawasa was eager to campaign, Mwaanga added. "We are confident that he will be able to undertake his duties effectively. As [of] now we will go with what the doctors are saying." Mwanawasa is eligible for a second and final five-year term. He narrowly defeated an opposition alliance led by the late Anderson Mazoka in 2001. The election date is expected to be announced in the coming weeks.

Source:

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