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Mkapa: Media a link between people and leaders



Former Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa. Photo/FILE

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On the sidelines of the just-concluded Pan Africa Media Conference, Daily Nation reporter Samwel Kumba engaged the former Tanzanian president Benjamin Mkapa in an interview on a variety of issues. Below are the excerpts:

Question: Is the media playing its role in helping African states grow economically?

ANSWER: They are trying and, indeed, the media plays a central role in ensuring constant communication between governments and their citizens, as well as among the people. None of these institutions can exist without needing the services of the other. But the media can build or destroy. The Nation Media Group, in my opinion, has largely played a key role in building.

Question: Before you were elected president, you were a practising journalist. How would you compare the media industry then and now?

ANSWER: It might be of interest for you to know that after my graduation from Makerere University, I chose two professions. First, I wanted to be a foreign relations officer at a then newly established Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tanzania. The government, however, told me that the chances of joining the ministry were slim. When it was almost apparent that I would miss that chance, I opted to become a journalist because I had studied languages. Over time, I can say, the media has grown beyond the expectation of many on the continent.

QUESTION: Your Excellency, as the president, you did not come out strongly to fight for and facilitate media growth.

ANSWER: Let me admit that I did not play a crucial role in assisting the media to grow, especially in terms of enabling them with equipment or monetary support. However, I ensured they have their freedom. When I realised that we would cross each other's paths I decided that we come up with a law which always safeguarded media's rights as well as the rights of the people of the Republic of Tanzania.

Question: But you hardly met and addressed the media as president?

ANSWER: That is true. But my term was in such a bad time when the economy was struggling, our relationship with donors was not at its best and life was generally difficult. I had to take time and fix all these. That is why I did not find time to meet the media. So, I agree with these accusations but it is not that I deliberately evaded them. I delegated that duty to my ministers.

QUESTION: There is an emerging trend where every politician wants to own a media house. What are your thoughts on this?

ANSWER: If politicians are establishing and owning media houses as a business, I have no problem at all as long as their goal is national and remains business-motivated. In other words, such politicians should not use their political

positions, first to fight their competitors and secondly to settle political scores with their perceived enemies.