

Remembering Mkapa Toward Mkapa Legacy symposium

Mkapa spearheaded stronger Government-citizens communication

It is one year down after the death of third President Benjamin Mkapa, whose contributions to this land are remarkable. As Tanzanians reflect back to what Mkapa did during his era, one of his living legacies is establishment of communication unit in every ministry and government's agency. Our reporter spoke to Ambassador Peter Kalaghe, who worked in the State House as deputy secretary to the president Mkapa, here he narrates: -

Nowadays, from the State House down to every ministry and almost each government institution and agency has communication unit.

These units have made easier for citizens being updated over several activities done by the government as well as programmes, policies and laws.

The late third president Benjamin Mkapa was the first president to engineer the formation of special department for communication within the government to bridge the communication gap between the authorities and the citizens.

As Tanzanians mark one-year anniversary of the death of Mkapa, one of his legacies he is being remembered with is how he was embracing public communication and enhancing media relations.

During his presidency, a lot of reforms were made, including privatization, formation of regulatory bodies and others with regard to boosting the country's economy.

However, there was disconnection between government's reforms and people's awareness on the reforms. It was not only the citizens but also the media.

Since Mr Mkapa was a journalist who grew in media industry, he easily identified the existed communication gap.

In the early 2000's he spearheaded the establishment of communication units in the government.

He started by studying what other countries like UK when the then Prime Minister Tony Blair was doing great in public communication. He went on to study how the South Africa was also doing.

In 2003, President Mkapa addressed the media stakeholders in a meeting held in Bagamoyo, with a view that the media industry was changing, thus needed policy changes and the government to be proactive in giving out information.

President Mkapa thought that it was important to empower ministries and government's agencies in order to make them proactive in public communication.

Mkapa began efforts within the State House itself when he coordinated efforts to have director of presidential communication.

The journey started when Mr Mkapa appointed Mr Geoffrey Mkuru as his press secretary, in charge of managing and organizing communications activities, including writing press releases, talking points and organizing local press events, among others.

At this juncture, it came to an attention that once the communication departments were in place, the next step was to enable heads of those departments become part of management meetings so that they are aware of what is discussed and decided.

Participation of the heads of departments in the management meetings also helps them in developing plans and strategies of how well to communicate the message to the public.

“We thank that President Mkapa gave a push by crafting policies and structures for public communication in the government”.

The aim was also to bring the government closer to the media because having media is very important thing, and the government must build capacity among them so that they understand government’s works better.

“President Mkapa intended to empower the media understand the government’s work better because upon understanding they could be at better position to write and report well,”

The government started understanding importance of being closer to the media.

Linking accountability and public communication, Amb Kalaghe says it was true that public communication plays a significant role in making leaders accountable.

This is due to the fact that when the public is informed over the government’s activities and programme they would be able to question and hold a leader accountable.

Amb Kalaghe was of the view that Mkapa’s efforts continued getting back up during the Forth and Firth Governments where a lot had been done in promoting media freedom and more access to information for public consumption.

A good example is enactment of the Access to Information Act, 2015, which has come to spice up President Mkapa’s vision.

The act stipulates that every person shall have the right of access to information which is under the control of information holders.

The information holder shall make available to the public or, on request, to any person, information which is under his control.

“Right to information has to be embraced, and we see that currently government agencies, for instance, police are very active in providing information to the public,” he says.

He adds: “I am satisfied with a current trend of public communication, now government’s agencies have accounts in social media platforms on which they share information to the public.”

However, the communication departments should be more than giving information but go further to assessing the impact of their information or government’s programmes or activities.

“Communication personnel have to tell us how the public has been impacted by the government’s initiatives, not only telling us what the minister has done,” he argues.

Information officers and the media should understand that they are key people that they should adhere to professionalism.

“My call is that information officers should use this opportunity of current effective engagement of media in government activities by giving them more information accurately.”

However, the government communication officers have to weigh what to share and not to share to the public, considering that the public does not want each information from the government.

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