

## Guidelines for Political Coverage During Elections

1. **Introduction and Title**

This document specifies the standards and principles to be applied in the coverage and broadcast of political news during the election period and will be titled, “Guidelines for Political Coverage During Elections.”

2. **Framework**

Media play a key role in framing electoral issues, informing the voters and communicating the platforms, policies and promises of the candidates. Professional broadcast journalists are called upon to cover election news in a manner that is perceived to be truthful, fair and unbiased.

Free and fair elections are possible only where the electorate has access to information including how to register and vote how to report irregularities in voting and the individual’s right to cast an informed and independent ballot.

Only a diverse media environment, where journalists are free from threats, physical attacks and overly restrictive laws limiting freedom of expression, can ensure that all viewpoints and political perspective are presented to the electorate.

Based on these guiding principles and in the interest of following international best practices, the Maldives Broadcasting Commission adopts the following guidelines.

3. **Direct Access Airtime During Election Period**

a. The following principles prescribed in Section 30 of the General Elections Law (Act no. (11/2008) must be followed when providing direct access to political parties and candidates during the election period.

1. During the elections period; i.e. from the day the Elections Commission formally announces the names of the candidates until 18:00 of the day prior to the election, all broadcasters must, in accordance with the Elections Public Law and all regulations pertaining to the law, must provide Direct Access airtime for candidates and political parties to promote their campaign.
2. Airtime allocation for Direct Access under Section 30 (a) of the General

Elections Law must be announced along with the rates, should the broadcaster decide to charge for direct access airtime. Broadcasters must ensure that political parties and candidates have equitable access to paid and/or free Direct Access airtime.

3. Under no circumstance should the paid and/or free Direct Access airtime provided to a political party and/or candidate under Section 30 (a) of the General Elections Law, exceed by 10% (ten percent) to that provided to another candidate and/or political party.
- b. Direct Access political messages will be clearly marked with audio/video content to indicate the sponsor.
- c. Direct Access content which contravenes the standards set forth in the broadcasting Code of Practice must not be broadcast.
- d. The reason for rejecting content under (c) will be publicly stated and within 24 hours the case will be submitted for review by the Maldives Broadcasting Commission.
- e. Equal time requirements may not apply to content such as news and current affairs programs, which are determined by the journalists and editors on the basis of what is newsworthy. Such content include:
  1. Regularly scheduled newscasts and current affairs analyses;
  2. Entertainment programs which include news and information;
  3. Documentaries (unless the documentary is about a candidate);
  4. Breaking news coverage, including rallies, press conferences and political debates.

#### 4. **News Coverage Standards**

- a. Broadcasters are encouraged to develop and follow their own voluntary ethical guidelines to ensure that the overall balance of news coverage is fair.
- b. Guidelines developed under (a) must not contravene the Code of Practice on broadcasting and Guidelines for Political Coverage During Elections set forth by the Commission.
- c. Guidelines developed under (a) should be publicly available on the station's website.
- d. Journalists should voluntarily avoid any personal activities that would call into question the fairness of their news organization. This would include public advocacy of candidates or political parties during their personal time.
- e. Journalists should exercise caution when covering official news conferences and events during the election period by state officials who are also running for office. Opposing views should be given opportunity of reply when political statements are made.
- f. Portions of News Programs that contain opinion, commentary or analysis should be clearly labeled as such.

- g. Broadcasters are encouraged to make specific daily commitment to airing news and public affairs content that explores the issues in the election and allows citizens to have a voice.
- h. Journalists should use social media in a way that does not compromise fairness. A journalist may 'friend' 'like' or 'follow' candidates or parties in order to monitor their feeds but should refrain from partisan posts.
- i. Broadcasters should have clear rules for use of their own social networking pages and forums by the public. Posts should be actively monitored to remove content that promotes hatred, violence or illegal activity.

5. **Public Service Broadcaster**

- a. The Public Service Broadcaster recognizes its special obligation to provide voter education, equitable Direct Access, and News Programs that are truthful, fair and unbiased.
- b. The Public Service Broadcaster shall keep public records of airtime devoted to political parties and candidates in both Direct Access and News Programs, with the goal of striving for transparency and overall fairness.
- c. The Public Service Broadcaster has a responsibility to air debates involving all legally qualified candidates and political parties. The format of the debates and choice of questioners and moderator should ensure that questions will be fair and balanced and reflect a wide variety of issues.
- c. The Public Service Broadcaster will make the live feed of the debates available free of charge to all broadcasters.

6. **Commercial/Private Broadcasters**

- a. In addition to following the Direct Access requirements of the Elections Public Law, broadcasters should develop voluntary guidelines for balanced and impartial News Programs and Public Service programs, including voter education.
- b. If a private broadcaster has an intentional bias to a candidate or political party it should be disclosed prominently in its political coverage.

7. **Libel and Defamation, Right of Reply and Retraction**

- a. During the Election Period any candidate or party who makes a reasonable claim of having been defamed by a broadcast must be given the opportunity to reply.
- b. In the case of factual error, the candidate or party will be entitled to a correction or retraction by the broadcaster or by the person who made the allegedly defamatory statement.
- c. The reply, correction or retraction should be given reasonable airtime and must be broadcast in a similar program, without delay.

- d. If a candidate attacks another candidate, it is the responsibility of the journalist to offer the target an opportunity to respond, and include both the attack and the response in the same report if possible.

8. **Reporting on a Candidate's Private Life**

- a. Journalists must be aware that privacy is a fundamental right guaranteed by the Constitution. To this effect when reporting on a candidate's private life, journalists must remember that respect for a person's private and family life, home and private communications is a constitutional right of every citizen and that every person must respect these rights with respect to others.
- b. If a candidate's behavior can be reasonably expected to affect the candidate's ability to carry out the duties of public office, it should be reported fairly and responsibly.
- c. Candidates and party leaders are considered public figures and should be prepared to tolerate a greater degree of criticism and a higher level of scrutiny than the ordinary citizen.
- d. Freedom of expression and creativity must be encouraged in political comedy and satire in a manner which would not violate the Broadcasting Code of Practice.

9. **Safety of Journalists**

- a. Security forces must take a pro-active approach in giving access to journalists to cover press conferences and other newsworthy events.
- b. Journalists must not be subject to arrest for gathering information, sound recordings, taking photos and video in a public place.
- c. Journalists must abide by reasonable law enforcement requests in the interest of public safety. Journalists refusing such requests will be at their own risk.
- d. Law enforcement must make special efforts to investigate all acts or threatened acts of violence, intimidation or harassment directed against journalists or any act of destruction of the property of broadcasters and broadcasting stations and bring those responsible to justice.

10. **Definitions**

**Journalists:** For the purpose of this document, 'journalists' refer to all those involved in the production and broadcast of news and programs.

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