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9th FEBRUARY, 2022

PRESS RELEASE

PARLIAMENT DEBATES THE NATIONAL ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION ACT, 2021.

The Parliament of Sierra Leone has on 9/2/ 2022 extensively debated the bill entitled; "The National Electronic Communication Act, 2021", and committed it to the Legislative Committee for further scrutiny.

The bill seeks to establish the National Communications Authority and to provide for the licensing and regulation of electronic communication operators and other related matters.

Presenting the bill to Parliament, the Minister of Information and Communications, Mohamed Rahman Swaray said the bill touches the lives of every Sierra Leonean; adding that the current and emerging situation of the telecommunication industry is gaining momentum in Sierra Leone despite its challenges.

He said under this new bill, the board has now been limited to three years instead of five years, and that the Director-General would now be appointed by the President. He informed that the bill would seek to address co-location and infrastructure, economic regulations, interconnection, transfer ownership, and among others.

In his submission, the Parliamentary Committee Chairman for Information and Communications, Hon. Boston Munda said the telecommunication industry plays a vital role in the development of the state; whilst commended the Ministry for a marvelous job in the transformation of the telecom industry in Sierra Leone.

He highlighted the role of the Committee on Information regarding the bill, and spoke on the need for capacity building for NATCOM staff. He called on colleague MPs to do the needful in the passage of the bill; whilst decried the excessive powers given to the Minister from the bill and also the creation of two funding entities instead of just one.

The Deputy Leader of Government Business, Hon. Bashiru Silikie said that when laws are enacted by Parliament, they should stand the test of time and warned for the effective functioning of the management of the Board not to be politicized. "Important state institutions should not be politicized," he warned. The Deputy Leader of Government Business commended the Minister and advised him to be rationalistic in establishing institutions of governance. He called on the Legislative Committee to do due diligence on the bill, when committed to the Legislative Committee for scrutiny.

Hon. Dr. Mark Mahmoud Kalokoh compared past and present Boards and informed that they were not in line with the proposed new board and said the bill had lot of lacuna and called for proper scrutiny by the Legislative Committee.

Hon. Lahai Marah commended the Minister for bringing very important bills to Parliament and cautioned the way bills are passed by Parliament. He spoke on the need for a two-thirds majority of MPs before bills are enacted by the law, "let take due consideration for the rural poor on bills before enactment into law", he advised. He said laws are to be made to stand the test of time in order to have an effective governance system.

He scolded the Minister that SALCAB is gone, but Universal Access Development Funds (UADF) must stay; adding that the Minister is killing old and functioning institutions, whilst creating new ones for his interest.

Hon. Mustapha Sallu commended the Minister for creating the platform for digital transformation for Sierra Leone. He said there are a lot of Board Chairpersons and Director-General of Institutions that were appointed by the President and asked why the President could not apply the same to the institution they are about to establish.

Hon. Abdul Kargbo said there was a total unanimity on the debate of the Communication bill and encouraged his colleagues MPs to continue in that direction for an effective democratic good governance. He highlighted the functions of NATCOM and that of Mobile Operators and went on to further support the idea of NATCOM retaining 90% of the revenue they collect under the bill. He supported for the establishment of UADF and decried the dissolution of Sierra Leone Cable Limited (SALCAB) .

Hon. Rev. Sama Sandy said the bill would revolutionize mobile technology and it was timely to develop a document that would stand the test of time. According to him, he had done several research in light of the bill.

He spoke on the need for the institution when created to be headed by someone appointed by the President and also suggested that UADF should be transformed into an agency. "I am of the views that we allow some of these powers to be shifted to the Managing Director," he stated.

The Leader of C4C, Hon. Saa Emerson Lamina said bringing such a bill indicated that Sierra Leone is now being put on the international platform and commended the Minister for replacing the parent document. He happily expressed that fines and protection of consumers' interests are prudent, but decried the bill for not including the councils especially mayors on the board. Contrary to previous speakers on the appointment of the Director-General, he supported that the President should appoint the latter.

Concluding the debate, the Acting Leader of the Opposition, Hon. Hassan A. Sesay said today's sitting was exceptional because everything including the statement from the Deputy Leader of Government Business was of national interest. He advised the Minister to leave UADF where as it is. He admonished the Minister to leave the bill in the hands of the drafters and not to politicize it. He used the opportunity to request for the Zooglab Agreement.

Further, the Opposition Whip advised the Minister to create strong institutions instead of individuals. "Let us don't allow the Minister to be too involved in the operations" he stated. He expressed hope for holistic approach of various

players in that sector. "The UADF must stay," he insisted. According to him, lot of rural people are benefiting from the service of UADF. He denounced the appointment of the Director General by President.

Concluding the debate, the Leader of Government Business, Hon. Mathew Sahr Nyuma thanked all MPs for their various contributions and referenced the powers of the Minister in the bill to be reviewed adding that they wanted to make the institutions more viable. He spoke well about the UADF operation and suggested for proper scrutiny on the bill. He also spoke about capacity building for the sector to be able to regulate service operators very well. In his comparative analysis on regulations in terms of percentage with other countries, he said the sector was behind in that direction. He asked the Legislative Committee to get the views of all in the course of further scrutiny. He also threw light on the administrative, composition and other aspects of the document. On the use of the tower, he advised for a fair play and also encouraged colleague MPs to rectify the problem between NATCOM and IMC on matters relating to the spectrum." We are being rational with the Minister in terms of the passage of the bill", he disclosed.

He responded to various concerns by all debaters.

The Leader of Government Business said Sierra Leone was at a global stage in the digital world and went to ask colleague MPs to send the bill to committal, while assuring that all their concerns would be taken into consideration.

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