

**Remarks by Sydney Mbhele, Absa Group Chief Marketing
Our guest of honour, Judge President of the Supreme
Court of Appeal Mahube Molemela**

SANEF Executive

Members of the media

Esteemed guests

Greetings to you all,

There's an infamous black-and-white photograph of a young Percy Qoboza, surrounded by three apartheid security police officers outside his offices in Industria.

Dressed in a pinstriped shirt with an animal-print tie, Qoboza appeared courageously undeterred as he was being detained following the midnight outlawing of eighteen organisations, including the Union of Black Journalists, as well as three newspapers –two of which he edited.

It is ironic that just two days later, on the 21st of October, 1977, an editorial written by Qoboza would appear in The New York Times titled "In South Africa, Black Misery." In it, he wrote, and I quote: "It is never too late to do the right thing. It is never too late to transform the might of South Africa into the might of justice and

dignity for all.”

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In many ways, these words continue to echo the mandate for the media today, standing as an unwavering pillar of democracy, human rights, sustainable development, and the rule of law. They remind us of our profound responsibility to uphold the truth and to be the voice for those who cannot speak for themselves.

As we gather here tonight, we are not just celebrating your achievements; we are honouring the sacrifices of those who came before us. We remember the courage of pioneers like Percy Qoboza, who faced unimaginable adversity with unwavering resolve. Their legacy is our guiding light, inspiring us to continue telling the stories of our communities with passion and empathy.

This year holds special significance for us as a nation, as we commemorate the 47th anniversary of Black Wednesday. It is a poignant reminder of the resilience and enduring spirit of those who dedicated their lives to the pursuit of justice and dignity for all.

So, as we reflect on the past thirty years of our democracy, we do so with a sense of pride. The media has undoubtedly played an indispensable role in shaping our society, ensuring that democracy and media freedom are inextricably linked. Continuously teaching

us, that for our democracy to flourish, protecting the freedom of the press is essential.

We honour the sacrifices of the men and women who have devoted their lives to upholding truth and accountability. Their work not only informs us but empowers us. They ensure that we, as a society, are equipped with the knowledge to challenge injustice, hold power to account, and shape the course of our democracy.

Beyond just delivering information, the media acts as a beacon of transparency, a guardian of public discourse, and a catalyst for change—driving progress in our political, economic, social, and cultural spheres.

But we must also acknowledge the challenging environment we find ourselves in. The rise of social media and the growing reliance on citizen journalism from unverified sources which have blurred the lines between credible reporting and unchecked misinformation.

Artificial intelligence and deepfakes have further complicated this, making it increasingly difficult for audiences to discern fact from fabrication. In this climate, the role of professional journalists as gatekeepers of truth has never been more critical, yet they operate under immense pressure from shrinking newsrooms, reduced

resources, and changing business models – meaning they are expected to do more with less.

That’s why, at Absa, we continue to support initiatives by SANEF, because we recognize the critical role they play in telling stories that inspire change, uphold accountability, and reinforce the rule of law.

It is not a coincidence, that earlier this year we repositioned our brand and organisation with the new tagline: ‘Your story matters’. It matters because each and every one of us here, before we are journalists, executives in business, as Chief Justice, a community or whichever role we play in society, we all have our own stories.

In line with our goal of being an active force for good, we also know that it is through collaborations like these that we can advance the interests of our country and continent by empowering Africa’s tomorrow together, one story at a time.

This year also marks twenty-eight years since the formation of the South African National Editors’ Forum, which was established to protect these hard-won freedoms and promote media ethics.

I’m reminded of the words of another anti-apartheid media stalwart who you may all be familiar with, Mr. Joe Thloloe, who was

a feature writer for The World newspaper when Qoboza was arrested.

Thloloe himself was jailed at the time for his role in the 1960 Anti-Pass Campaign that led to the Sharpeville Massacre.

At a 2017 event, Thloloe said, and I quote: “So many people have sacrificed their lives for the freedom of expression that is enshrined in our Bill of Rights. None of us here believes they suffered or died in vain. We need to honour them. Ask yourself: How much am I prepared to pay to preserve these freedoms? Is my voice loud enough against those who threaten freedom of expression?”

In that breath as I conclude, we commend and support the efforts of the South African National Editors’ Forum in sustaining and enhancing media freedom as a cornerstone of our democracy.

We wish you well as you continue to pursue this worthy cause and telling the stories of our country and its people. For you too SANEF, your story matters.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak here this evening and wish you an enjoyable evening further.