

Fair and Equal Treatment of Candidates by the Print Media

1. Fairness and equality in treatment of candidates will be examined by the Electoral Affairs Commission (“EAC”) with reference to the surrounding circumstances on a case-by-case basis.
2. Practical problems that may be experienced by publishers (like limitation of column space and staff resources; situations such as some candidates having extensive arguments on issues of public relevance while some others not expressing their views, or some candidates having made newsworthy statements or speeches while some others not making any comment; and the difference in status and standing of candidates as public figures) are examples of circumstances alongside which the EAC will judge whether the media have fulfilled the criteria of fair and equal treatment.
3. What is important is that practical problems, in general terms without specifics, should not be allowed to be used as pretexts for not giving fair and equal treatment and coverage to all candidates competing in the same Rural Area. Merely saying that practical problems gave rise to the selective reporting will be viewed as a lame excuse. However, if the other candidates had been approached but declined the interview and this fact is made known in the same article, there can hardly be any suspicion or complaint that the guidelines have been breached.
4. Equal treatment and coverage are not necessarily equal space given to and equal number of words written on every candidate of the same Rural Area. It is an idea that has to be examined together with all the circumstances of each individual case. Where a candidate says more on a topic and another candidate says less, a truthful and faithful report of this should not be criticised of unequal reporting. In other words, fair and equal treatment here is in the sense of **equal opportunity** being given to all candidates competing in the same Rural Area, so as to help electors make informed choices.
5. If there is fair and equal treatment of all candidates competing in the same Rural Area in a publication, its editorial line or the personal opinions of the writer on individual candidates can be freely expressed, insofar as they are fair comments and based on true facts. Any newspaper is at full liberty to express its support for or disapproval of a candidate. The guidelines do not seek to impose any shackle on the expression of such ideas.