**SPEECH DELIVERED BY MRS. JEAN MENSA, CHAIRPERSON OF THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION OF GHANA AT THE GHANA JOURNALISTS’ ASSOCIATION AWARDS NIGHT**

**DATE: SUNDAY 29TH OCTOBER 2023**

**VENUE: ACCRA INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE CENTER**

**TIME: 3PM**

The Minister for Information, Hon. Kojo Oppong Nkrumah, the Chairman of the National Peace council, Rev. Dr. Adu Gyamfi, The United States Ambassador to Ghana, Ambassador Virginia Palmer, President of the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA), Mr. Albert Dwumfour, Executives of the GJA, Friends of the media, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good evening to you all.

I thank God for the opportunity to join you as you recognize members of the media who have distinguished themselves in various roles as watchdogs over our democratic processes.

I also thank the President and Executives of the GJA for inviting me to deliver the Keynote Address before this august gathering.

The theme you have chosen for this Awards Night, “*Leveraging Media Freedom to Sustain the Democratic and Security Architecture: The Litmus Test of 2024 Elections*”, attests to the crucial moment at which our nation stands today. With the 2024 Election beckoning, and with no incumbent seeking re-election, the stakes are particularly high. We face an open contest where any candidate could win or lose. In essence, the 2024 Election will be more than a democratic exercise, it will be test of our nation’s resilience.

As journalists, you will play a crucial role in building that resilience. You have the ear, the eyes, and hearts of the citizenry. You are a stone’s throw away from millions of homes across the country. It is of utmost importance that you are cognisant of the delicate interplay that will be required between media freedom, our democracy and National Security. Your conduct will impact positively or negatively on our dear nation.

As the Fourth Estate, you are not just a facet of our democracy. You are its bedrock. You are the beacon of truth. You are guardians of transparency. You are vanguards of freedom and catalysts for informing and shaping public debate. Your role requires the nation’s support and protection over your freedoms.

With your role, and the nation’s support and protection, comes great responsibility. We are all well-aware of the risks to national security when the role of the media goes unchecked. Your exercise of your power and freedom in the lead up to the 2024 elections could potentially make or break our nation’s security and cohesion. This is a sobering truth.

The lessons of Rwanda are evident for all to see. We are all aware of how the unchecked power of the media contributed to a devastating genocide. Disinformation and falsehood turned friends and neighbours into enemies and culminated in a dark chapter of human history. This is a path we must vow never to walk on.

Therefore, your commitment to ensuring the peace and security of our country as we go to the polls in 2024, should go beyond mere rhetoric to practicing responsible journalism.

You have already shown your potential to play the watchdog role responsibly. I commend you highly for the role you have played since the inception of our 4th Republic. Indeed, Ghana’s journey this far would not have been possible without your pioneering contributions during the early days of our democracy. You helped shepherd our democracy and played an integral part in cementing constitutional rule in our dear Nation. Ayekoo.

And you have many great footsteps to walk in. Media stalwarts including the late PAV Ansah and Mr. Tommy Thompson, Mr. Kofi Koomson, Mr. Malik Baako, Mr. Ben Ephson, Mr. Kwaku Sakyi Addo, Ajoa Yeboah-Afari, Mr. Kabral Blay Amihere, Mr. Kwesi Pratt, Alhaji Haruna Attah, Mr. Yaw Boadu Ayeboafo, Mr. Ransford Tetteh, Mr. Kobby Asmah and younger journalists including Kwame Sefa Kayi, Evans Mensah, Mr. Kojo Yankson, Samson Lardy Anyenini, Anas Aremeyaw Anas, Manasseh Azure Awuni, Bernard Avle, Portia Gabor to mention a few cannot be glossed over.

I urge you to stay the course that these great names have blazed, even as we approach the 2024 Elections. This is more important than ever. For, ladies and gentlemen, recent years have raised cause for concern regarding the role of the media.

Several media platforms which should have been spaces for informed public debate have been turned into vehicles of propaganda and sometimes, sheer falsehood.

We see the result in the deepening polarization of our dear nation across party lines. Citizens no longer see things through the eyes of right and wrong. This is a worrying trend to put it mildly.

As we go to the polls in December 2024, it is important that you bear in mind that media freedom while sacrosanct does not equate to freedom to deceive. You should rise and take up your roles as custodians of the truth. You are duty bound to do so.

That said, do note that we at the Electoral Commission are not above scrutiny. Scrutinize and critique our work, as your role requires, but do so objectively. Criticism laced with insults and falsehood should be beneath you.

I reiterate that we are partners with you in this quest to build our nation. We must all put Ghana first and work to ensure that irrespective of the side of the political divide we may sit, our actions and activities inure to the benefit of Ghana. To all stakeholders:

1. Media Professionals: Your pen and platform have unmatched power. Fact-checking and research aren’t mere journalistic niceties; they are necessities. Uphold them.
2. National Media Commission: Proactivity is needed now more than ever. Ensure strict adherence to media ethics. Bring to book those flout the norms. Set a standard that compels respect and truth.
3. To our citizens: As consumers of information, be discerning. Understand the power of informed choice and demand nothing less than the truth from your sources.

Election 2024 will be a landmark election in the history of our country. Let us rise to the occasion and make Ghana proud.

But tonight is for celebration and recognition. It is to award and reward you, for all you have done in the year gone past and will do in the year ahead in your role as a responsible, competent and independent media that keeps the beacon of our democracy alive. Congratulations to all the awardees.

May we purposefully abide by the words of St. Francis of Assisi and work to ensure that ‘where there is discord, we bring harmony. Where there is error, we bring truth. Where there is doubt, we bring faith. Where there is despair, we bring hope.’

May God bless you all and bless our homeland Ghana and make her great and strong.