

The Last Word

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Mugabe's victory spells doom for the media in Zimbabwe

ABSTRACT

This article explores recent events in Zimbabwe, the violence and intimidation that marred the 2002 presidential elections and the war Robert Mugabe, the country's president since independence in 1980, waged against whoever was opposed to or challenged his leadership - especially white farmers and journalists - in the run-up to the crucial polls.

I opine that even though Mugabe won 56 per cent of the country's vote, his leadership lacks legitimacy because a sizeable number of people, especially in the opposition areas, were denied the right to exercise their democratic right to cast their vote. Although I argue that his purge against critics is unjustifiable and evil, I also write about the need to fight injustices subjected to his people.

I posit that Mugabe's contempt and assault on the media will continue, especially after he signed into law the controversial Access to Information Act aimed at curtailing criticism by the press.

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Robert Mugabe is back in power. And the media and journalists are scared. Unless he undergoes an overnight metamorphosis, Mugabe's contempt for critics, especially the media and journalists, will increase as he continues the purge against those opposed to his style of leadership.

He has already indicated that his assault on the media will continue by signing into law the controversial media bill – Access to Information Act – aimed at curtailing criticism by the press.

Geoff Nyarota, the editor of the only "independent" daily newspaper in Harare, the *Daily News*, says the new law would seriously curtail criticism of the government. "Coming so soon after the presidential election, I think it is vindictive punishment of the independent press for its anti-government stance. I think it's also a preventative measure because the press is in the process of investigating the massive fraud in the election," he says.

However, I have always had a problem with the term independent media. What is really independent when the editorial content of any newspaper is determined by several factors? In any situation, media owners have the ultimate power over content and can ask for what they want to be included or omitted. Several other factors also compromise the traditional professional ideals of impartiality, balance and objectivity. Entrepreneurial interference has far-reaching effects on the way journalists operate, and commercial, legal and political pressures also contribute to the way the media operate. So while some of these journalists were hiding behind the word "independent", Mugabe, his Zanu-PF party, and the so-called war veterans saw them as unpatriotic and insensitive to the needs of the majority of black Zimbabweans. But in a democracy, one does not have to agree with everything that is being said, and that is why the freedom of expression to hold different views is very important in a country like Zimbabwe. But this is something Mugabe is definitely opposed to, or he at least has a problem with it. So if his speech at his swearing in on March 17, in which he swore that "those who are negative characters, who deliberately impede government programmes, because of their political inclination will have to go", is anything to go by, then the clamp down on opponents will continue. Whether Zimbabweans and the world will continue to sit by and watch is another thing altogether, but from what has already transpired, the dictator will have his way. Even though the United States, Britain and the Commonwealth have all condemned his victory and criticised the polls as being far from free and fair, the sanctions the West has imposed on his country will do little to his rule (considering what is happening in Iraq, for example, where Saddam Hussein continues to wallow in wealth as his subjects suffer in poverty), but hurt the common man who is already suffering under his rule.

But I would not rubbish altogether what Mugabe has said. There is no doubt that

Zimbabweans need a radical land distribution programme (how would you deal with a situation where most of the country's arable land is owned by a mere 4 500 people, mainly whites?), and that the country and the people should be left alone to decide their own destiny, without the interference from either Western powers or the former colonial master, obviously Britain.

Mugabe is courageous enough to tell the west off, to say that Zimbabweans should be left alone to decide their own destiny and rightly so because, as a sovereign state, it has the right to decide for itself what is good or not for itself. Would he be viewed differently, for example, if he were an American president demanding that countries support the fight against terrorism and then waging war against a hapless and helpless 'Third World' country? But he is a lone ranger who does not carry the load with him because as he dismisses the rest of the world, his people are suffering; they are hungry, and most are unemployed....

The failure of most of Africa is that they have been unable to cut the umbilical cord from their former colonial masters, and the over-dependence on Western aid. Although Mugabe says Zimbabwe should be left to Zimbabweans, he does not have the ability to rescue them from their misery and that is the genesis of his problem. Indeed, it is true that if it were the Africans he was butchering, like he did in 1983 in Matabele, the West would not raise their voices, let alone impose sanctions on his country. This is clearly a case of double standards and some Western nations are not honest in their actions.

Recently, I watched a programme by the British Broadcasting Corporation in which they showed a clip of the 1983 massacre of the Ndebeles and the British said nothing, in the spirit of respecting the country's sovereignty, despite pleas for them either to take action or protest the genocide.

But it is the press that I cry for. With the draconian bill – the Freedom of Information and Right to Privacy Bill – passed days before the elections, there is no doubt that the media in Zimbabwe would become a mere puppet of the government, and the bill, as Basildon Peta, a journalist with the *Financial Gazette* in Harare, says "...effectively reduces all journalists in Zimbabwe to entertainment reporters who can only cover musical shows, discos, films and other limited events that will guarantee producing copy which may not cause "fear, alarm and despondency"."

Peta, also the secretary-general of the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists, says, "Seasoned political writers might have to merely restrict themselves to covering ruling party rallies in glowing terms to avoid being penalised under the sweeping provisions of the bill."

Although nobody doubted that he would win the elections, the fact that he is again in control of Zimbabwe spells doom for those journalists seen as critical of the government, especially after the Zimbabwean parliament passed the Freedom of Information and Right to Privacy Bill. Undoubtedly, Mugabe is the leading enemy of the press in the world at the moment, and the bill gives him the power to muzzle the press further and use it for his own political agenda.

The bill passed just before the elections establishes a Statutory Media Commission, which will require all journalists to apply for a one-year renewable licence to be allowed to work. These licences will be awarded only if a stringent set of requirements are met, and can be revoked at any time for those who breach a planned code of conduct. Those found guilty of any offence will face a fine of up to Z\$100,000 (\$1,875) or two years' imprisonment.

The bill also demands that:

- All journalists must be Zimbabwean citizens (which bars all foreign nationals from reporting in the country).
- Foreign correspondents may be allowed to cover special events.
- It is an offence to "spread rumours or falsehoods that cause alarm and despondency under the guise of authentic reports".
- Journalists are barred from publishing "unauthorised" reports of cabinet deliberations and policy advice by a head of a public body, as well as information that may be harmful to the law enforcement process and national security.
- Public bodies are also barred from releasing information that relates to intergovernmental relations or their financial or economic interests.

What this means is that the freedom of the press is not guaranteed in Zimbabwe and only those supporting the government will be allowed to work as journalists. His purge on the media means that he controls the news and information menu for most of Zimbabweans and those interested in the goings on in his country. Indeed, as it has been noted, "independent political journalism is the lifeblood of democracy" and his war on the media means that his country is slowly slipping into anarchy (although others would say that, and rightly so, there is anarchy in his nation).

During the campaigning period, Mugabe used the media, over which he had great control, to pursue his political agenda successfully. So the war against the 'independent' media denied those who relied on the media organisations not controlled by the government the information diet they needed to participate effectively in the electoral process. The Catholic Archbishop of Bulawayo, Archbishop Pius Ncube, for example, dismissed the Press, before the election day, as big liars, an obstacle to the free flow of

ideas and as tools either of the government or other forces. "The media here fabricate news, distort information and do not give the subjects of their unfair reporting the right of reply," he said, blaming them for much of the political polarisation.

Although we cannot say at the moment whether this trend will continue with his purge on media, I hope he will realise his mistake, loosen the controls and knock down the barriers he has erected to allow journalists to work without fear and intimidation.

Most journalists' fears stem from Mugabe's consistent battle with the 'independent' media, which has been critical of his 'unpopular' leadership in which Zimbabwe has continued to deteriorate into anarchy.

When Mugabe came to power at independence from Britain in 1980, many hailed him as a hero; the man who had liberated blacks from the yoke of colonialism, the man who had led the country to freedom from the white racist minority regime of Ian Smith. But it did not take long for the 'liberated' people and the world to realise what a despot he was. Before long, he killed thousands of people in Matabele ostensibly as he tried to put down a rebellion within the country.

Since then, he has ruled Zimbabwe with an iron hand and messed up the country, which would take years to repair. Up to four million of the 13 million population now face food shortages caused by drought and the violent occupation of white-owned commercial farms. Inflation has reportedly hit 117 per cent and unemployment 60 per cent. But I must ask: How can one man be directly responsible for the mess in a country like Zimbabwe?

Obviously, to the majority of Zimbabweans, he is still a hero, a man who can tell off the West, sometimes with obscene and clearly racist language. But again, this is the man who is responsible for the escalating poverty, hunger, unemployment and numerous other ills afflicting this southern African country, a once rich and well-endowed nation. Although the land issue would have had to be addressed some day, probably immediately after he came to power in 1980, the manner in which he wrestled the land out of the white farmers has left a lot to be desired. Ten years into independence, he reportedly spurned a scheme to fund a land buy-back programme because he preferred a process that gave him a free hand to distribute land, and perhaps to wait for an opportune time when he needed to start the land distribution programme.

Even the so-called war veterans are nothing but hooligans groomed by the Zimbabwean government to cause violence and fear throughout the country, especially in the wake of the crucial poll in which he faced the stiffest challenge in his 22-year rule from Morgan Tsvangirai of the Movement for Democratic Change.

So running scared, Mugabe had to find a way out of his dilemma – and the best way he knew how, the use of violence against both the white farmers, who he saw as an extension of the colonial master, and anybody opposed to his rule.

But Mugabe's real battle with the media perhaps began in earnest in as early as 1999 when two journalists from the Standard – Ray Choto and a colleague, Mark Chavanduka – spent a week in military detention and were tortured after claiming that there had been a plot to stage a military coup.

This onslaught led to the bombing of the *Daily News* press and attempts by the government or Zanu-PF activists either to cripple the newspaper or put a stop to what the Information Minister, Jonathan Moyo, called the newspaper's "madness".

Then on 17 February, 2001, in what was the beginning of trouble for foreign journalists, the Zimbabwean government ordered two journalists, BBC correspondent Joseph Winter and Uruguayan Mercedes Sayagues, who worked for South Africa's *Mail and Guardian* newspaper, to leave the country, ostensibly because their work permits had expired.

But the real motive, I suspect, even though the Zimbabwean government argued that the journalists' expulsion was not a breach of press freedom and that indeed the government recognised the importance of a free press as part of building a democratic culture, was to deny people the information they needed to make important decisions and effectively participate in the business of the government, presuming that Mugabe respected democracy and the freedom to receive and disseminate information without intimidation.

It is now again recognised that that was a precursor to the events of the recent past where popular opinion has not mattered in the way in which Zimbabwe is being run. Apart from the Freedom of Information and Right to Privacy Bill, the Zimbabwean Parliament passed two other contentious bills: The Public Order and Security Act and the General Laws Amendment Act.

The Public Order and Security Act gives unprecedented powers to the police and punishment for breach of the bill ranges from the death penalty to jail terms and heavy fines.

The bill makes it illegal:

- "To undermine the authority of the president" or "engender hostility" towards him.
- To make abusive, obscene or false statements against the president.
- To disturb the peace, security and order of the public, which includes public

gatherings “to conduct riots, disorder or intolerance”.

- To perform acts, utter words, distribute or display any writing, sign or other visible representation that is obscene, threatening, abusive, insulting or intended to provoke a breach of peace.
- The police are given powers to arrest anyone at a public meeting not in possession of an identity card.

The General Laws Amendment Act introduced changes to the Electoral Act, which placed significant obstacles in the way of those registering to vote.

But it is the Freedom of Information and Right to Privacy Bill and the Public Order and Security that threaten the work of journalists most. How do the media criticise Mugabe and his government when it is illegal, for example, to “... undermine the authority of the president” or “engender hostility” towards him. To perform acts, utter words, distribute or display any writing, sign or other visible representation that is obscene, threatening, abusive, insulting or intended to provoke a breach of peace”?

I see not only the Press but also democracy suffering in Zimbabwe. Democracy, which Mugabe vows to uphold, cannot blossom in a state of fear, in a country where the freedom of expression, association is curtailed.

All these bills were clearly aimed at stifling opposition against Mugabe before and after elections. This ensures he has legal backing for his actions, which are mostly aimed at his critics or those bent on bringing down his government and ensuring he remains in power, by all means. And he has no apologies for his actions as he made it clear during the swearing-in ceremony on March 17.

But what Mugabe should realise is that he and the country need the media for democracy to blossom, even when he does not agree with what some say.

The fact that Mugabe won 56 per cent of the country’s vote does not mean his leadership is legitimate. It is clear the elections were not free and fair, especially because they were marred by violence and intimidation and the fact that a sizeable number of the 5.6 million of registered voters, especially in the so-called Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) strongholds, were denied the right to exercise their democratic right to cast their vote. Ironically, that is democracy that clearly says the winner takes it all, unless obviously there is a different democratic prescription for Africa from that which is prescribed elsewhere in the world.

But if democracy be thrown to the dogs, Mugabe must not be allowed to sink the country for his own selfish reasons. Even democracy has its limits – it is not enough

just to command majority support without respect for law and order and the appreciation of human life.