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Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe
Monday January 30th – Wednesday February 29th 2012
Election Watch 2011-3

THE MONTH'S TOP STORIES

It's all about the birthday boy

PRESIDENT Mugabe's 88th birthday celebrations, whose main event was held at Sakubva Stadium in Mutare on February the 25th, dominated news coverage of all the media throughout the month.

But coverage of these celebrations saturated the government media, particularly the national broadcaster's news and current affairs programming in the week of his birthday on February 21st. The highlights of this period were Mugabe's two interviews with the state-controlled media and his address to thousands of Zimbabweans at Sakubva Stadium.

Mugabe's birthday celebrations received attention in 182 stories in the government media: [ZBC (113) and official Press (69)]. The private media covered it in 58 stories.

The media also carried 485 stories on various national issues, such as the constitution-making process; local government affairs; party campaign activities; and security sector reform.

But 182 (38%) of these 485 stories still emanated from Mugabe's birthday interviews and speeches.

Two hundred-and-fifty-nine of these reports (53%) appeared in the government media, while the remaining 226 featured in the private media.

21st of February cult takes over at ZBC

THE national broadcaster, ZBC, saturated its airwaves with news reports and current affairs programmes about President Mugabe's birthday celebrations, held under the auspices of the 21st February Movement.

This exclusively adulatory and positive coverage reinforcing the personality cult of the President created by ZANU PF's 21st of February Movement, intensified in the week of Mugabe's birthday. During this period, ZTV alone devoted 35 stories out of its 100 main evening news stories to the issue. This translated into one and half hours out of 6 hours 30 minutes of its 8pm bulletin.

These news bulletins were often bracketed with messages praising Mugabe's leadership. In one such case, ZTV news anchor Grace Tsvakanyi described the President as ***"a veteran politician with distinguished qualities"*** (20/2, 8pm).

This excessive and lavish publicity included live coverage of the celebrations held at Sakubva Stadium. Radio Zimbabwe and ZTV suspended normal programming from around 9 am to 6pm to accommodate this event.

In addition, ZBC frequently featured advertisements and congratulatory messages from various arms of government, companies, and ZANU PF and its allies, as well as praise songs from musical groups, such as Mbare Chimurenga Choir, youth outfit Born Free Crew, and gospel musician Mercy Mutsvene.

These praise songs and messages celebrated Mugabe's life, thanked God for giving him good health and long life, and eulogized him for his ***"vision"*** and ***"wisdom"***, epitomized by the controversial land reform and indigenization programmes, and his ***"spirited"***, ***"principled"***, ***"resolute"*** and ***"unwavering"*** stance against neo-colonialism.

Apart from this, ZBC incessantly aired snippets of Mugabe's speeches on various national and international issues, ranging from his time as leader of the struggle for independence, the early years of Independence, until the present-day.

But a different take on Mugabe's birthday bash in Sakubva appeared in *The Zimbabwean* (26/2), which reported the party's Manicaland provincial youth chairman Tawanda Mukodza, as having publicly told Mugabe that as youths they were not happy with the corrupt tendencies by some top ZANU PF officials in the province.

And the *Daily News* (29/2) reported that a Mutare man, Richmore Jazi, is in trouble with the law in the eastern border city for questioning Mugabe's ability to blow up his birthday balloons, considering his advanced age and reported ill-health. Jazi, who made these remarks while watching live coverage of Mugabe's birthday celebrations at a bottle store, now faces charges of undermining the authority of the President.

Mugabe wants elections with or without new constitution

ZIMBABWEANS woke up to the renewed possibility of the country holding national elections this year – even without a new constitution – following President Mugabe’s birthday interviews with the ZANU PF-run state media.

Mugabe told Radio Zimbabwe (20/2, 8:30pm) that Zimbabwe would definitely hold its elections ***“this year with or without a new constitution”***.

His comments came at a time when the Constitutional Parliamentary Select Committee (Copac) has been under sustained attack from ZANU PF and its allies for allegedly ignoring the views of the majority of Zimbabweans; “smuggling foreign ideas” into the draft constitution, such as respect for “sexual orientation”, and attempting to use the draft to strip Mugabe of some of his omnipotent Executive authority.

Although ZANU PF and the state media has long been campaigning against the constitution-making process, matters came to a head when the government-controlled daily, *The Herald*, leaked a provisional draft constitution on February 10th, which contained a clause disqualifying candidates who would have ***“already held office for one or more periods, whether continuous or not, amounting to 10 years”***.

All the media reported this draft as having effectively disqualified Mugabe from contesting and quoted ZANU PF and its allies urging Zimbabweans to reject it, a position that was echoed by Mugabe in his birthday interviews.

In one such interview Mugabe was reported accusing the MDC of conceiving the idea because it was afraid of electoral defeat (*The Sunday Mail*, 19/2).

In another with Radio Zimbabwe, Mugabe was also reported lashing out at those who inserted this clause: ***“Cowards, cowards, Cowards! Why are they afraid of me? Why should they ban anyone at all? We haven’t come to a position where political tricks or legal trick...are put in place to bar anyone who normally has a right to participate in an election”***.

Copac appeared to buckle under pressure when it issued a statement distancing itself from this draft and having inserted the contentious clause (*NewsDay*, 21/2). Although Copac admitted having produced the first draft, it denied having released it to the media. Copac also emphasized that its draft was still ***“a work in progress”*** and was being reviewed with assistance from ***“technical experts”***, adding: ***“No suggested positions in the first proposal can be taken as final”***.

The private media also inaccurately reported that the draft also contained an age limit for presidential candidates (*NewDay*, Radio VoP, Studio 7, 9/2). And they only belatedly reported that term limits need not be retroactive, mainly perhaps because it upset their initial line that there was a plot within the ZANU PF camp to bar Mugabe's candidacy through the new constitution (SW Radio Africa and *The Zimbabwean*, 22/2).

Reports on Copac's controversial draft constituted 69 (56%) of the 124 stories the media carried on the administrative aspect of Zimbabwe's elections. Of these, 51 appeared in the government media [ZBC (33)], while the remaining 73 featured in the private media.

The other 55 touched on various issues, such as concerns over the state of the voters' roll, calls by ZANU PF for its supporters to register; and warnings from domestic civil society organisations and some sections of the international community for Zimbabwe's inclusive government to implement necessary reforms before holding elections.

MEDIA COVERAGE OF PARTY ACTIVITIES

Mugabe attacks African leaders

PRESIDENT Mugabe's birthday celebrations, which Mugabe, his party and the state media turned into a platform to promote the President's image and his party's policies, was the most significant event among the activities of Zimbabwe's main political parties in the month.

All public and private media widely reported Mugabe expressing his party's position on various national issues, such as the constitution-making process; elections; security sector reforms; and criticizing his coalition partners.

But the highlight of this was his condemnation of African leaders as **"cowards"**, **"naïve"** and **"weak"** for failing to resist Western imperialism (*The Sunday Mail*, *The Herald* and *Daily News*, 19, 21 & 27/2). Mugabe accused these leaders of being **"prepared to sell out their countries for financial aid and material benefits"** (*The Herald*, 21/2). His criticism stemmed from what he perceived to be the African Union's complicity in the bombardment of Libya by NATO forces in an effort to stop former Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi's crackdown on an armed uprising against his rule.

MMPZ notes that this is a reinforcement of Mugabe's attack on African leaders on his return from the African Union summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in January (ZTV, 31/1, 6pm and 8pm and *The Herald*, 1/2).

Mugabe's birthday celebrations formed 240 (59%) of the 405 stories the media carried on the activities of Zimbabwe's coalition parties ahead of national elections. Of the 405 stories, 268 (66%) appeared in the government media [ZBC (151)], while the remaining 137 featured in the private media.

The other 165 were on direct party activities: ZANU PF (95), MDC-T (54) and MDC-N (16). All reports on ZANU PF's activities in the government media were positive, while those on the MDC formations were mostly negative. The private media's coverage of the three parties' activities was generally balanced.

Figs.1 & 2: Media coverage of the activities of the parties in the GNU

Fig.1

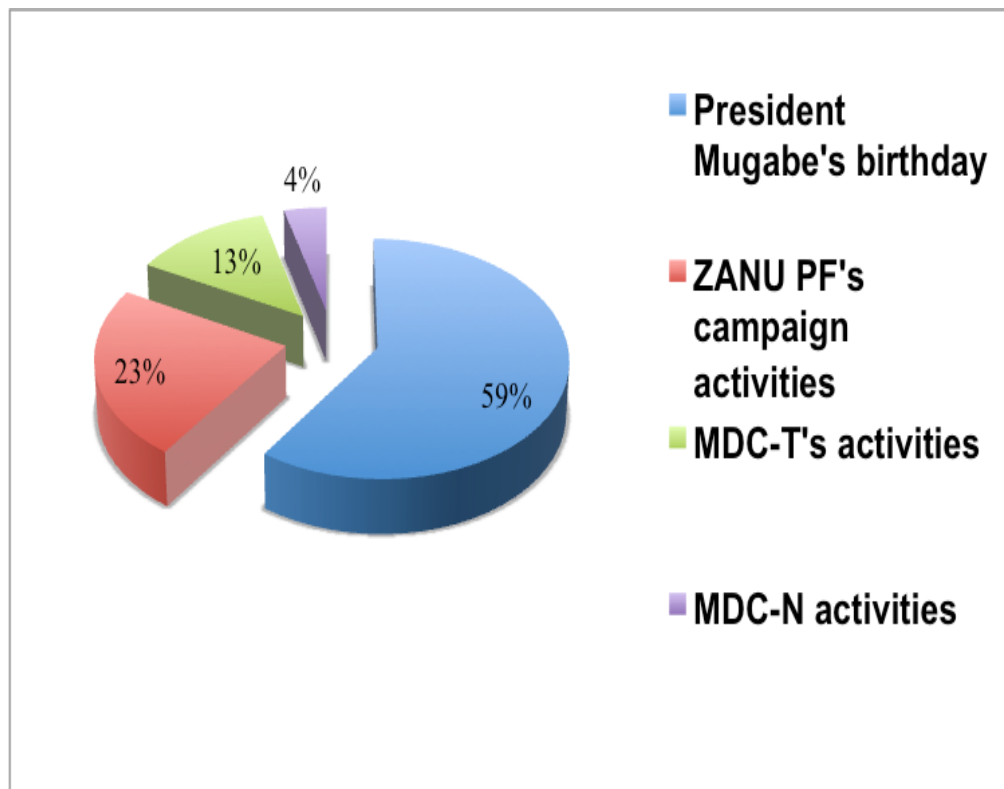
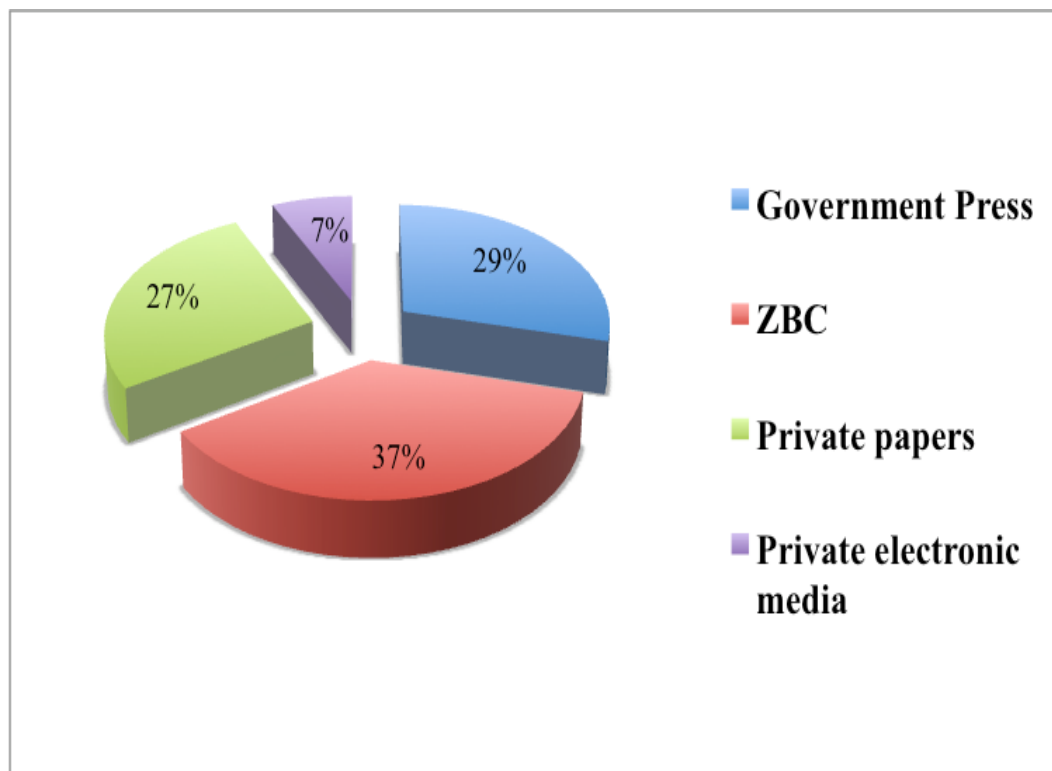


Fig.2



Warning: Don't fight on Facebook

MMPZ advises Zimbabweans who use various social network sites to avoid using insulting, defamatory or obscene language against any individual, as it is likely to constitute a criminal offence.

This advice follows reports of the conviction of a young Chiredzi man, who was arrested last month, for photographing and posting a picture of a local woman on his *Facebook* account, accompanied by offensive comments labelling her a prostitute (*The Herald*, 20/2). This conviction is the first of its kind in Zimbabwe.

A week later, the same paper (27/2) reported Gutu North MP Hamandishe Maramwidze as having caused a stir on *Facebook*, after he allegedly posted obscenities directed towards a UK-based Zimbabwean woman, Barbara Nyagomo. The woman had reportedly asked Maramwidze how he had used the Constituency Development Fund made available to MPs by Treasury in 2009.

These two cases were among 45 incidents of rights violations the media recorded during the month of February. Forty of them appeared in the private media, while the remaining five featured in the private media.

Others included:

- The banning, by the governor of Masvingo province, Titus Maluleke, of 29 local and international NGOs from operating in the province. He apparently made it clear at a meeting at his offices attended by senior military, police and prisons service officers, that “the environment has to be cleared” before national elections can be held (Studio 7, Radio VOP, NewZimbabwe.com [14/2]).
- The invasion of a white-owned farm in Mazowe by Chief Chiweshe and the occupation of another, Ndire Farm, by senior army official Eric Matova in Masvingo (*NewsDay*, 6 & 9/2), and
- Reports of the arrest of about 20 MDC-T members in Gwanda and Beitbridge, Matabeleland South, for convening an unsanctioned meeting (Radio VoP and *Daily News On Sunday*, 26/2).
- And as this report was going to print, civil society reported the disappearance on February 8th of Paul Chizuze, a veteran human rights activist in Matabeleland.

What they said...

"The day will come when I will become sick, but as of now I am fit as a fiddle" – President Mugabe was reported by most sections of the international media as having said this in an interview with Radio Zimbabwe (20/2).

"We just must have elections. They just must take place with or without a new constitution, and we will, on our side as a party, we have made a decision, last year at our conference that this year we definitely have an election exercise" – Mugabe speaking in an interview with ZTV (21/2).

"How can you go to Tsvangirai's house to speak about government issues and expect to be taken seriously? A house does not become a government place just because you have put a coat of arms behind you. Even in a banana republic politicians do not behave like that" - ZANU-PF politburo member Jonathan Moyo chiding Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai and his deputy, Arthur Mutambara, for holding an official Press conference at the PM's Strathaven home (*The Financial Gazette*, 16/2).

Ends/

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