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A REPORT ON MEDIA COVERAGE OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES IN ZIMBABWE'S 2008 ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

Foreword

This research reports on the media's coverage of political violence and human rights violations as reported in Zimbabwe's media during the country's March 2008 harmonised elections and the June presidential poll run-off election. The statistics and graphs are accompanied by a qualitative analysis of the nature and content of the reports on the violence in Zimbabwe and seeks to identify where the blame for the violence was mostly attributed.

This research serves as a companion to MMPZ's major work on the performance of the media during Zimbabwe's two elections in 2008, entitled *The Propaganda War on Electoral Democracy – Media Coverage of Zimbabwe's 2008 Election Campaigns*.

Other books published by MMPZ include: *A Duty to Inform*; *A Question of Balance: The Media and the February 2000 Referendum on the Draft Constitution*; *The Media War – Media Coverage of the 2000 Parliamentary Elections*; *Media Under Siege – Media Coverage of the 2002 Presidential and Mayoral Elections*; and, *Election Voices Silenced – Media Coverage of Zimbabwe's 2005 Parliamentary Elections*."

The management of MMPZ wishes to extend its thanks to all those partner organizations who provided the Project with the support necessary for the research and publication of this booklet. And a special thanks goes to the

Project's monitoring staff, particularly Sandra Mujokoro, the main researcher, who worked so long and hard in compiling the information that made this publication possible.

Notes to the monitoring and analysis of this report

MMPZ defines political violence as any form of physical, emotional and verbal abuse such as threats, insults, assaults, abductions, murder, attempted murder, torture, rape, forced school closures, coercion, property related-attacks and arson. The Project also recorded other related forms of human rights violations as reported by the media, such as unlawful arrests and detentions, attacks on Zimbabweans' freedoms of association, expression and assembly, and discrimination.

This analysis is divided into two time frames. The first is between January 1 and March 31 2008, which covered the March harmonised election period. The second is from April 1 to June 30 2008, the period leading up to - and just after - the presidential run-off election.

The media monitored

In compiling this report MMPZ monitored the government-controlled public media and the privately owned news outlets. The public media comprised five titles under the Zimbabwe Newspapers (ZIMPAPERS) stable and three Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) stations. The following lists the news media outlets monitored during Zimbabwe's two election campaigns.

The ZIMPAPERS publications included:

1. The Herald
2. Chronicle
3. The Sunday Mail
4. The Sunday News
5. The Manica Post

ZBC stations monitored:

1. ZTV
2. Radio Zimbabwe
3. Spot FM

The private media comprised:

Independent Media Group

1. The Standard
2. Zimbabwe Independent

Modus Publications

1. The Financial Gazette

The Zimbabwean Limited

1. The Zimbabwean
2. The Zimbabwean on Sunday

Private electronic media

1. SW Radio Africa
2. Studio 7

Private online agencies

1. Zimbabwe Online
2. New Zimbabwe
3. ZimDaily
4. The Zimbabwe Times

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About MMPZ

The Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe (MMPZ) works to promote freedom of expression and responsible journalism in Zimbabwe. The Project monitors the content of the country's mainstream radio, television and print media and publishes weekly reports of its findings. It also produces other reports on the domestic media's coverage of other issues of public interest and importance, particularly their performance during elections. For example, this booklet is a product of MMPZ's research during Zimbabwe's 2008 elections.

MMPZ also operates an Advocacy Unit whose aim is to raise public awareness about the importance of freedom of expression, public information rights and the need for a diverse media environment. Society depends on the media to communicate with itself and cannot protect the democratic ideals its citizens aspire to unless the people are adequately informed. These are the motivating principles behind MMPZ's monitoring and advocacy work.

MMPZ is an independent trust that began its operations in January 1999 and has produced reports on the domestic mainstream media's coverage of all the country's national elections since then.

MMPZ's mission is:

- To monitor the Zimbabwean media to determine how far they adhere to constitutionally and internationally guaranteed standards of freedom of expression, as well as generally accepted standards of ethical journalistic practice.
- To inform the public and relevant decision-makers about its findings; to make its reports public; and to conduct public information rights campaigns that help to foster and protect ideals contained in Article XIX of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that seek to protect freedom of expression and information.

MEDIA COVERAGE OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES IN ZIMBABWE'S 2008 ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

Introduction

Every national election since Zimbabwe's independence has been plagued by violence to a greater or lesser extent. Since the turn of the millennium however, a number of human rights organizations have emerged to document such abuses more accurately than had been the case in the past. Their findings clearly point to the fact that ZANU PF government agents and those that supported the party have been responsible for most of the political violence and human rights violations that have occurred during these more recent election campaigns.

For example, in the 2002 presidential election campaign independent human rights groups recorded 1,096 incidents of violence, including 35 deaths. In over 90 percent of the incidents human rights watchdogs identified pro-government elements: war veterans, militia, ZANU PF activists and state security agents as being responsible¹. Similarly, in the 2005 elections Zimbabwe's human rights watchdogs recorded about 1,221 incidents of violence and rights abuses and one killing. Again most of the cases were attributed to ZANU PF supporters and security agents, while the victims were mainly from ZANU PF's political opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).²

Evidently then, political violence and coercion became an intrinsic weapon in ZANU PF's strategy to crush the growing popularity of the first serious political challenge to its authority since independence.

In the 2008 elections, which were among the most violent in the country's history, Zimbabwe's civil society human rights groups documented 8,558 incidents of political violence and human rights violations³. These included scores of killings, unlawful arrests, harassment, abductions, assault, torture and the destruction or theft of property, mainly against MDC supporters and civic activists perceived to be opponents of ZANU PF, but also against ordinary civilians without any known political persuasion.

¹ See Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum report, *Political Violence Report March 2002*, Harare Zimbabwe

² Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, *Political Violence Report March 2005*, Harare Zimbabwe

³ Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, *Political Violence Report June 2008*, Harare Zimbabwe

This report seeks to assess how far the media reflected this widespread state-sponsored brutal coercion of the electorate during Zimbabwe's March 2008 harmonised elections and particularly the June presidential run-off.

Although both electoral periods were marked by political violence, this report will show that the period leading to the presidential run-off election was by far the bloodiest as ZANU PF sought to reverse its embarrassing defeat by the then opposition MDC-T during the earlier combined elections.

None of the media fully captured the severity of the violent campaign against the electorate as eventually became apparent from the records of independent human rights monitors⁴. However, the private media did provide a more accurate perspective of the severity and extent of the violence compared to the wilful distortion and marginalization of the violence reported in the government-controlled state media. The reports in the private media exposed the brutal nature of the violence against the MDC and the electorate in general and reported this as being part of ZANU PF's barbaric campaign to subvert the democratic will of the Zimbabwean electorate.

The government-controlled media almost exclusively reported only those incidents of political violence emanating from official claims that the MDC-T was to blame for the mayhem that characterised the elections, especially in the period leading up to the presidential run-off.

For example, Police Commissioner-General, Augustine Chihuri was quoted in the *Chronicle* newspaper (21/6/08) just before the presidential election run-off squarely blaming the MDC for most of the political violence in a clearly emotional tirade:

"I wish to put the record straight on the political violence in Zimbabwe...The MDC-T is the main culprit of the political violence that we are currently witnessing ...

"MDC-T deployed Democratic Resistance Committees to rural constituencies causing mayhem and banning political rallies by other political players in various areas where the MDC-T has won...In all these instances there was no provocation...

"...The violence being perpetrated by the MDC-T was also aimed at intimidating voters to influence the outcome of the elections...

"...Since the 29 March elections MDC-T has been on a violent diplomatic onslaught (against) the country and its leadership peddling falsehoods (about) winning the elections...MDC-T party is a violent party that craves violence since its formation.

⁴ See the Zimbabwe Association of Doctors for Human Rights statement, *Cases of Systematic Violent Assault and Torture Overwhelm Health Professionals*, June 17 2008, published in full by *The Zimbabwe Times*, June 18 2008

(2) Also see Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition report on 2008 elections, *In The Name of Sovereignty... Unmasking Zimbabwe's Electoral Fraud!* Harare.

(3) Also see Solidarity Peace Trust report, *Punishing Dissent, Silencing Citizens: The Zimbabwe Elections 2008*, May 21, 2008, Johannesburg.

“...MDC-T has targeted war veterans and Zanu PF supporters in their quest to wipe out the history of the liberation struggle and effect regime change...”

The comments were carried in a story headlined ‘MDC-T Behind Violence’ and simply accepted Chihuri’s wild statements as being truthful. No attempt was made to obtain less partisan opinion or even to allow the accused party an opportunity to respond.

The government-controlled media also avoided interpreting the summary arrest of MDC-T activists and perceived government opponents as being part of state-sponsored human rights violations meant to cripple the opposition’s election campaign. Instead, they portrayed these arrests as the normal consequences of the rule of law against what these media and the police presented as being an inherently violent and lawless opposition.

Political violence in the March elections campaign

According to the Human Rights NGO Forum, an independent human rights watchdog that documents incidents of political violence and human rights abuses, there were 2,049 incidents of human rights abuses including political violence between January 1 and March 31 2008⁵. These included abductions, assaults, disappearances, rape, school closures, torture, attempted murder, property related attacks, attacks on the freedoms of association and expression, discrimination and unlawful arrests and detention.

Yet media coverage of political violence and human rights abuses did not reflect this reality. For example, MMPZ only recorded 112 incidents being reported in the same period. Of these, 88 (81%) appeared in the private print and electronic media while the remaining 24 (19%) stories appeared in the official media. Out of these, ZBC, which has a wider reach than any other media accessible to information-starved Zimbabweans, aired only five, while the remaining 19 featured in the official Press.

In the same period the media carried two reports of alleged politically motivated killings. One of the reports was on the death of seven ZANU PF supporters in a car accident in Norton, outside Harare. While *ZimDaily* (7/2/2008) reported their death as politically motivated, *The Herald* (5/2/2008) presented it as a genuine accident. The other report, which featured on *Radio Zimbabwe* (22/3/2008), was on the stabbing of a ZANU PF supporter in Epworth by an unnamed offender ***“in a suspected case of political violence.”***

Notably, the Forum did not record any deaths in this period.

⁵ See Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, *Political Violence Report June 2008*, Harare Zimbabwe

(2) See also Amnesty International, *Zimbabwe Time for Accountability*, 31 October 2008. London.

(3) Human Rights Watch, *“They beat me like a dog”: Political Persecution of Opposition Activists and Supporters in Zimbabwe*, August 11 2008, New York, USA

But while all media generally failed to capture the full extent of political violence as recorded by independent human rights groups, it was the performance of the state media that attracted the greatest attention as a result of its unprofessional conduct. These media mostly ignored incidents of violence, particularly those that implicated ZANU PF and government supporters. They only showed an interest if the opposition was allegedly to blame. And to reinforce the impression that the opposition was behind the violence, nearly all their stories either stemmed from official statements or were unfailingly corroborated by the police.

The official media's reluctance to independently report on the exact source and extent of political violence resulted in them initially ignoring incidents of violence that occurred in the pre-election period, before the proclamation of the election date on January 26. They only began responding to reports of violence in the context of official attempts to distort the cause of violence in the face of increasing reports from independent sources implicating ZANU PF during the campaign period between January 27 and March 29.

For example, before the proclamation of the election date ZBC and government papers only carried 10 general stories related to political violence, which were mainly calls for political parties and Zimbabweans to be peaceful ahead of the elections.

The private Press and radio stations however, recorded six separate incidents of political violence, harassment and intimidation. These included the harassment of rural teachers and villagers; death threats against MDC spokesman Nelson Chamisa; the assault of members of the public intending to attend an MDC meeting in Mbare, and an individual who refused to take part in the so-called "Million-Man March" organized by war veterans in support of ZANU PF and President Mugabe's candidature. ZANU PF supporters were blamed for all the incidents. In addition, the papers and the private electronic media (including four online news agencies monitored by MMPZ) also exposed government's continued intolerance of Zimbabweans' rights to free expression, assembly and association despite amendments to the country's repressive security laws that hitherto criminalized political gatherings not sanctioned by the police. They carried 15 reports on the police's pre-emptive heavy-handed response to the MDC's so-called "Freedom March" between January 17 and 22. The march was scheduled for January 23, 2008.

The private media interpreted the subsequent arrest of MDC-T leader Morgan Tsvangirai and his supporters for planning and participating in the march, which the police had banned on the grounds that it **"might cause mayhem"** [*ZimDaily* 23/1/2008], in light of state-sanctioned attempts to curtail constitutionally guaranteed political and civil liberties ahead of the polls.

Although *The Herald* (17,18 & 22/1/2008) carried four articles on the matter, (two opinion pieces and two news stories) these were only in the context of defending the state's actions while projecting the opposition as the troublemakers. For example, in one of the opinion pieces (17/1/2008), *The Herald* columnist Caesar Zvayi simply dismissed the MDC march as **"mischievous"**, adding that the party was spoiling for a fight because it could **"still have shown its concern for the people without marching"**. He did not explain why the MDC march was provocative while ZANU PF had been

holding similar demonstrations across the country since November 30, 2007 without any hindrance.

In contrast, the private media, particularly SW Radio Africa and Studio 7, noted in many of their reports that they had tried but failed to obtain police comment in the cases of political violence they reported whose sources were mainly members of the opposition or from civil society.

The announcement of the election date by President Mugabe on January 26 2008 marked a turning point in the political landscape as reflected by an increase in the number of incidents of politically motivated violence and rights abuses reported in the media.

The media recorded 97 incidents of politically motivated violence and rights abuses in their 212 reports on the topic. However, most of these were reported in the private media as the government-controlled media continued to present the impression that peace prevailed in the country.

For example, of the 43 incidents of politically motivated violence and human rights abuses the print media recorded, 28 (65%) appeared in the private papers and 15 (35%) in the official Press. And while ZBC recorded one incident broadcast across all its stations, the private radio stations reported 29 incidents.

The online news agencies carried news of 24 incidents of political violence, although only four of them were reports that did not appear in the other private media.

The government media continued to be highly selective and biased in its coverage of the violence across the country following the announcement of the election date. They accused the MDC of being a violent party and attributed almost any violence during the campaign period to the opposition. For example, out of the 15 reports on violence in the government papers, 12 accused the MDC of being responsible for committing acts of violence against ZANU PF. Only two reports blamed ZANU PF, but even these were about the party's internal fighting and did not address any of the violence against the MDC. One was about violence allegedly perpetrated by the Progressive Teachers' Union of Zimbabwe against ZANU PF.

In contrast, the private media belied this misrepresentation of reality by reporting ZANU PF and state security agents as being the main sources of the violence, mostly against the opposition and other members of society perceived to be enemies of the state. However, many of their stories relied on the MDC and eyewitness accounts and lacked police corroboration.

For instance, 20 of the private papers' 28 reports identified violence against those perceived to be critics of the government or rivals to ZANU PF. These included the MDC, Simba Makoni's Mavambo project, civilians, members of civil society and teachers believed to be influential in the communities where they worked.

The private media also carried 95 general stories that discussed the country's poor human rights record and its likely impact on the holding of democratic elections.

In contrast, the government-controlled papers avoided such discussions in the 83 general stories they featured on political violence. Instead, their stories glossed over the problem of its actual occurrence, passively quoting officials calling for a peaceful campaign, or reporting the police pledging to maintain peace, which they claimed was being exclusively threatened by the MDC and its alleged western sponsors.

For example, *The Herald* and *Chronicle* (27/2/2008) both carried a story passively quoting Police Commissioner-General Augustine Chihuri saying, ***“there has been talk from some opposition circles and civic organisations of street protests or Kenya-style riots if the ballot does not go in favour of one’s political party. The same thread of rhetoric is also coming from the US and Britain whose hypothesis is that any victory by a ruling party in Africa (means) the elections are not free and fair. They are already making these insinuations because they fear the victory of the ruling party.”***

He was not challenged on this blatant misrepresentation of reality.

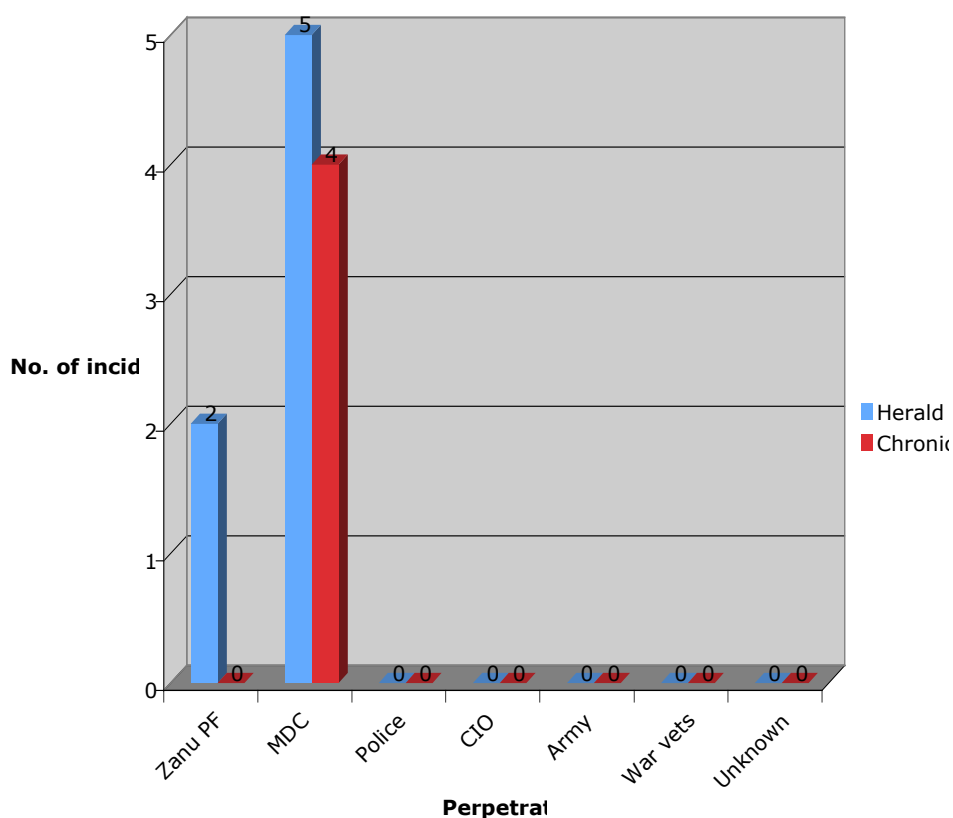
The difference in reporting political violence and human rights abuses in the official and private media is clearly illustrated by their statistics identifying the offenders and victims of the violence.

For example, out of 11 perpetrators identified in the official media in the period between January 1 and March 31, 2008, nine (82%) were MDC supporters and only two (18%) were ZANU PF. Of the 13 victims, three (23%) were ZANU PF, eight (62%) MDC – although incidences involving the MDC were not viewed as human rights violations by the official papers. Two civilians (15%) were also identified as victims.

In contrast, of the 54 perpetrators identified in the private media, 37 (69%) were ZANU PF, five (9%) MDC, 10 (18%) state security agents, two (4%) unknown, while 72 victims were identified, including six (8%) ZANU PF, 54 (75%) MDC. The remaining 13 (17%) included civilians, civil society, teachers, journalists and Simba Makoni

Below is a graphic presentation of these statistics per media.

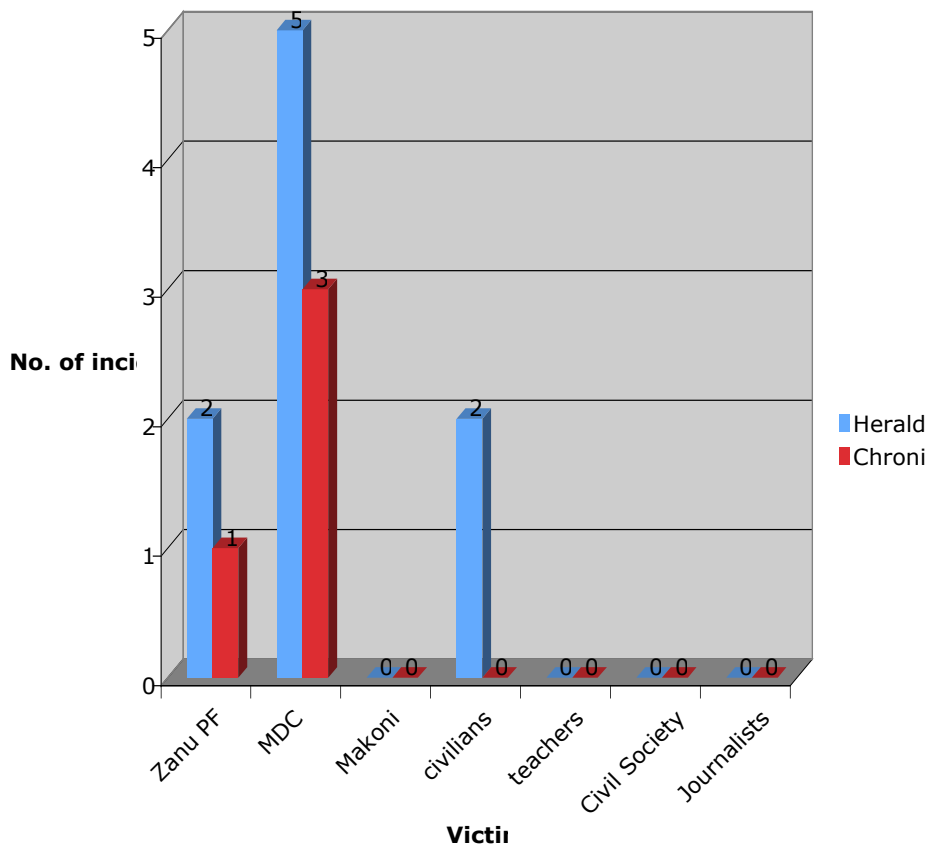
Perpetrators of political violence in the Herald & Chronicle



Of the 11 incidents of violence *The Herald* and the *Chronicle* reported, nine (82%) were attributed to the MDC while only two were blamed on ZANU PF. Even then ZANU PF was only implicated in the intra-party fighting over the nomination of its candidates for the elections.

And while these papers did carry reports on the state security agents' heavy-handed response to MDC gatherings, including the arrest of its leaders and the assault of its supporters and civilians, they avoided openly reporting them as political violence or blatant human rights violations. Instead, they simply presented the incidents as normal law enforcement. As a result, the stories they carried, which clearly showed the MDC and civilians as the victims of violence (see graph below) were reported in isolation and not as further evidence of the authorities systematic campaign to curtail the opposition's constitutionally guaranteed liberties ahead of the elections.

Victims of political violence March election in the (28 Mar)



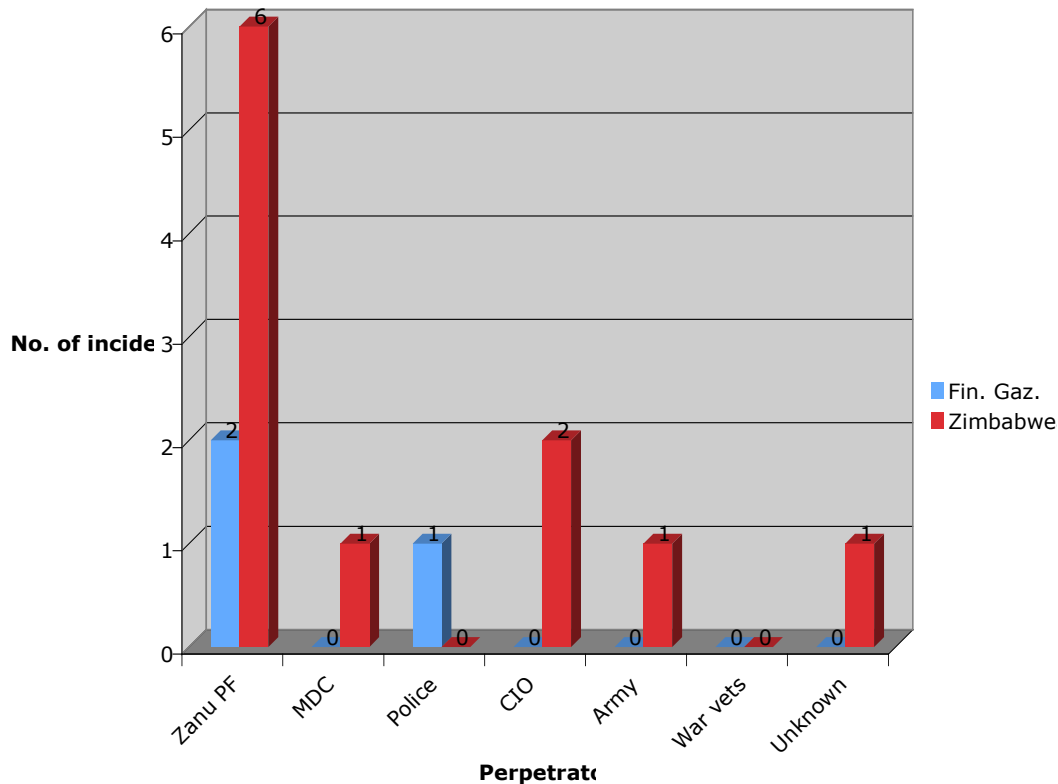
The official papers' reluctance to expose the use of violence to coerce the electorate and hinder the opposition's campaign activities resulted in *The Sunday Mail* and *The Sunday News* reporting just one incident each, also blaming the MDC for committing violence against ZANU PF. *The Manica Post* completely ignored the subject in the run-up to the March elections.

Similarly, ZBC TV, Radio Zimbabwe and Spot FM carried a single incident each blaming the MDC for the violence. Both Radio Zimbabwe and Spot FM also carried an incident apiece attributing violence to unknown assailants. ZANU PF was portrayed as the main victim. The only time that these stations reported the MDC as being the victim was when they reported an isolated incident of alleged intra-party fighting to reinforce the official media's impression that the MDC was a violent party.

The picture was different in the private media, whose stories largely attributed cases of political violence to ZANU PF and state security agents. For example, out of the 11 incidents *The Zimbabwean* carried, six (55%) blamed ZANU PF supporters, while the CIO and the army were identified as being responsible for three (27%), and only one (9%) in which the MDC was to blame. Perpetrators of the remaining incident were unknown. Although *The*

Financial Gazette carried fewer incidents, all three of its reports blamed ZANU PF or the police.

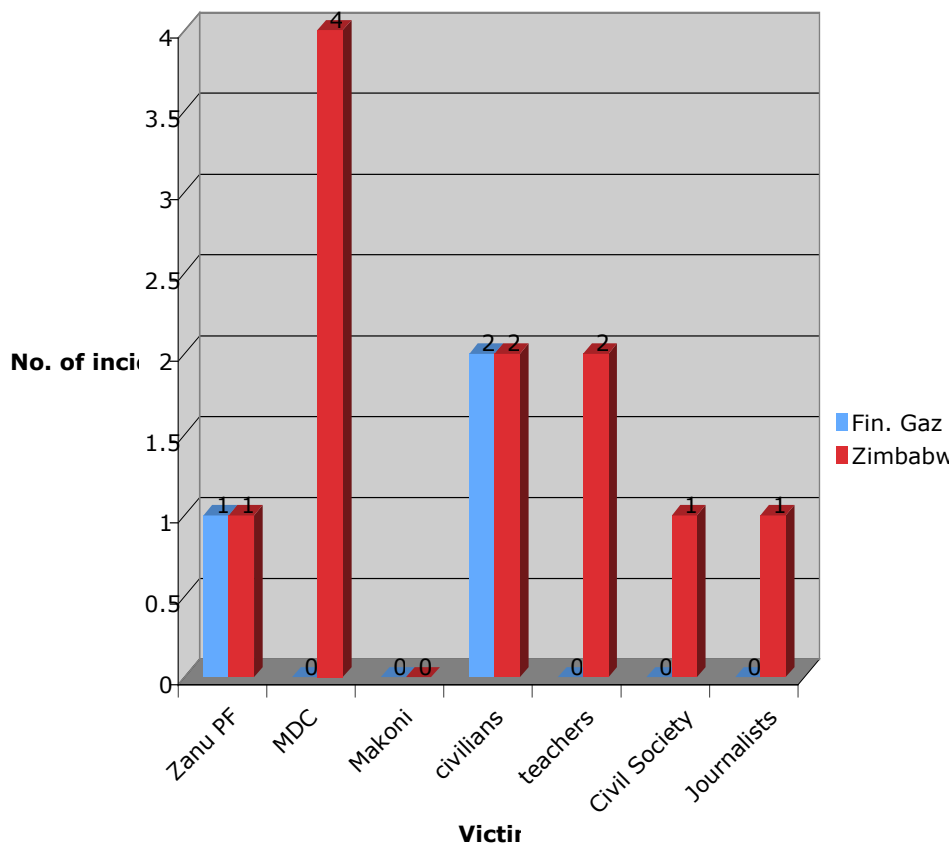
**Perpetrators of political violence in the Fin Gaz. & Zimbabwe
28)**



They also revealed that while ZANU PF suffered from the violence too, the MDC, members of the public, teachers and journalists were the main victims at the hands of ruling party activists and state security agents. For example, in 11 incidents reported by *The Zimbabwean* it identified the victims as being the MDC in four of these reports, while teachers and civilians were the victims on two occasions each. Civil society, journalists and ZANU PF were identified as being the victims in one story each. *The Financial Gazette* identified civilians as being the victims in two incidents and ZANU PF in one case.

Notably, instances where ZANU PF was reported as the victim it was mainly due to internal factional fighting.

Victims of political violence in the Fin Gaz. & The Z 28)

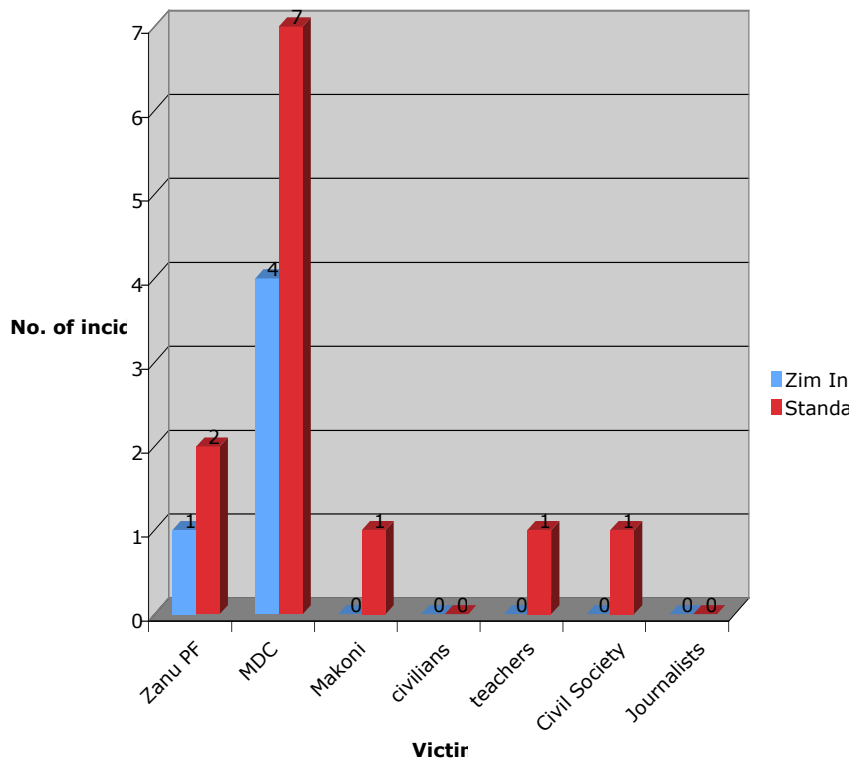


The Standard's reports on political violence also implicated ZANU PF. Of the 13 incidents it reported, 10 identified ZANU PF activists as being responsible, one accused the police and in two reports the assailants were said to be unknown. The *Zimbabwe Independent* recorded five incidents, three of which blamed the MDC and two blamed ZANU PF.

Seven of the 12 victims *The Standard* reported were from the MDC, while two were ZANU PF. Mavambo, the movement launched by presidential candidate Simba Makoni, civil society and teachers were presented as victims on one occasion each. The *Zimbabwe Independent* presented the MDC as victims in four of the five incidents it reported, while ZANU PF was reported as the victim in one.

While these papers identified the MDC as a victim of ZANU PF and state security agents' intolerance of the opposition, ZANU PF was projected mainly as a victim of its own violence owing to factionalism.

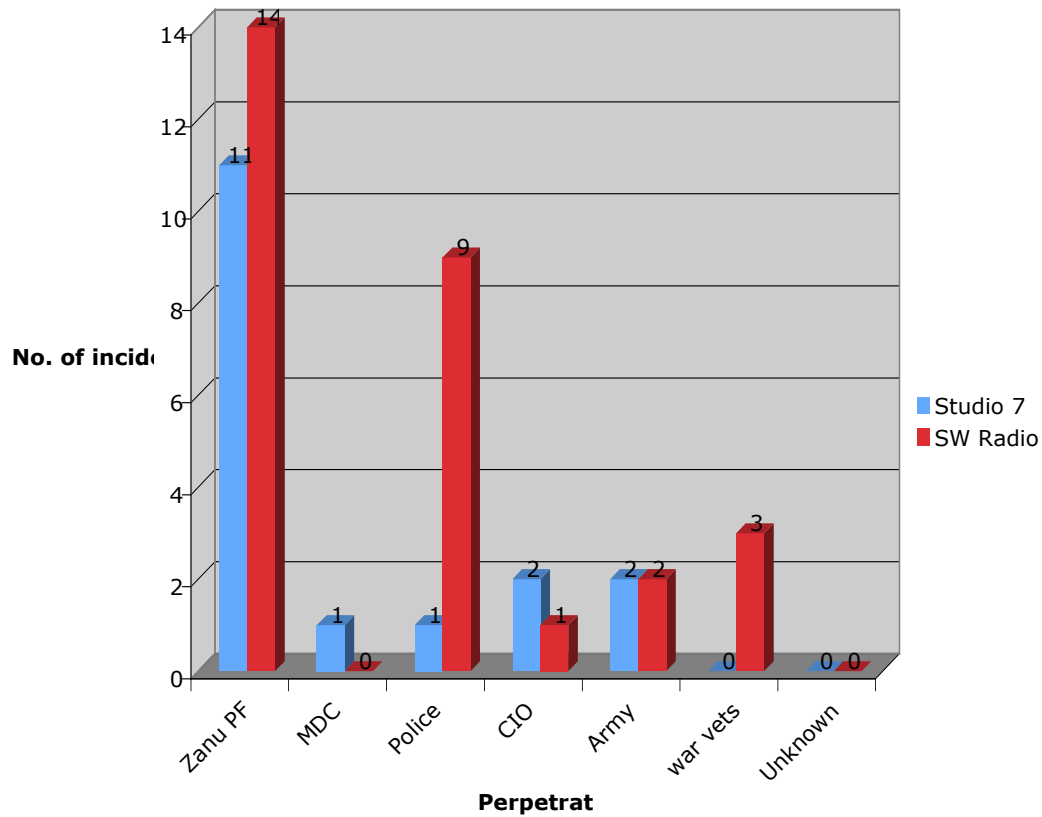
Victims of political violence in the Zim Ind. & Stan



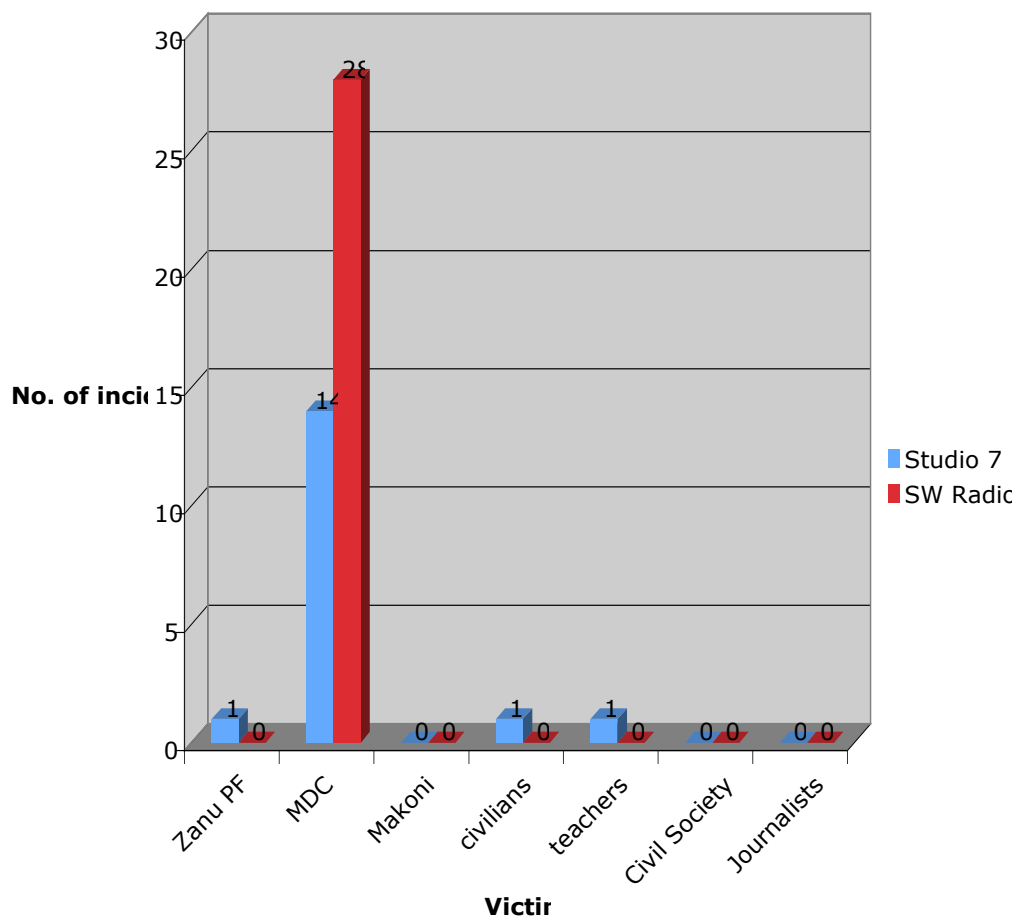
ZANU PF and state security agents' culpability in political violence was more glaring in the reports of the private radio stations. For example, all 29 incidents SW Radio Africa reported accused ZANU PF activists, war veterans, the police, the army, or the CIO. Of these, ZANU PF activists were blamed in 14 incidents (48%), war veterans in three (10%), the police in nine (32%), the army in two (7%) and the CIO in one (3%). None were attributed to the opposition.

Studio 7 recorded 17 incidents, of which 11 (64%) were attributed to ZANU PF, two each (12%) to the CIO and the army and one to the police. Only one identified the MDC as being to blame.

Perpetrators of political violence - SW Radio Africa & Studio 7 (28)



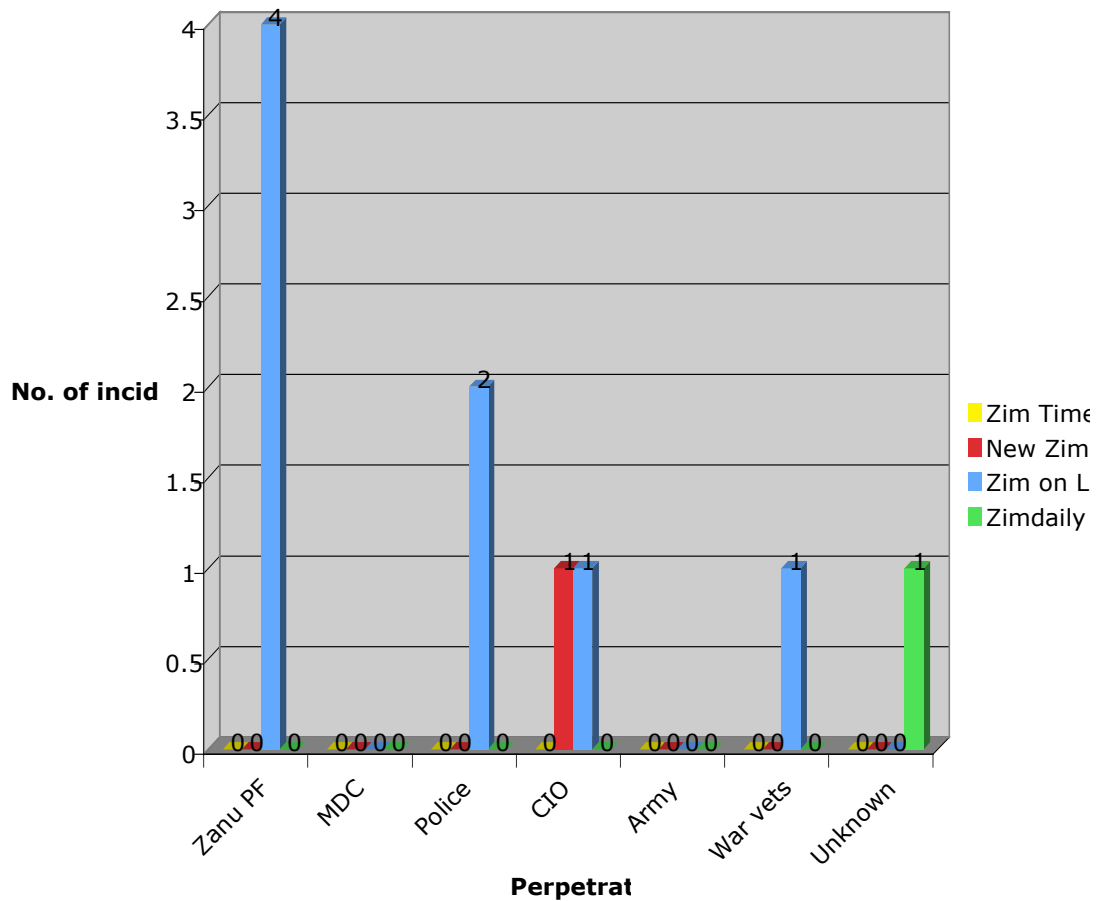
All 28 victims reported on SW Radio Africa were members of the MDC. And of the 17 victims in Studio 7's reports, 14 (82%) were MDC activists and one each was identified as being civilians and teachers. ZANU PF was also a victim in one incident.



Online agencies

The online news agencies' five incidents of political violence they reported showed ZANU PF, war veterans and state security agents as the main offenders with their victims being the MDC and Makoni's Mavambo project. They reported one incident in which ZANU PF was a victim of its own violence.

Perpetrators of political violence - Online Publicatic



Political violence and human rights abuses in the June presidential run-off election campaign

Although the March harmonised election was marred by incidents of violence, these paled into insignificance when compared to the June presidential run-off. This election was characterized by the widespread killing, torture, beating and abductions of MDC supporters and entire village communities and the destruction of their property, a situation that led Tsvangirai to withdraw his candidacy in protest.

And while in the March elections violence was largely prevalent in the rural areas, in the June run-off it spilled onto the streets of major towns and cities such as Harare, where ZANU PF militia forced residents to attend night vigils of sloganeering and camped in venues booked for MDC rallies.

The Human Rights NGO Forum, for instance, recorded 6,469 incidents of violence and rights abuses between April 1 and June 30, a sharp increase of

4,420 cases from 2,049 it recorded between January 1 and March 31.⁶ While the media's reports on incidents of political violence fell far short of those reported by human rights defenders, their coverage of the matter in the same period did reflect the intensification of violence as ZANU PF sought to overturn Mugabe's embarrassing defeat in the March elections. They recorded 523 incidents in the three months leading up to the run-off, compared to 109 they carried in the March election campaign.

Notably, the media reported more politically motivated deaths than those recorded by human rights defenders. This was remarkable considering that most rural areas, where violence was more prevalent, had been turned into no-go areas after being sealed off by rampaging ruling party militias.

Between April 1 and June 30 they recorded 154 deaths due to political violence. Of these, 127 were of MDC activists while 27 were reported to be ZANU PF activists. The Human Rights NGO Forum recorded 84 politically motivated deaths in the same period.⁷

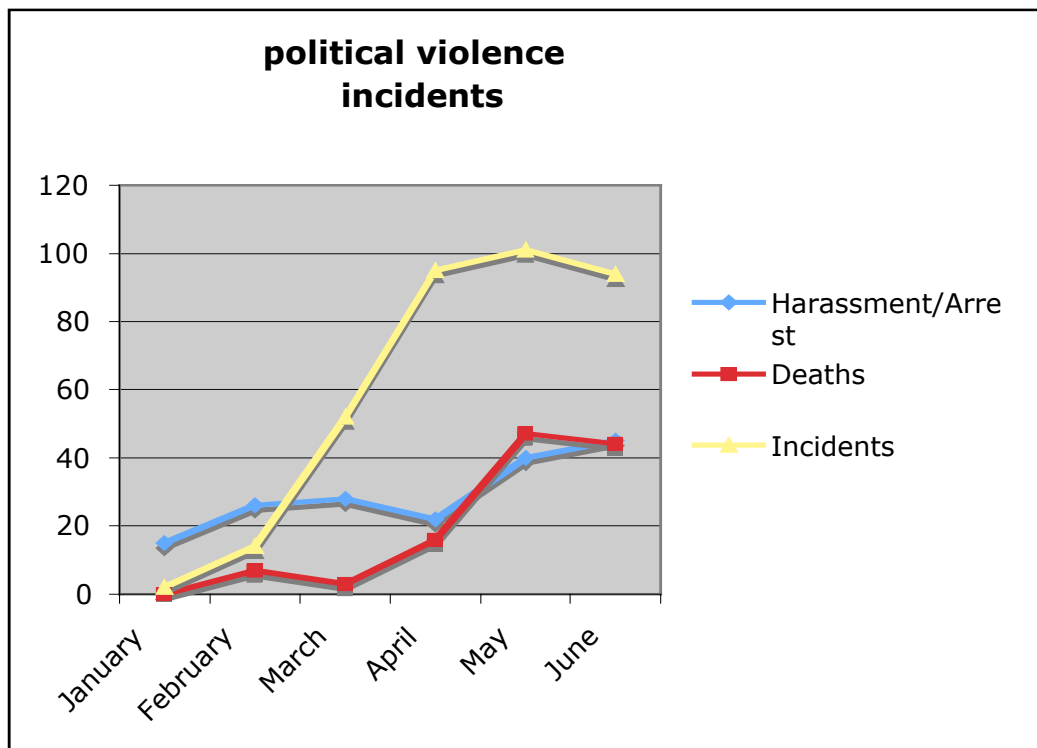
However, the official media, in line with their status as ZANU PF propagandists, reported that only two of the 37 deaths they reported (ZBC [22] and government papers [15]) were not of ZANU PF supporters. One was about an MDC activist's death and the other was of a teacher, both of which the papers merely reported in the context of police denials that their deaths were linked to ZANU PF-sponsored violence. For example, the *Chronicle* and *The Herald* (8/5/2008) quoted the police claiming that the death of an MDC polling agent in Shurugwi was due to meningitis, while the alleged killing of a Guruve teacher was false as he was in fact alive.

There was no independent verification of these claims. Neither was comment sought from the MDC. These media also made no attempt to report or follow up on the deaths of other MDC activists reported in the private media.

The graph below illustrates the intensification and prevalence of violence as reported in the media between January and June. As the graph shows, there was a sharp increase in incidents of violence as reported in the media from March through April, which peaked around June before dropping slightly after the elections. Incidents on politically motivated deaths followed a similar trend.

⁶ See Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, *Political Violence Report June 2008*, Harare Zimbabwe

⁷ See Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, *Political Violence Report June 2008*, Harare Zimbabwe



As was the case in the March elections, the dominant official media chose to ignore cases of state-sponsored violence against the opposition. They only gave prominence to official statements that projected ZANU PF as the victim of the MDC's allegedly inherent violent nature. Their stance appeared to reinforce ZANU PF officials' hate messages that sought to discredit the MDC and portray it as an organisation bent on unleashing violence and terror against the people in order to destabilise the country and as such did not deserve legal protection.

For example out of the 159 perpetrators of political violence and human rights abuses in the official media between April 1 and June 2008, 132 (83%) were allegedly MDC supporters while only five (3%) were ZANU PF. The remaining 22 (14%) comprised white commercial farmers, the police and the army, although the heavy-handed actions of the state security agents were presented as normal and not constituting political violence or harassment. Similar bias was reflected in the statistics on the victims of the violence and rights abuses. Out of the 157 identified as victims, 123 (78%) were ZANU PF supporters and only 18 (12%) were MDC. The remaining 15 (10%) included ordinary people, soldiers, police and resettled farmers.

In contrast, of the 546 people identified as being responsible for acts of violence and rights abuses reported in the private media, 267(48%) were ZANU PF while only nine (3%)were MDC. The remaining 270 (49%) were mainly state security agents. And out of the 553 victims they identified, 330 (60%) were MDC supporters and only seven (1%) were ZANU PF. The remaining 215 (38%) included civil society, teachers, white farmers, journalists, diplomats, election officials and ordinary people.

This deliberate and reckless perversion of the truth was only exposed by the few remaining private media, which, by comparison, became the only credible and reliable sources of information. This perspective was ultimately corroborated by the reports of the SADC and other election observer missions who witnessed the violence for themselves.⁸

They exposed the brutal nature of the violence against the electorate and ZANU PF's opponents in a nationwide campaign evidently aimed at destroying MDC structures and terrorising the electorate in general against voting for Tsvangirai for a second time. The private media reports included harrowing testimonies from the victims and gruesome pictures of their injuries, none of which found space in the government media.

For example, out of the 119 incidents of politically motivated violence the government media carried (official papers [79] and ZBC [40]) between April 1 and June 30, only five (4%) identified ZANU PF activists as being to blame, while the rest (an incredible 96%) were attributed to the MDC. Their reluctance to report truthfully on the real extent and intensity of the ZANU PF government's violent campaign was further exposed by their failure to probe the police's vague and evasive statements whenever it came to commenting on violence allegedly committed by ZANU PF. For instance, *The Herald* (13/5/2008) quoted Assistant Police Commissioner Mike Tanyanyiwa imprecisely saying the police had dismantled bases that were used to commit violence in Masvingo set up by **"some parties"**. He was not asked to name the parties or to elaborate on the political affiliation of the bases, which the private media revealed had been set up by ZANU PF militia to torture MDC supporters and ordinary civilians.

Instead, the paper quoted ZANU PF's Tazvitya Mapfumo **"warning"** Zimbabweans to be **"wary of MDC-T and its Western sponsors who were creating an excuse for foreign intervention through stage-managing and perpetrating violence in the country."**

This crude attempt to disguise what was evidently a highly organized and systematic campaign of state-sponsored violence against the MDC membership and the civilian population seemingly stemmed from ZANU PF's leadership, especially President Mugabe himself. Almost all his campaign rallies were underlined by attempts to misrepresent the truth.

In one of the rallies he told his supporters: **"Hatidi kuti pave ne violence. Asi hazvirevi kuti kana wavingwa nepfumo woti ndakanzi naPresident no violence. Unotushurwa kana usina kuzvidzivirira."** (We do not support violence. But this does not mean that if someone attacks you, you fail to retaliate because the President said no to violence. You will be killed if

⁸ See SADC Election Observer Mission on the Zimbabwe Presidential Run-Off and House of National Assembly By-Elections 2008 Preliminary Statement Presented by Head of the Mission Hon. Jose Marcos Barrica, June 2008

(2) Also see the Pan-African Parliament Election Observer Mission to The Presidential Run-Off and Parliamentary By-Elections in Zimbabwe Interim Statement, June 2008

you do not defend yourself), ZTV (25/5/2008, 8pm) and *The Herald* (26/5/2008).

Earlier, his spokesman George Charamba told Radio Zimbabwe and Spot FM (23/5/2008, main bulletins) that it was MDC supporters who were causing violence while ZANU PF activists had only **“organized themselves for protection against MDC attacks.”**

These media did not ask why the two would sanction and justify ZANU PF supporters' 'retaliatory' attacks instead of asking them to report the cases to the police, who are the only ones with a legal mandate to handle such matters. Instead, they carried several editorials echoing the official rhetoric wilfully distorting the truth. *The Sunday Mail* (1/6/2008) for example, called on the MDC to put an end to violence and accused the international media of **“distorting”** the situation by **“creating an impression that ZANU PF is responsible for all the political violence in Zimbabwe”** and using deaths due to “natural causes” as evidence of political violence to discredit ZANU PF.

Even where there was glaring evidence of ZANU PF cruelty, the official media dismissed this as either fabricated or deserved.

For instance, after the kidnapping and brutal murder of MDC-T activist Tonderai Ndira, *The Herald* (9/6/2008) carried an opinion piece by Caesar Zvayi describing him as a **“common thug”** and a **“dunce to all who knew him”** and reminding his readers that the murdered activist had 35 brushes with the law, including his involvement in the MDC's violent intra-party fighting, as if this justified his murder at the hands of suspected state security agents.

In another incident, *The Herald* and *Chronicle* (8/5/2008) dismissed allegations that an MDC supporter had died after being assaulted by ZANU PF supporters, claiming instead that the victim had died of meningitis.

The Sunday News (20/4/2008) had earlier referred to the incident in passing in its report, **“MDC hooligans unleash reign of terror on ZANU PF supporters,”** which gave graphic details of how some **“MDC hooligans...brutalized ZANU PF supporters leaving one with multiple fractures and was admitted at Masvingo General Hospital.”** While the report sought to project the MDC as a party that had embarked on a vicious rampage, it unwittingly quoted one of the accused belying this notion. He revealed the attack on ZANU PF supporters was in retaliation for the assault of three MDC activists in the same area the previous day. However, this was buried deep in the story and brushed aside without any follow up to the revelations and contained no independent verification.

ZBC's television and radio stations also played up the violence allegedly committed by the MDC-T against ZANU PF, dramatizing the incidents in an effort to reinforce the impression that the MDC-T was inherently violent. One example was the ZTV report (12/6/2008) on the alleged attack on six ZANU PF supporters by MDC-T activists in Bikita East reportedly resulting in the death of Mabiko Mudzingwa and Leonard Chipenyu and the hospitalization of the other four.

Other than being unusually long (5 minutes and 17 seconds), the report was a dramatic narration of how the victims were beaten and left for dead despite

carrying very little evidence to substantiate the claims. The victims' accounts appeared to be prompted by a ZANU PF delegation that visited them at the hospital, which included retired defence forces commander Vitalis Zvinavashe and Masvingo Governor Willard Chiwewe. The reporter, Lilian Muungani, inserted her own opinion, describing the victims as carrying **"permanent scars and life disability"** as a result of the attack.

There was no attempt to seek comment from the MDC-T.

Instead, the station repeated the incident eight times over five days. Similarly, the torching of ZANU PF offices in Gwanda allegedly by the MDC-T (ZTV, 16/6/2008, 8pm) was reported five times over four days.

To lend credence to their reports distorting the source of political violence, the official media almost always quoted the police corroborating their stories. This trend was reinforced by the fact that nearly all the statements the police issued on political violence blamed the MDC-T while concealing ZANU PF's culpability. In fact, the police gave graphic narratives of the incidents of alleged MDC violence against ZANU PF as if they were eyewitnesses.

Without challenging this apparent partisan policing, the official dailies (21/6/2008) and ZBC (22/6/2008, main bulletins) simply quoted police chief Augustine Chihuri saying the MDC-T **"and its Western sponsors"** were behind the violence in the country in a bid to influence the outcome of the run-off. He alleged: **"In all these instances there was no provocation and as expected the hypocrites (MDC-T) kept quiet"**.

These media allowed such blatant dishonesty to pass as fact without challenge.

Likewise, they did not reconcile Chihuri's attempts to portray the MDC-T as solely responsible for violence with his own revelations in the same report that the police had arrested 156 ZANU PF supporters and 390 MDC-T activists since March 29 for engaging in political violence.

Apart from exposing the fallacy of the official media reports and police statements on perpetrators of violence, Chihuri's figures also provided evidence of a significant under-reporting of the incidents of politically motivated violence by the same government mouthpieces.

The Attorney-General's statements on cases of political violence that had been reported also exposed this failure to report the violence adequately. For example, *The Herald* (23/5/2008) quoted Acting Attorney-General Justice Bharat Patel saying in four days alone (between May 18 and May 22) 80 cases of politically motivated violence, one murder and two attempted murders had been reported in six provinces.

His interpretation that such extraordinary statistics indicated a decline in cases of violence involving ZANU PF and the MDC-T only helped to illustrate the shocking scale of political violence ahead of the June poll and the total failure of the media to capture the extent of its occurrence accurately.

But in what appeared to be an exercise in damage control, Patel's deputy Johannes Tomana, subsequently issued statements that seemingly downscaled the prevalence of the violence. He was quoted in *The Herald* (9/6/2008) vowing that the AG's office would get tough on perpetrators of

political violence saying his office had handled “more than” 80 cases since March 29, 2008. He added that in some provinces the violence was “50-50” between the two main parties, further exposing the police and government media’s attempts to dishonestly blame the MDC-T as exclusively responsible for the violence.

There was no attempt by the public media to reconcile these contradictory statements by the government’s senior legal officers.

The official media’s failure to test official statements also resulted in them simply amplifying police claims that cases of violence were on the wane without testing them against their own news reports which indicated the opposite. For instance, while the *Chronicle* (29/5/2008) quoted the police saying there was a decline in the violence due to effective law enforcement, the paper and *The Herald* continued to carry several reports reflecting an increase in incidents of political violence as the June election date drew close. They reported 149 arrests as a result of political violence between May 29 (the day the *Chronicle* published its story claiming a drop in incidents of violence) and June 30.

Notably, all the accused were MDC activists and none were ZANU PF.

It was left to the private media to provide a more truthful picture on the source and extent of violence ahead of the June run-off, which they blamed on ZANU PF.

During this period they recorded 373 incidents of politically motivated violence. Of these, 128 were reported by the two private radio stations, the private papers reported 214 incidents, and the remaining 31 appeared in the online news agencies.

Contrary to the official media’s impression that the MDC was exclusively responsible for the June pre-election violence, with ZANU PF only forced into self-defence, Studio 7 (17/6/2008) quoted humanitarian workers saying there had been very few cases of violence by the MDC.

Statistical evidence gathered from the private media helps to corroborate this point. For example, out of all the 373 incidents of political violence recorded by the private media, the MDC was only identified as being responsible in three (1%) of these. The rest (99%) were attributed to ZANU PF activists, the youth militia, war veterans and state security agents (the police, CIO and the army).

And while in the March elections violence was largely confined to the rural areas, the private media revealed that in the run-up to the June 27 election ZANU PF set up militia camps in some urban suburbs from which it launched a brutal reprisal campaign dubbed *Operation Mavhotera Papi?* (Who did you vote for?) [SW Radio Africa (14/4/2008), Studio 7 (5/6/2008) and *The Standard* (15 & 22/6/2008)].

For example, *The Standard* (22/6/2008) carried a comprehensive round-up of violence allegedly committed by ZANU PF cadres and their allies in the Harare suburbs of Dzivarasekwa, Mabelreign, Epworth, Alexandra Park, Chitungwiza, Mbare, Warren Park and Rugare. The report chronicled how

residents were allegedly forced to attend all-night vigils where they were made to chant ZANU PF slogans.

Apparent too, was the alleged involvement of state security agents in the violent suppression of Zimbabweans' democratic will. While *The Financial Gazette* (24/4/2008) reported three incidents of assault on civilians by soldiers in Kuwadzana in Harare, *The Standard* (13/4/2008) reported on soldiers' raids on several Gweru bars where they indiscriminately assaulted patrons.

These reports belied the army's attempts to absolve itself from the violence following counter-claims by Army Public Relations Officer Major Alois Makotore that its officers had become victims of violence by the public. *The Herald* and *The Manica Post* (9/5/2008) quoted him claiming that soldiers were being attacked **"by some sections of our community for no good reasons"**. He was not challenged to provide evidence or identify the culprits.

Notably, whereas the police seemed willing to give information and comments to the government media on political violence, the private media almost always indicated that they had difficulties getting police corroboration for their stories.

The police's biased media relations did not only underline their evident partisanship during the elections, but also exposed their calculated attempts to cast doubt on the credibility of the private media stories that were potentially damaging to the authorities' disinformation campaign on the occurrence of violence in Zimbabwe.

Arrests and harassment

Besides their direct involvement in several cases of violence against the MDC, police complicity in the widespread violation of Zimbabweans' basic liberties was underlined by the overwhelming number of summary arrests of MDC supporters and other perceived opponents of ZANU PF that the then ruling party had for long portrayed as being enemies of the state. For example, between January 1 and June 30, 2008 the media reported 163 arrests and harassment of MDC officials and perceived enemies of ZANU PF. Of these, 131 (80%) appeared in the private media and 32 (20%) in the government media.

Notably, the government media tried to conceal this gross abuse of authority by the police by underreporting the arrests of government critics and ruling party opponents and presented all 32 of their reports on the arrests in such a way as to portray this as normal police law enforcement. In this way, these media avoided presenting these arrests in the context of the state-sanctioned campaign to subvert the electoral process in favour of President Mugabe and ZANU PF.

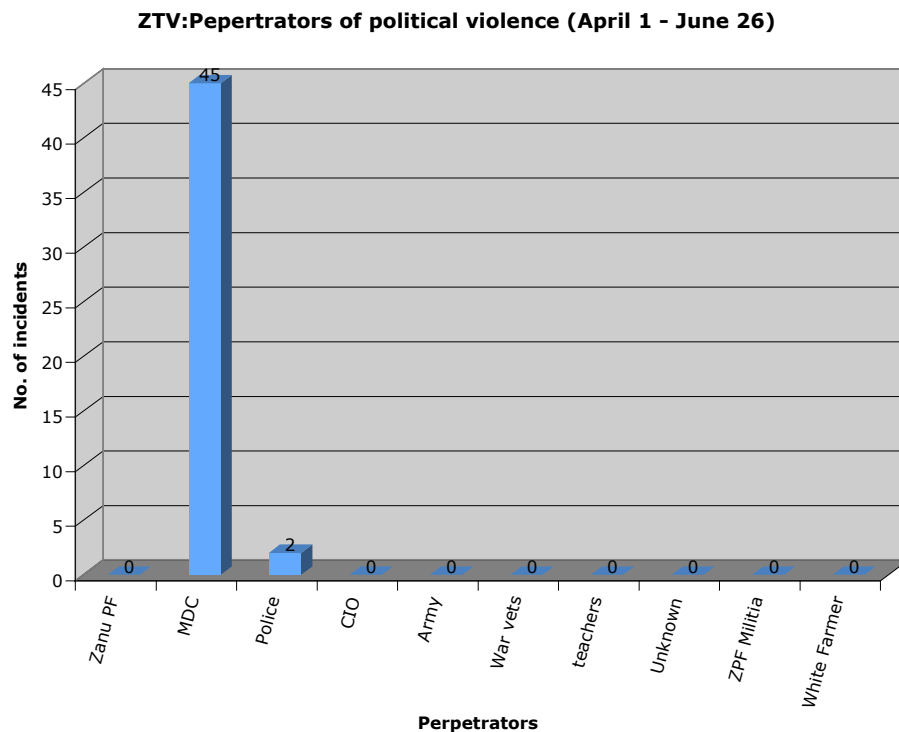
For example, ZBC (25/4/2008) and the official dailies (26/4/2008) unquestioningly reported the police raid on the MDC's Harvest House headquarters in Harare where they arrested 215 people who were allegedly given sanctuary in the offices after committing **"various acts of political violence."**

These media merely presented the raid, which was just one of many such swoops the MDC has suffered since its inception, as evidence of an efficient police force committed to upholding law and order and stemming political violence. As a result, they neither questioned whether the police had a search warrant nor viewed the raid as a device to lend credence to police attempts to buttress their claims that the MDC was solely responsible for the violence.

This only found expression in the private media, which widely reported the arrests as part of a state-sponsored harassment campaign to destabilize the MDC's election preparations.

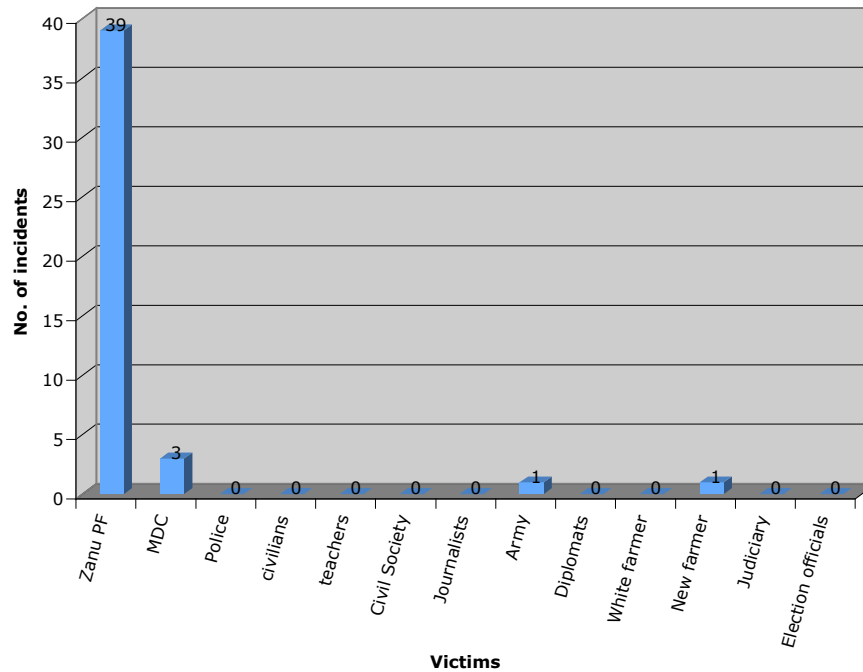
The difference in the media coverage of political violence in the June election campaign is graphically illustrated by the statistics below.

For example, in all the incidents of violence that ZTV reported, the MDC was presented as the culprit. Although the station carried two cases that implicated the police, it simply depicted their violation of the MDC's rights as normal policing procedure.



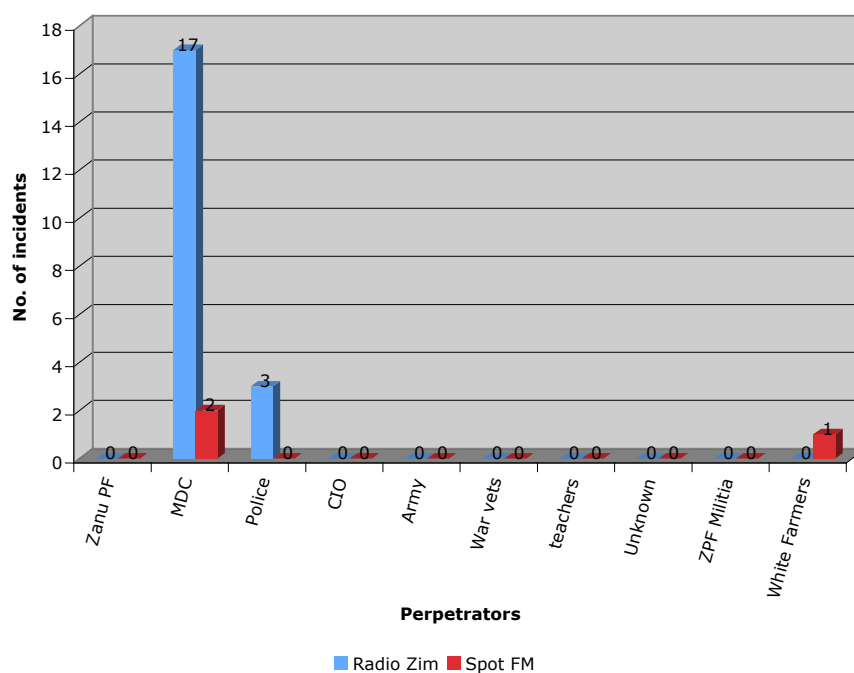
Of the 44 victims of violence ZTV recorded in its reports, 39 (87%) were from ZANU PF and only three (7%) were from the MDC. An army officer and a new farmer were identified as victims once each (3%). The three MDC victims were only reported in the context of official reports dismissing accusations that ZANU PF was responsible for the violence against the MDC.

ZTV: Victims of political violence (April 1 - June 26)



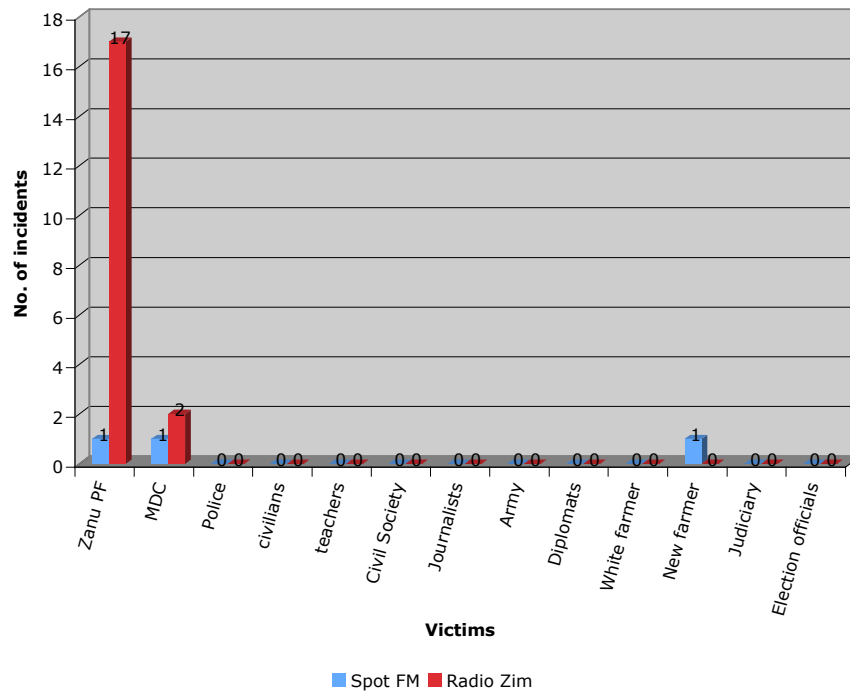
ZBC radios adopted a similar trend. Radio Zimbabwe, for example, identified 20 perpetrators of violence ahead of the June presidential run-off. Of these, 17 (85%) were allegedly MDC activists and three (15%) mentioned the police. However, like ZTV, it simply presented the arrest and beating of government opponents by the police as normal law enforcement activity.

Radio Zimbabwe & Spot FM: Perpetrators of political violence (April 1 - June 26)



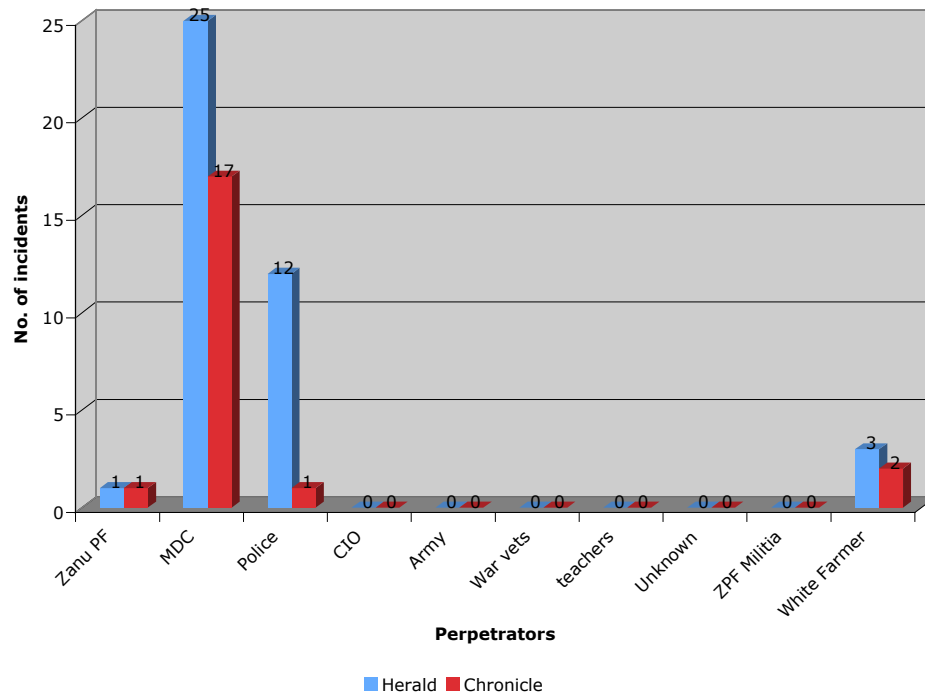
Similarly, Radio Zimbabwe portrayed ZANU PF as being the main victim of alleged MDC violence; out of the 19 victims it named, 17 (89%) belonged to ZANU PF and two (11%) to the MDC. The MDC victims appeared in reports that sought to dismiss the party's complaints as unfounded.

Radio Zimbabwe & Spot FM: Victims of political violence (April 1 - June 26)



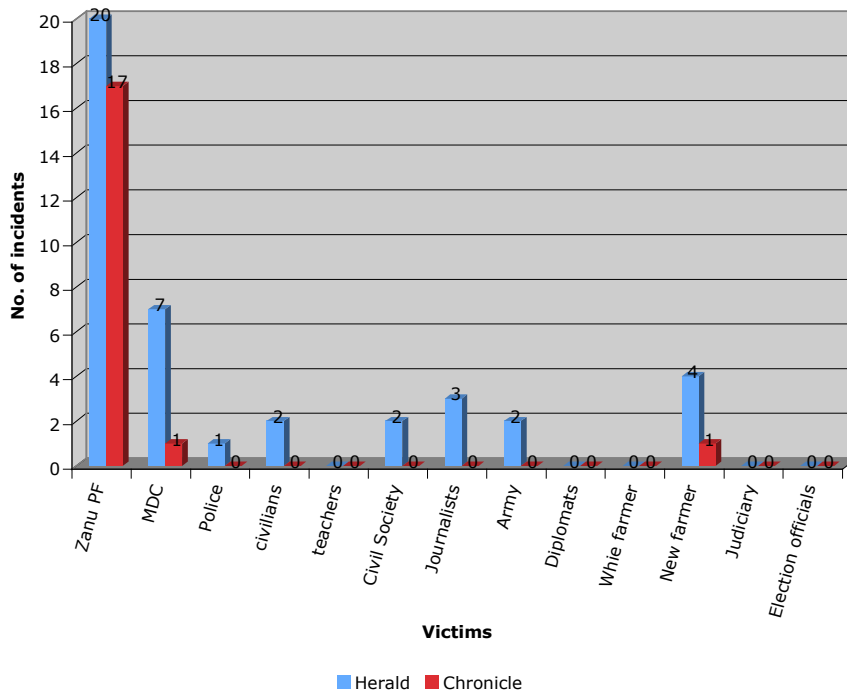
The government Press also gave a distorted picture of the mayhem that prevailed ahead of the presidential run-off. Of the 62 perpetrators of violence the official dailies identified in its reports, the MDC was implicated 42 times (68%) while ZANU PF was only blamed in two (3%) incidents. White farmers, which the official media continue to portray as being tools of the West's illegal regime-change agenda since government's land seizures in 2000, were accused in five reports (8%). Although the papers featured 13 incidents (21%) exposing violent police intolerance of government opponents, they avoided reporting them in the context of being state-sponsored rights abuses.

Herald & Chronicle: Perpetrators of political violence- (April 1- June 26)



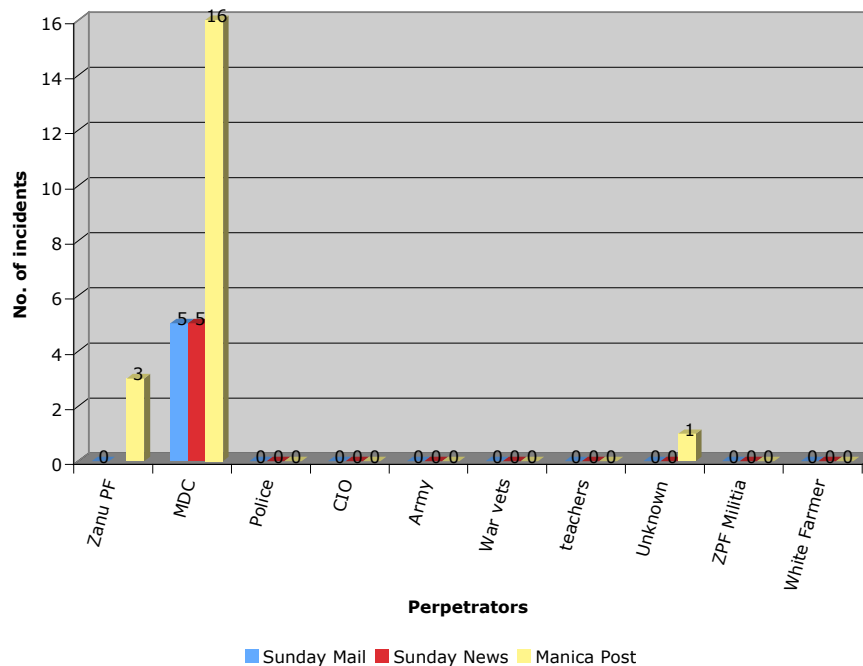
The government dailies recorded 60 victims of political violence in the run-up to the June election. ZANU PF was identified as being the victim on 37 occasions (62%). The MDC was mentioned as the victim on eight occasions (13%). However, these were only reported in the context of denying MDC claims of the violence committed against it by ZANU PF. The remaining 15 victims reported in the dailies included members of civil society, journalists, the police, the army and resettled farmers. However, while the arrest of members of civil society and journalists were not viewed as constituting harassment by the police, newly resettled farmers were presented as being under threat from former white farmers who had allegedly returned to reclaim their previous farms upon hearing that Tsvangirai had won the March elections. Not a shred of evidence was provided to substantiate this fatuous allegation, underpinned by a racial bigotry that has largely defined government's controversial land reforms.

Herald & Chronicle: Victims of political violence (April 1 - June 26)



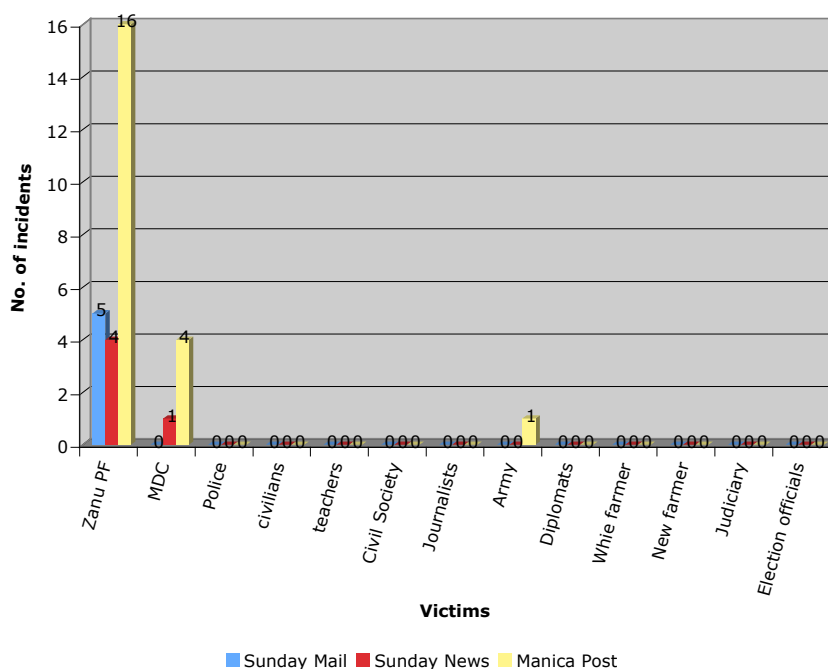
The official weeklies were no different. As shown in the graphs below they projected ZANU PF supporters as victims of mindless MDC violence.

Sunday Mail, Sunday News & Manica Post: Perpetrators of political violence (April 1 - June 26)



Like their counterparts, the government weeklies identified the MDC as victims only in situations where the authorities were trying to disprove private and international media reports exposing ZANU PF violence against the opposition.

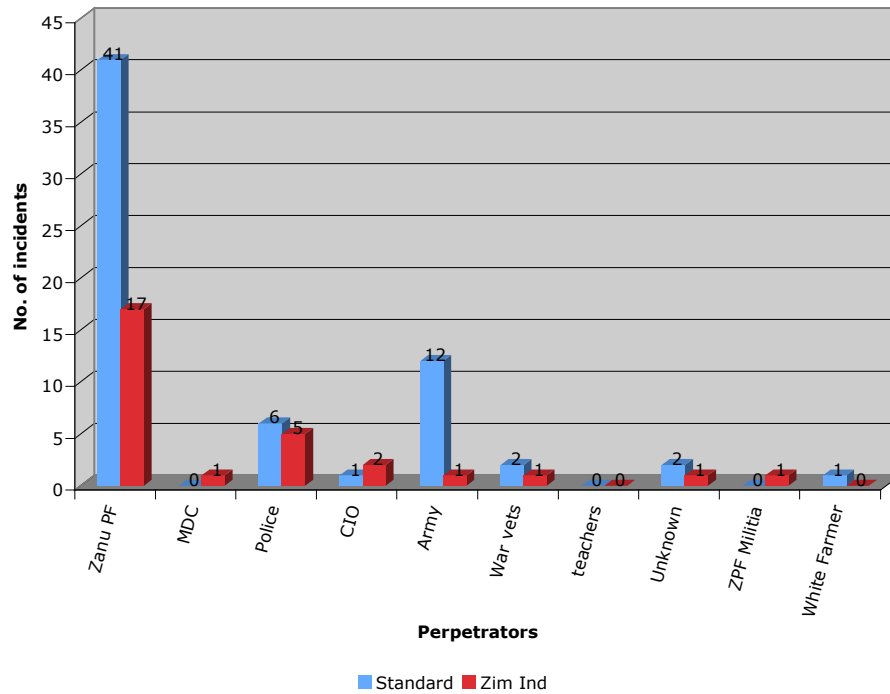
Sunday Mail, Sunday News & Manica Post: Victims of political violence (April 1 - June 26)



The private media statistics showed a different picture altogether. For example, the *Zimbabwe Independent* and *The Standard* reported ZANU PF being responsible in 58 (62%) of their 94 reports identifying those responsible for political violence, the police were blamed 11 (12%) times, and the army on 13 (14%) occasions, while the CIO and war veterans were blamed three times each (3%). The MDC was blamed once (1%).

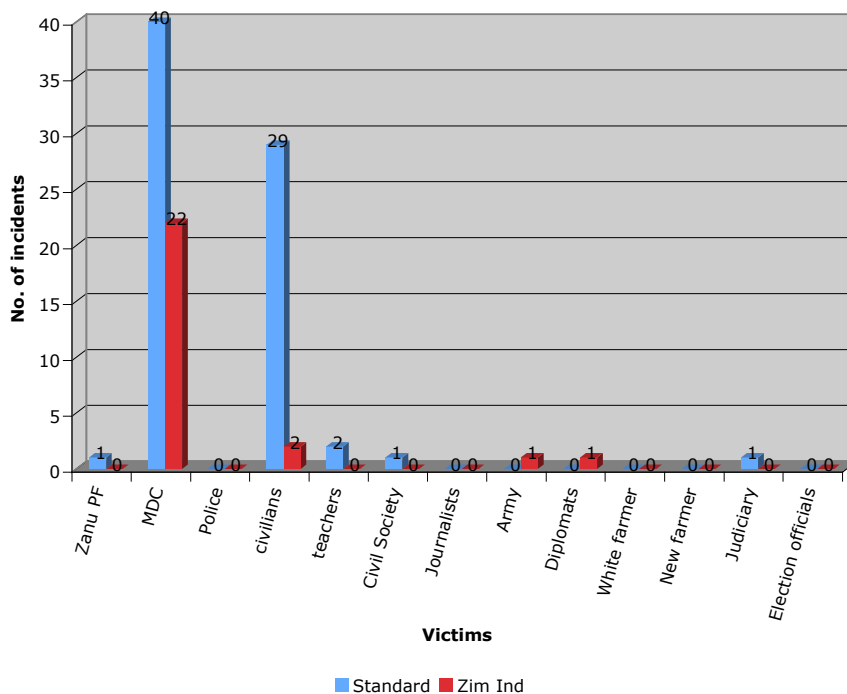
The remainder were attributed to unknown assailants (3%), ZANU PF militia (1%) and white farmers once (1%). The report in which white farmers were blamed stemmed from a repudiation of official allegations that former commercial farmers were harassing newly resettled landowners.

Standard & Zim Ind: Pepertrators of political violence (April 1 - June 26)



The victims of violence recorded by the two weeklies also confirmed ZANU PF as the aggressor. Of the 97 victims they recorded, only one (1%) was ZANU PF while the rest were members of the MDC (64%), civilians (32%), teachers (2%), civil society, diplomats and the judiciary (4%).

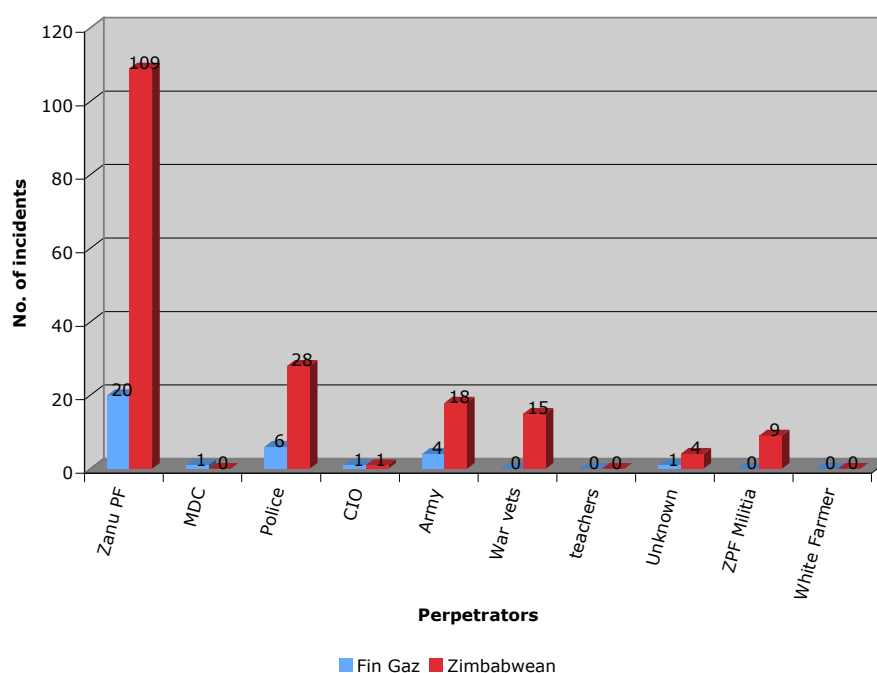
Standard & Zim Ind: Victims of political violence (April 1 - June 27)



The culpability of ZANU PF supporters and state security agents in the pre-election violence was even more prevalent in reports carried by *The Zimbabwean*. Out of the 183 times its reports identified those responsible for the violence, its reports blamed ZANU PF activists on 130 occasions, while it blamed state security agents and ZANU PF militia in 53 incidents. None blamed the MDC.

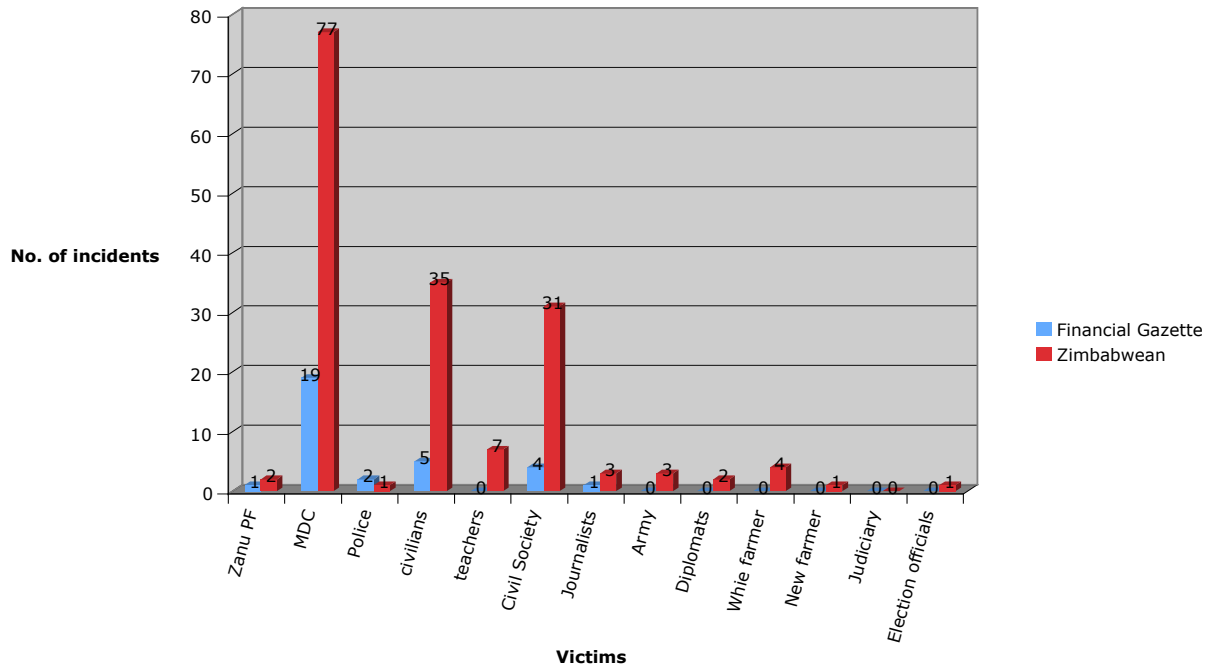
Although *The Financial Gazette* attributed one incident of violence to the MDC out of the 33 cases it recorded, 31 of these blamed ZANU PF and state security agents while one was attributed to an unknown assailant.

Fin Gaz & The Zimbabwean: Perpetrators of political violence (April 1 - June 26)



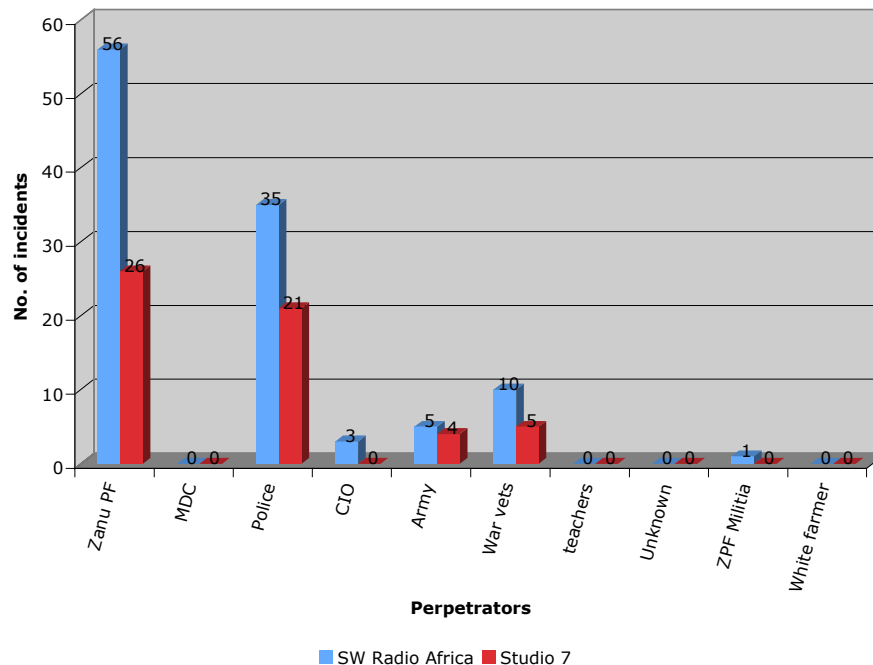
These papers reported that most of the victims of the June 27 pre-election violence were from the MDC, as well as members of the public and civil society, as shown in the graph below.

Fin Gaz & The Zimbabwean: Victims of political violence (April 1 - June 26)



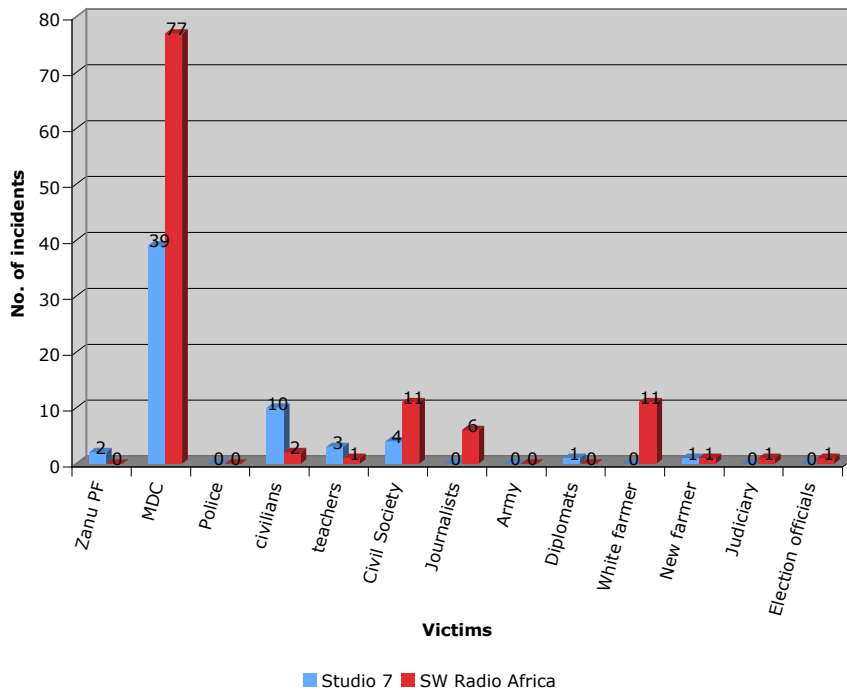
Similarly, the private radio stations, SW Radio Africa and Studio 7, showed ZANU PF, state security agents and war veterans as being responsible for the violence in all the incidents they aired, further exposing the propaganda disseminated by the official media.

SW Radio Africa & Studio 7: Perpetrators of political violence (April 1 - June 26)



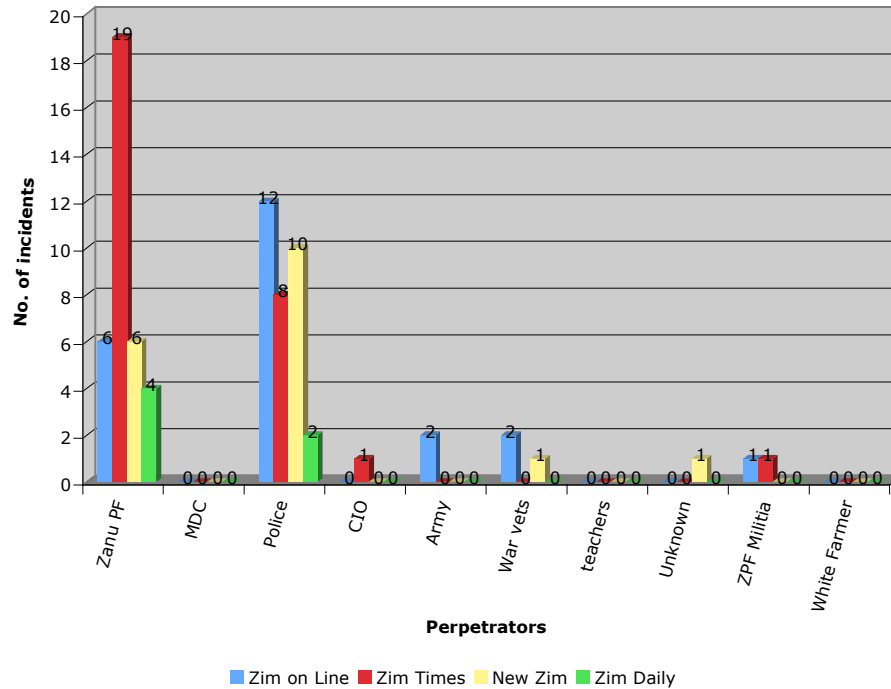
Of the 171 reports identifying the victims of violence, the private radios reported MDC (116), civilians (12), members of civil society (15), teachers (4), journalists (6), white farmers (11) and others as being the victims in 169 cases. ZANU PF was reported as having claimed to be a target of opposition violence in the two remaining cases.

SW Radio Africa & Studio 7: Victims of political violence (April 1 - June 26)



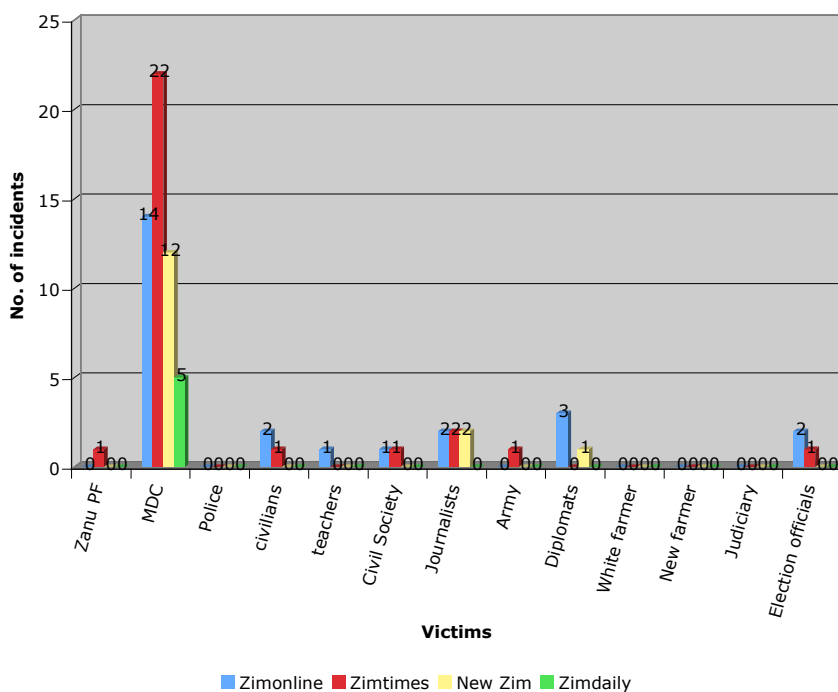
The online news agencies also provided overwhelming evidence of ZANU PF violence in the run-up to the June presidential run-off. Besides one incident in which the political affiliation of the culprits was not identified, all the other 75 perpetrators of violence identified by the agencies named ZANU PF, war veterans and state security agencies as being responsible.

Online Publications: Perpetrators of political violence (April 1 - June 26)



According to the online agencies, the victims of the ZANU PF government's violence campaign remained mostly MDC activists and other perceived opponents such as journalists, teachers, foreign diplomats and civil society (72). The agencies reported ZANU PF and the army as victims in only two cases.

Online Publications: Victims of political violence (April 1 - June 26)



An analysis of the media's sourcing patterns also exposed the official media's severely distorted coverage of the political violence in Zimbabwe's 2008 election campaigns. Their voice distribution showed an overbearing dependency on ZANU PF and police as sources for their reports and very little or no independent verification. The MDC-T, which these media identified as being responsible for the violence in nearly all their stories, was barely given the right of reply.

For example, between January 1 and June 30 the official papers cited 201 sources in their stories on political violence. Of these, 103 (52%) were police voices, 48 (24%) ZANU PF and 19 MDC (9%). All the MDC-T voices were reported in the context of official dismissals of the MDC's allegations blaming ZANU PF for the violence against their party supporters. Independent voices were quoted 10 times (5%) and the actual victims themselves on 21 occasions (10%). Notably, the official media actively facilitated the victims' voices to give graphic detail of their alleged assaults by the MDC-T activists.

While it appeared as if the government media sought comment from alternative sources, this was more an act of deceit as these sources were simply used to reinforce ZANU PF's distorted claims on the cause of violence. These included pro-ZANU PF organizations such as the obscure Zimbabwe Association of Youths, Zimbabwe Lawyers for Justice (ZLJ) and unnamed political analysts who all blamed the MDC-T. ZLJ even called on government to declare a state of emergency because of the ***"increased violence from suspected MDC-T hooligans"*** (*The Herald*, 14/5/2008)

Similarly, ZBC's sourcing pattern also showed a heavy dependency on the police and ZANU PF officials confirming official media reports depicting the MDC-T as brutal and barbaric. For example, out of the 238 voices the broadcaster cited in its political violence reports, the police were quoted 138

times (58%), ZANU PF 63 times (26%), MDC six times (3%), alternative commentators 22 times (9%) and ordinary people nine times (4%). Again, the MDC was cited in the context of officials trivialising its claims of persecution by ZANU PF while nearly all the 'independent' voices were either pro-ZANU PF or unnamed commentators who were used to reinforce the impression that the MDC was to blame for the violence.

For example, ZTV (19/6/2008) claimed that ***“political scientists”*** had castigated the MDC for working on ***“discrediting the run-off by continuing to instigate and perpetuate violence”***. However, only one analyst, Kenneth Manungo, of the University of Zimbabwe was named, while the rest were not identified. Reasons for masking their identities remained unexplained.

In contrast, the private radio stations relied on the MDC, quoting it 147 times (50%) out of the 295 voices they cited, as opposed to ZANU PF's 10 times (3%). The police were quoted 14 times (5%), while independent commentators were cited 113 times (38%) and victims of the violence 11 times (4%).

The online agencies had a similar voice distribution pattern: The MDC was quoted 91 times (38%) out of a total of 240 voices the agencies cited, while ZANU PF was accessed 27 times (11%). They quoted the police 48 times (20%), alternative commentators 59 times (25%) and ordinary people 15 times (6%).

Out of the 518 voices the private Press cited, the police were quoted on 58 occasions (11%). The rest were MDC (158 times or 31%), ZANU PF (36 times or 7%), alternative observers (173 times or 33%) and ordinary people (93 times or 18%).

Notably, whereas the alternative commentators the official media cited basically echoed ZANU PF rhetoric, those quoted in the private electronic media critically viewed the widespread political violence as part of ZANU PF's strategy to overturn the March election results by any means necessary, regardless of the consequences.

Conclusion

As illustrated by the statistics in this report, the government media was reluctant to expose ZANU PF as responsible for the mayhem that characterised the country's bloody 2008 elections, aimed at severely crippling the MDC and subvert the democratic will of Zimbabwe's electorate. Instead of reporting honestly on the violence that has blighted the country's electoral process for years, they slavishly magnified ZANU PF's attempts to distort the truth by depicting the MDC as a criminal and violent party that did not deserve state protection.

But such a stance, which underlined these media's complicity in the erosion of Zimbabweans' civil and political liberties, basically conformed to the official media's partisan coverage of other important issues affecting Zimbabweans' livelihoods, particularly relating to the country's political and socio-economic crises ahead of the elections. This coverage also sought to absolve ZANU PF from being remotely responsible for the country's problems while presenting

the MDC as a barbaric surrogate of the West bent on destabilising the country by violently fronting its Western masters' neo-colonial "illegal regime change" interests.

This propaganda campaign apparently intensified after the March 2007 brutalisation of the MDC and civic organisation leaders attending a prayer meeting in Harare. Rather than openly report and condemn the violent crushing of the court-sanctioned meeting by the police that resulted in the shooting to death of an MDC activist, the government media dishonestly ascribed the violence to the tendencies of the opposition at the time for breaking the law and grandstanding for Western attention. Subsequently, they gave front-page prominence to the arrest of scores of MDC activists, once again on false claims that they were responsible for a spate of alleged terror bombings around the country.

None of those arrested were convicted of these crimes, affirming independent observers' views that the arrests were part of a covert state-sponsored campaign to cripple the MDC's preparations for the 2008 elections. The official media did not only suffocate news of their acquittal but continued to project the MDC as a terrorist organisation.

It is against this background that despite carrying reports that clearly showed the state security agents' persecution of ZANU PF opponents, the official media did not view it as such. Instead, they presented their oppressive behaviour as standard law enforcement.

Only those with access to the few remaining private media were better informed on the scale of political violence and rights abuses and their perpetrators. But while these media attempted to counter the daily propaganda disseminated by ZANU PF through the government media, they were unable to match the official media's dominance of the news market owing to repressive media laws. For instance, the few remaining private papers are all weeklies, while the foreign-based private radio stations are only accessible to those with Short and Medium Wave radio sets – and the money to buy batteries.

Together with the government media's monopoly of the domestic airwaves and the daily print market, the voice – and opinions – that dominated Zimbabwe's communications industry during the country's two elections in 2008 was that of a strident and defensive ZANU PF.