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Transitional Barometer Monthly Report: January 2010

The Transitional Barometer is a monthly summary of how the media covered issues relating to the activities of the coalition government - and an assessment of how the media are monitoring adherence to the Global Political Agreement signed by the country's three main political parties in September 2008. It is a product of the Media Monitoring Project, Zimbabwe.

SUMMARY

THE government-controlled public media remained poor watchdogs of the unity government's compliance record according to the terms of the Global Political Agreement (GPA).

Not only did they fail to give any enlightening insights into the coalition's intractable delays over resolving outstanding issues in the power-sharing agreement and delivering on its reconstruction promises, they also continued to give heavily biased and favourable coverage to the ZANU PF arm of government at the expense of its MDC partners.

Of the 220 reports these media carried on the coalition's activities in January, 118 (54%) were on ZANU PF activities with the MDC formations sharing 46%: MDC-T 37% (82 stories) and nine percent (20 stories) for MDC-M.

The voice of ZANU PF was also the most heard, constituting 116 (55%) of the 208 voices the public media carried on the political parties' activities. MDC-T was quoted 63 times (30%) while the MDC-M was accessed 29 times (14%). See Figs 1 and 2.

The government-controlled media's reports on ZANU PF activities mostly championed the party's cause in its power-sharing dealings with the MDC formations, while those they carried on the MDC-T were generally negative, portraying it as an unfaithful partner and an obstacle to the resolution of outstanding issues. As a result, their coverage of the coalition's activities violated both the principle of **"balanced and fair coverage"** and the requirement that the media **"refrain from using abusive language that may incite hostility, political intolerance and ethnic hatred or that unfairly undermines political parties and other organisations"** as stated in Article 19 (d & e) of the GPA.

Fig. 1: The most covered party in the public media

Media	ZANU-PF	MDC-T	MDC-M
ZBC	61	47	11
Zimpapers	57	35	9
Total	118	82	20

Fig. 2. The most heard political party in the public media

Media	ZANU-PF	MDC-T	MDC-M
ZBC	64	24	12
Government press	52	39	17
Total	116	63	29

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Milliband revives sanctions propaganda

THE sanctions issue dominated the government-controlled media's coverage of problems hindering full implementation of the GPA to which they devoted 101 (69%) of the 147 reports they carried on political developments in the country. The remaining 46 reports during the month looked at related aspects of the power-sharing initiative.

The official media's revival of the sanctions debate followed British Foreign Secretary David Milliband's remarks in the British House of Commons that Britain would take a cue from the MDC, among other factors, in lifting its targeted sanctions against ZANU PF's ruling elite and its associates.

Milliband's controversial comments sparked a frenzied campaign in the government-controlled media to undermine the credibility of Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai's MDC that completely excluded a balanced, rational assessment of Milliband's comments and their effects on the effective execution of the GPA.

Instead, these media reduced all legitimate concerns raised in the talks over unresolved disputes in the power-sharing coalition to an entirely sanctions-related problem amplifying ZANU PF's claims that:

- The MDC had campaigned for the imposition of sanctions;
- The party was in control of the British government's decisions on the issue; and that
- The MDC was solely responsible for the current political deadlock by allegedly refusing to lobby for their removal.

This propaganda blitz extended to marketing and defending ZANU PF's demands under the power-sharing agreement; dismissing MDC-T's concerns; and undermining its contribution to the coalition by depicting it as working against the people.

Rarely was the MDC-T given a chance to respond to these allegations, which were used to reinforce ZANU PF's renewed reluctance to comply with the provisions of the GPA on the grounds that Milliband's "confession" vindicated the party's claim that the MDC was colluding with the West and thus had the power to call off the sanctions.

For example, of the 101 reports that the government-controlled media carried on sanctions, 71 (including 15 editorials and 22 opinion pieces) were used as platforms for ZANU PF officials and their apologists, sometimes disguised as analysts, to berate the MDC's alleged **"murderous collusion with the West"** to cause national suffering through the 'illegal' imposition of sanctions (*The Herald* 28/1).

In one such article, *Herald* columnist Reason Wafawarova (28/1) charged that **"the thousands who have died because of the ruinous sanctions are mere collateral damage to MDC-T's notorious cause of leveraging ZANU-PF by starving the nation"**. No evidence was provided to support such damaging and false allegations.

In contrast, the private media provided a more balanced analysis in 37 of the 163 reports they carried on the political activities of the alliance. The remaining 126 provided generally fair investigations into the complexities of the power-sharing talks characterised by prolonged friction over "outstanding issues" and growing regional impatience with the coalition parties' failure to resolve their differences.

While the private media agreed that Milliband's comments had handed ZANU PF **"a smoking gun"**, they pointed out that European sanctions targeted at Mugabe and his ZANU PF allies would likely remain until other conditions contained in the GPA, such as the restoration of the rule of law, an end to political violence, and a free media environment, had been effectively addressed.

The parliamentary watchdog, *Veritas*, also weighed in with some compelling observations on the implications of ZANU PF's decision to make the lifting of sanctions a pre-condition for any concessions in the talks. Its Bill Watch (28/1) noted that the ZANU PF Politburo's resolution not to engage in further inter-party talks until Western sanctions had been lifted **"leaves the inter-party negotiations trapped within a somewhat vicious circle"** given that **"without some reform legislation, which is not yet in the pipeline, it does not look as if governments imposing selective sanctions will lift them"**.

Horse-trading allegations over ZMC resurface

THERE was little news about media issues in the government-controlled public media during the month. Collectively, they carried just three stories.

These comprised two reports quoting Information Minister Webster Shamu commending progress in the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings' digitalisation exercise (Spot FM 28 & 31/1, 8pm) and a Radio Zimbabwe (31/1, 8pm) story on a ZBC strategic workshop in Nyanga. None inquired about the lack of progress in the media reform exercise promised under the GPA, despite pre-Christmas news identifying the names of the members of the new Zimbabwe Media Commission.

There was limited news about media reform in the private media too, but their nine stories continued to report the painfully slow pace of the reforms, including reports that accused the coalition partners of striking a political compromise in the selection of the ZMC commissioners whose job it will be to regulate and licence new media products and journalists.

For example, The *Zimbabwe Independent* and SW Radio Africa (22/1) reported that Harare publishing consultant Roger Stringer had written to the Speaker of Parliament Lovemore Moyo, chairperson of Parliament's Standing Rules and Orders Committee (SROC) that conducted the public interviews last August, challenging him to clarify allegations of **"political horse-trading"** in the selection of nominees to the ZMC.

Reportedly, Stringer had been ranked sixth out of the 27 prospective candidates for the ZMC but had his name allegedly removed from the list of the 12 candidates submitted to President Mugabe from which he appointed eight commissioners as required under the constitution. Instead, ZANU PF official and former ambassador to China, Chris Mutsvangwa, who was said to have failed to make it into the final 12, was appointed to the commission.

The private media also continued to provide their audiences with important political profiles of the new commissioners.

A *Veritas* Bill Watch bulletin (28/1) summed up the uncertainties surrounding media – and other – reforms, observing that **"those anticipating prompt passage of the POSA Amendment Bill and the early introduction of media and other reform legislation ... are likely to continue to be disappointed"** as these bills were not ready for presentation and it would become difficult for Parliament to meet once the constitutional reform outreach exercise kicks off. None of *Veritas'* observations found expression in any of the media.

Constitutional reform stumbles forward

WHILE both Houses of Parliament continued to enjoy an extended Christmas holiday, it was the ongoing controversies over the constitutional reform exercise that attracted most of the media's attention during the month.

Although parliamentary sessions were adjourned until the beginning of February, the government-controlled public media did carry three stories on parliamentary activity, comprising the announcement of an upcoming **"joint caucus"** meeting and the postponement of a parliamentary workshop scheduled for Bulawayo (Spot FM {2/1, 8pm & 30/1, 8pm}). No further details on the two events were provided.

However, several parliamentary portfolio and thematic committee meetings were held at the end of January (25th -29th), which included Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare; Education, Sport and Culture; Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs; and the Media, Information and Communications Technology committee. Unforgivably, none of the media carried any news of the proceedings of these meetings. News on these only appeared in a report from the parliamentary watchdog NGO, *Veritas*, in its Bill Watch report towards the end of the month.

'A tool to overthrow ZANU PF'

THE government media carried 110 stories on constitutional reforms, 65 of which focused on administrative issues and 22 on problems bedeviling the process. Progress in the constitutional rewriting exercise was captured in 13 reports, while the remaining 10 were general reports on the exercise.

However, this widespread coverage did not necessarily translate into in-depth coverage of the process as most of their reports mainly acted as conduits for official pronouncements. For example, of the 125 voices recorded commenting on the constitutional reform exercise in these media, 116 (93%) were official voices while only nine (seven percent) offered alternative views.

The authorities' voices comprised 55 from ZANU PF, 37 from MDC-T, MDC-M (16) and eight government voices. Notably, all the eight voices quoted in the public media in their official government capacities, belonged to ZANU PF.

Consequently, there was very little independent monitoring of how the constitutional reforms were being conducted.

For example, ZTV (1/1, 8pm) simplistically quoted MDC-T Constitutional Affairs Minister Eric Matinenga saying his ministry had **"put up all necessary structures to ensure a smooth countrywide advocacy for the people-driven constitution"** without demanding details on how this was going to be conducted.

Similarly, ZTV (20/1, 8pm) did not provide any insight into the ZANU PF **"politburo decision to intensify outreach programmes to ensure ideals and principles of revolution are enshrined within the constitution"**, especially in

view of private media reports alleging coercion of villagers by the party to support the Kariba Draft Constitution.

The government-controlled media mainly used its ZANU PF sources to blame the MDC, civil society organisations and the West for the lack of progress in the constitutional reform initiative, accusing them of using the exercise as a tool to overthrow ZANU PF.

The Herald (25/1), for example, accused the MDC-T of securing donor funding so as “... **to influence the constitution-making process ... to achieve a regime-change agenda**” with plans “**to hold workshops and public hearings ... to influence the public to adopt the party’s ideas and opinions with a view of tipping the scale in their favour in the next general election**”. The private media offered a more balanced analysis in their 62 reports on the subject.

Of these, 26 focused on assessing progress in the constitution-making process and 36 reported on the problems afflicting it. The stories reporting progress focused on reassurances by donors, mainly the UNDP, of continued funding, and the patching up of differences between the Constitutional Parliamentary Select Committee (Copac) and the management committee on the composition of rapporteurs. But this was reported as being another section of the constitution-making exercise that had fallen victim to political compromise, rather than the selection of non-partisan experts. Some of the problems in the constitutional rewriting exercise that the private media also highlighted included inadequate funding, incessant political bickering and ZANU PF’s alleged campaigns to force villagers to support the adoption of the Kariba Draft constitution as a basis for the rewriting of the country’s supreme law.

HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

State media censors threats and violence

The state media turned a selectively blind eye to widespread, ongoing human rights violations in the country, recording just two incidents in four reports on human rights issues during the month.

This compared starkly with the 86 stories carried in the private media, which included 24 reports of new human rights violations.

The private media identified commercial white farmers, MDC supporters, students, ordinary people, journalists, and human rights activists as being victims, while the perpetrators of the abuses were largely reported as being state security agents and ZANU PF supporters. The MDC were reported as being the culprits in two incidents.

Some of the incidents recorded by the private media included:

- Death threats against freelance journalist Stanley Kwenda by a senior police officer (*The Zimbabwe Times* 19/1).
- The arrest and detention of two MDC activists, Fani Tembo and Emmanuel Chinanzvavana, at Banket police station in Mashonaland West for allegedly kidnapping a ZANU-PF supporter (*The ZimTimes* 20/1 & *Studio 7* 19/1).
- The intimidation of MDC supporters by ZANU-PF officials in Uzumba, Mashonaland East, to coerce them into supporting the Kariba Draft constitution (SW Radio Africa 11/1).
- The arrest of 27 Bindura university students for protesting against the university's decision to prevent those who had not paid tuition fees from taking examinations, and the arrest and assault of NUST student representative council president, Brian Mtisi, by police for allegedly inciting violence at the trial of the university's principal accountant, Roy Ndlovu (*Studio 7* 15/1 & *The Zimbabwe Times* 18/1).
- The eviction of South African citizen, Ray Finaughty, from his farm, which reportedly is protected under a Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement (*The Financial Gazette* 14/1)
- The arrest of WOZA members for demonstrating against, and petitioning the Education Ministry over poor educational standards. (*The Zimbabwean* 28/1).

The government-controlled media identified state security agents as being responsible for the death of a suspected criminal, Wilson Sabun, in Mutare from injuries sustained during a beating (*The Manica Post* 29/1) in one of their two reports. The other report identified MDC-T supporters as suspects in arson attacks after seven homesteads belonging to ZANU-PF supporters were burnt to the ground in Buhera North (*The Herald* 28/1 & *ZTV* 25/01, 8pm).

Ends/

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