

The Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe
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Contents

1. General comment
2. Crackdown on MDC-T leads to coalition crisis
3. Did you know that...?
4. Rights abuses attract international condemnation
5. ZBC promotes political intolerance
6. MDC-T castigated for hosting investment conference

Comment

IN what was reported as a first for Zimbabwe, police arrested an individual on February 24th for posting a message on *Facebook* commenting on the recent uprising in Egypt.

The State accused Vikas Mavhudzi of **“subversion”** after he allegedly expressed support for the protests in Egypt that led to the resignation of long-time ruler Hosni Mubarak on Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai’s *Facebook* wall (Nehanda Radio and *New Zimbabwe.com*, 16 & 17/3). He has been denied bail by a Bulawayo magistrate.

“I am overwhelmed...What happened in Egypt is sending shockwaves to dictators around the world. No weapon but unity of purpose worth emulating, hey”, Mavhudzi allegedly wrote.

The State says Mavhudzi had **“unlawfully”** suggested to Tsvangirai ***“the taking over or attempt to take over the government by unconstitutional means or usurping the functions of the government”*** (Nehanda Radio and *New Zimbabwe.com*, 16 & 17/3).

The magistrate dismissed his bail application on the basis that he allegedly posed a national security threat and that ***“what happened in Egypt is a reality”***.

MMPZ views this as an indictment of the criminal justice system where a citizen accused of making an innocuous observation about uprisings in North Africa is incarcerated for three weeks on charges alleging he was encouraging the illegal overthrow of the Zimbabwe government. Denying this citizen his right to freedom on the basis that he represents a “security threat” has the effect of suffocating legitimate debate about the uprisings in North Africa and their relevance to Zimbabwe – as was the arrest, detention and prosecution of former MDC legislator Munyaradzi Gwisai and five other human rights activists last month.

These overzealous prosecutions of ordinary citizens debating perfectly legitimate issues of democracy – and the denial of their freedom – clearly instils fear of arrest among the citizenry if they publicly engage in discussing such topics. Such intimidation undermines Zimbabweans’ right to free expression and provides the democratic nations of the world with a good example of the gratuitous repression that has become the hallmark of Zimbabwe’s intolerant and authoritarian government.

Crackdown on MDC-T leads to coalition crisis

THE arrest of MDC-T's Energy Minister Elton Mangoma and the nullification of Lovemore Moyo's election as Speaker of Parliament by the Supreme Court this week provoked an angry reaction from Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai and his party.

Mangoma was arrested on charges of "criminal abuse of duty" after his office allegedly imported fuel without following proper procedure, while the Supreme Court set aside the election of Moyo as Speaker after an appeal by ZANU PF Politburo member Jonathan Moyo that his election violated secret ballot rules as set out in the Constitution and Standing Orders of Parliament.

The media reported Tsvangirai accusing the ZANU PF arm of government of persecuting members of his party during a Press conference in Harare and threatening to bring an end to the troubled coalition government.

The alleged persecution of Mangoma and Moyo followed what appears to be a systematic state crackdown on senior MDC-T officials on charges that are largely being viewed as a selective application of the law by the MDC-T, political commentators and the international community. Apart from Moyo and Mangoma, at least six MDC-T MPs have already appeared in court in the last few weeks facing charges ranging from theft and political violence, to possession of mbanje.

While the official media's news coverage of Mangoma and Moyo's court cases was fair, their follow-up editorials were heavily biased against them and the MDC-T in general. In addition, the government media only partially reported Tsvangirai's comments by exclusively selecting excerpts that exposed him to criticism.

For example, Tsvangirai's assessment of the failings of the inclusive government, such as the prevalence of political violence, the banning and disruption of political and other public meetings, the proliferation of "hate language", theft and corruption (*Zimbabwe Independent* 11/3) were never reported in the government media. Neither did they investigate the implications on the country of an MDC-T pull-out from the inclusive government.

The official media eagerly seized on Tsvangirai's intemperate criticism of the **"post-Dumbutshena and post-Gubbay"** judiciary era following the Supreme Court's verdict on Moyo, which he said had **"largely discredited itself by becoming a willing appendage of ZANU PF"** as an opportunity to quote ZANU PF sympathizers condemning the Prime Minister's outburst.

For example, *The Herald* (12/3) reported Zimbabwe Lawyers for Justice leader, Advocate Martin Dinha, saying Tsvangirai faced arrest over his **"shocking comments"** about the judiciary as they constituted a **"criminal offence"**.

He told the paper: ***“He faces arrest for contempt of court because the law is very clear that you should not demean or defame judges of the High Court or the Supreme Court...We expect the police to act swiftly and arrest the PM for bringing the entire system of government into disrepute.”***

Earlier, ZTV (11/3, 8pm) quoted ***“political analysts”*** such as *The Herald’s* Caesar Zvayi and Gabriel Chaibva describing Tsvangirai’s threats as a ***“political gimmick”*** meant to ***“win the hearts of his party’s handlers”***.

Zvayi castigated Tsvangirai for being a ***“very, very confused individual, who unfortunately speaks before he thinks”***, while Chaibva trivialized his concerns as an attempt to ***“disrupt the operations of the inclusive government”***.

The private media reported these developments as having left Zimbabwe’s fragile coalition on the verge of collapse (*Zimbabwe Independent*, 11/3).

They viewed ZANU PF’s alleged persecution of MDC-T members as a deliberate ploy to frustrate the MDC-T to walk out of government so that an early national election could be held on ZANU PF terms.

Did you know that...?

HIGH-RANKING politicians in Zimbabwe have a history of criticizing court judgments (*New Zimbabwe.com*. 15/3). Some of the incidents the news agency recalled include:

- Then Information Minister Jonathan Moyo accused High Court Judge Justice Chatikobo of being a ***“night judge dispensing night justice”*** after granting an urgent interdict outside office hours to private radio station, Capital Radio, to stop Moyo from seizing its equipment at a time when the main case was pending in court. Moyo subsequently wrote a letter to the then Judge President Justice Godfrey Chidyausiku expressing ***“government’s disquiet over (the) High Court ruling in the Capital Radio saga”***, (*Zimbabwe Independent* 13/10, 2000).
- The *Zimbabwe Independent* (2/8/2002) reports President Mugabe telling a reception for MPs that the government would not obey judgments it regarded as ***“subjective”*** after Justice Minister Patrick Chinamasa had been convicted of contempt of court charges by then High Court Judge, Justice Blackie. It quoted him: ***“We will respect judges where the judgments are true judgments”***, adding that a judge who ***“sits alone in his house or with his wife and says ‘this one is guilty of contempt;’ that judgment should never be obeyed”***.

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- Moyo is also on record dismissing the contempt of court judgment by Justice Blackie, telling the British-based BBC (2002) that the judge, ***“who has a history of kangaroo courts” had taken the matter into “a personal crusade and has done that in a manner that will erode public confidence in the justice system” and further that “there is no doubt that fair-minded and law abiding citizens will see this judgment for what it is: outrageous, sinister, highly personalised crusade made by someone who should be packing his bags”*** .

Rights abuses attract international condemnation

A Human Rights Watch report released in the week blamed ZANU PF as being responsible ***“at the highest levels”***, for the fresh outbreak of violence in the country and warning that the situation was ***“drastically deteriorating”*** ahead of elections.

SW Radio Africa and *ZimOnline* (8 & 9/3) reported Human Rights Watch (HRW) stating that despite the formation of the inclusive government, security agents and militias ***“continue to commit human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests, beatings, torture and killings”*** of MDC-T supporters.

“There has been little or no accountability for these crimes. The government has not made any genuine effort to investigate, much less discipline, or prosecute any of the individuals responsible,” says the report. The report also noted that such ***“impunity”*** had encouraged Mugabe’s supporters because they know they will not be prosecuted for committing any crime.

Notably, none of the mainstream media gave this report any publicity.

However, while the official media continued to censor or downplay ongoing incidents of politically motivated violence, the private media recorded many sections of the international community expressing deep concern over the problem.

Among them were participants at the Euromoney investor conference in Harare.

The private media also viewed ZANU PF’s increased calls for the seizure of foreign owned companies as having fuelled a fresh wave of property invasions around the country.

Among the 39 incidents recorded this week [private media (36) and official media (three)] were:

- The separate arrest of two MDC-T MPs, Costin Muguti (Gokwe-Kabuyani) and Shepherd Mushonga (Mazowe Central), and 10 party activists in Harare, on political violence and theft charges (SW Radio Africa, 11/3).
- The alleged disruption of several meetings and demonstrations by civil society organizations and arrest of their members in Bulawayo, Chinhoyi and Chitungwiza (Studio 7, SW Radio Africa and *The Standard*, 7, 8, 9, 10& 13/3).
- Burning of five homes belonging to MDC-T supporters by suspected ZANU PF youths in Mwenezi for refusing to attend an anti-sanctions petition meeting (Radio VOP 11/3).
- Occupation of offices belonging to a South African company, Easipark, by a ZANU PF affiliated youth empowerment group, *Upfumi Kuvadiki*. The group was reportedly irked by Harare City Council's decision to award a parking tender to this company instead of a local one (*NewsDay* and *Daily News*, 7/3); and
- The alleged invasion of Anglo American's Unki Mine in Shurugwi, by suspected ZANU PF youths and war veterans demanding a 51 percent shareholding in the company (*The Zimbabwe Independent*, 11/3).

ZBC promotes political intolerance

AN ongoing exercise by the Fallen Heroes of Zimbabwe Trust (FHZT) to exhume the remains of Zimbabwean freedom fighters who died in the liberation struggle gave ZANU PF and its allies and the national broadcaster, ZBC, another opportunity to disparage former colonial power Britain and the MDC-T, which was identified as being a surrogate of the British.

The FHZT, a voluntary organization led by ZANU PF Politburo member Misheck Rutanhire, has reportedly been conducting the exercise since Independence in 1980 (ZTV, 14/3, 8pm).

ZTV (14/3, 8pm), reported that 444 bodies of former liberation fighters, who were **“murdered”**, **“gassed”** or **“buried alive”** by the **“brutal”**, **“repressive”** and **“racist”** Rhodesian government, had been exhumed from a disused **“mine shaft”** in Mount Darwin. It quoted the FHZT saying about 1,000 bodies had been buried at the site, but did not ask the organization how it had arrived at this figure or the context in which such atrocities had taken place.

ZTV (15/3) quoted FHZT chief exhumers Jimmy Motsi claiming that some of the bodies **“had skin clinging to the bones and one could easily tell who the person was”**.

But the story provided ZBC with the opportunity to quote the FHZT, ZANU PF and its allies, including war veterans, gratuitously linking ZANU PF's political opposition to this atrocity by warning the government to be vigilant against

Zimbabwe's enemies, particularly former members of the Rhodesian government and the MDC-T (ZTV, 14 and 15/3, 7am & 8pm).

Pro-ZANU PF commentator Goodson Nguni was quoted saying the exhumations would ***“harden the attitudes of war veterans”***. He claimed: ***“Most war veterans and most black people will never accept a government composed of people who took part in these atrocities. This is the major reason why the MDC will never dislodge ZANU PF from power”***. He added that President Mugabe was ***“actually magnanimous by incorporating human rights abusers such as Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai, Zimbabwe Electoral Commission member Geoff Feltoe, Education Minister David Coltart, National Housing Minister Giles Mutsekwa and MDC-T treasurer Roy Bennett”*** into government (ZTV 8pm 14/3).

MDC-T castigated for hosting investment conference

PRESIDENT Mugabe's absence from a major international investment conference, organized by the MDC-T arm of government, and the condemnation of the event by ZANU PF and the state media, appeared to vindicate concerns that Zimbabwe's coalition was not working.

Notably, the conference coincided with the arrest of Mangoma and other MDC-T members, which political commentators argue had the potential to scare away investors. It also came at a time when ZANU PF had intensified its campaign to take over foreign owned companies in line with its indigenization policy.

The official media trivialized the event as part of Western imperialism and condemned Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai for failing to use the platform to call for the removal of Western sanctions against Zimbabwe while officially opening the event (ZTV, 8 & 9/3, 8pm and *The Herald*, 12/3).

They also criticized the Prime Minister for accusing ZANU PF of violating the letter and spirit of the Global Political Agreement and selectively quoted foreign investors ***“hailing”*** Zimbabwe as a safe investment destination.

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You can contact us either by email at monitors@mmpz.org.zw or you can even sms your comments on our dedicated hotline cell phone number: **0774 432 509.**

Comments on the stories themselves are also welcome. We look forward to hearing from you.

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