

Comment

A cautious welcome for The Daily News

MMPZ welcomes the return of the privately owned *Daily News*, whose **“souvenir launch edition”** hit the streets on March 18th. Full-time publication of the paper was promised to resume last Friday.

Once the country's most popular daily before it was forced off the streets in September 2003 after failing to register with the Media and Information Commission (MIC) under the chairmanship of Tafataona Mahoso, the paper received a new lease of life after being licensed last May by the MIC's successor, the Zimbabwe Media Commission.

While the return of *The Daily News* – coupled with the introduction of *NewsDay* – is a welcome relief that will help to provide the critically important alternative daily news service for Zimbabweans who have been at the mercy of the government-controlled dailies for more than seven years, MMPZ still views such a development as a limited victory for media freedom.

Punitive laws that control all media activity, such as the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) still remain in place. This law and the Broadcasting Services Act, among others, impose stifling statutory controls on all media activity, and government has used them effectively as its weapon of choice to suppress independent thought and opinion.

In addition, while in theory ZBC should be congratulated for restoring its broadcast coverage to 65% of the country with the installation of transmitters in Mudzi, Plumtree, Beitbridge and Victoria Falls (ZTV 13/3, 8pm), this cannot be hailed as significant progress until the broadcaster is freed from the shackles of its propaganda role for ZANU PF and its mandate as an independent national public broadcasting service is restored.

Although government introduced legislation that allowed non-state broadcasters to be licensed in 2000, the law effectively prevented the operation of any independent broadcasters, thus preserving ZBC's illegal monopoly of this sector.

As a result, no independent broadcasters have been licensed despite the GPA's calls for the **“opening up of the airwaves”** and **“the operation of as many media houses as possible”**.

So the same restrictions that have curtailed freedom of expression, including those used to shut *The Daily News* and three other private papers, remain basically intact. And even if many members of the ZMC are progressive “media reformists”, the Commission is still obliged to apply the excessively bureaucratic registration and regulatory provisions that remain under AIPPA.

MMPZ therefore expects the inclusive government to expedite the media reforms it undertook to implement under the Global Political Agreement and fully restore Zimbabweans' rights to free expression in accordance with regional and international protocols.

Ban on MDC rallies raises doubts over police neutrality

THE decision by the police to ban MDC rallies in Harare and Chitungwiza apparently to pave the way for ZANU PF to hold its anti-sanctions petition rallies, raised fresh questions about the neutrality of the country's law enforcement agency.

The move, which attracted significant media attention at the weekend, came when the uneasy relations between ZANU PF and its MDC-T partner in government had already taken another battering following the arrest and prosecution of several MDC-T officials on what the party viewed as trumped-up charges.

The government media only publicised the bans on the MDC rallies without questioning the logic and fairness of the police's actions. Further, news of MDC plans to hold rallies were subordinated to those by ZANU PF to hold its anti-sanctions petition rallies.

The Herald (19/3), for example, buried news of the MDC-T's intention to hold a rally at Glamis Arena at the end of a report about ZANU PF's plans to **"roll out"** anti-sanctions rallies across the country on the same day. The daily and Spot FM (19/3, 8am) quoted the police warning Zimbabweans not to attend the **"unlawful"** MDC-T event.

But *The Sunday Mail* (20/3) reported the police as having denied the MDC-T permission to hold its rally because ZANU PF was already booked to hold a rally **"less than 500 meters away"** from that venue. The police reasons were contained in a report announcing the High Court's decision to dismiss an urgent chamber application by the MDC-T to hold its rally. Although the High Court did not immediately provide reasons for its judgment, the police justified its decision on the basis that it wanted to avoid clashes between supporters of the two parties.

The private media questioned the credibility of the police reasons, contending that they exposed the police's bias against ZANU PF's opponents and worsened relations in Zimbabwe's shaky coalition. They also argued that the police's behaviour gave ZANU PF an unfair advantage over its rivals ahead of national elections.

Notably, ZANU PF held its meeting at its provincial headquarters, about four kilometres away from the Glamis Arena (*The Standard* and SW Radio Africa, 20 & 22/3).

While *The Standard* reported that there was "no sign" of a ZANU PF meeting at the venue it was said to have booked, SW Radio Africa (22/3) reported that about 18 suspected MDC-T supporters had been attacked by ZANU PF supporters near Glamis Arena on the Saturday. *NewsDay* (21/3) also reported the police beating up supporters of the MDC formation led by Welshman Ncube in Chitungwiza and drove them out of a hall where the party was holding a campaign rally.

The police reportedly threatened to assault Ncube and his secretary-general, Priscilla Misihairabwi-Mushonga, and arrested another senior party official, Lionel Mushonga, for taking photographs of the skirmishes (*NewsDay*, 21/3).

Party campaigns: Praise for ZANU PF – brickbats for MDC

THE state-controlled media carried 110 stories on the campaign activities of the coalition parties, 90 (82%) of which were on ZANU PF, while 18 were on the main MDC-T formation. The remaining two were on the Welshman Ncube-led MDC group.

Notably, all their reports on ZANU PF were positive, while those on the two MDC formations were all negative.

Eight of their reports on the MDC activities were based on the police warning against the holding of the parties' **"unsanctioned"** and **"illegal"** rallies (ZBC, 18 & 19/3, 8am & 8pm). The remaining 10 were opinion pieces or news reports accusing the MDC formations of sabotaging the country by allegedly supporting Western sanctions against Zimbabwe, refusing to increase civil servants' salaries and engaging in political violence and corruption (*The Herald* and *The Sunday Mail*, 19 & 20/3).

Most of ZANU PF's campaign stories were on its anti-sanctions campaign.

They quoted senior ZANU PF officials who officiated at the anti-sanctions rallies extensively, blaming sanctions for all the country's problems and castigating the MDC-T for allegedly calling for their imposition and refusing to campaign for their removal (ZBC, 19 & 20/3, 8pm and *The Sunday Mail*, 20/3).

In one report, *The Sunday Mail* (20/3) quoted Media and Information Minister Webster Shamu arguing that the signing of the anti-sanctions petition by thousands of Zimbabweans **"will alert the world to the fact that Zimbabweans have spoken against the sanctions, that they are diabolic, unjustified and are affecting the economy"**.

The private media's coverage of the parties' activities was generally balanced.

Not only did they criticize ZANU PF for coercing Zimbabweans to attend its anti-sanctions petition rallies and condoning violence by its supporters against its opponents, they also questioned the effectiveness of the two MDC formations in government, especially the one led by Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai.

For example, these media castigated Tsvangirai for criticizing the country's judiciary for nullifying the election of the Speaker of Parliament, Lovemore Moyo; quoted analysts questioning the relevance of his recent regional tour to urge SADC leaders to take action against President Mugabe, and accused the MDC formations of abandoning Zimbabwean workers, particularly civil servants (SW Radio Africa, *NewsDay* and *The Standard*, 15, 20 & 23/3).

War dead exhumations turned into a propaganda tool

ZANU PF and the state media used an ongoing exercise to exhume the remains of Zimbabweans reportedly killed by Rhodesian forces during the liberation war as an opportunity to vilify the MDC formations for their perceived connections with the West and the former Rhodesian regime.

The 'discovery' of mass graves of the alleged fallen heroes in Mount Darwin and Gwanda received massive publicity in the official media: ZBC 79 reports and seven in the official papers – despite the existence of these mass graves being known to government since 1993.

ZTV alone devoted 1 hour 31 minutes of the 5 hours 27 minutes of its main news bulletins (excluding sport, arts and foreign news segments) between March 14 and March 23, to publicize the exhumations in Mount Darwin, conducted under the auspices of the Fallen Heroes Trust of Zimbabwe (FHTZ) led by a senior ZANU PF official.

The official media used the exhumations to allow ZANU PF and its allies to malign Zimbabweans perceived to have links with the former Rhodesian government.

The Herald (17/3) quoted ZANU PF Politburo member Saviour Kasukuwere saying the atrocities were an indication that **“white people are not here for charity”**, while another party official, Martin Dinha, **“invited”** Prime Minister Tsvangirai, MDC-N president Welshman Ncube and MDC-T spokesman Nelson Chamisa to come and witness the exhumation and see what **“their white friends did to the people so that they will repent”**.

Earlier, ZBC (15 and 16/3, 1pm and 6 & 8pm) quoted war veterans, “observers” and Zimbabweans from all walks of life **“expressing anger”** at the atrocities, which they equated to **“(Nazi Germany’s dictator) Adolf Hitler’s holocaust”**.

The official media’s reports on the exhumations raised questions in the private media about which bodies these were.

The Zimbabwean on Sunday (20/3) claimed that ZANU PF had refused to have DNA analysis to identify the bodies. The paper suggested that some of them could belong to MDC-T agents who died during the 2008 elections, noting that the bodies were being used to **“ratchet up propaganda against imperialism and colonialism.”**

NewsDay (23/3) also questioned the exclusion, during the exhumations in Mount Darwin, of relevant government departments and other important players such as archaeologists and pathologists.

Anti-sanctions campaign stokes violence

REPORTS that ZANU PF youths and state security agents attacked a wide cross-section of the Zimbabwean society in Harare and other parts of the country during ZANU PF's anti-sanctions petition rallies provided an indication of the rising levels of political intolerance in Zimbabwe.

Notably, eight out of the 17 fresh incidents of human rights violations recorded this week were related to ZANU PF's anti-sanctions campaign.

Civil society activists were the major targets in the remaining nine incidents.

The cases included:

- Coercion of Zimbabweans to attend ZANU PF's anti-sanctions rallies in Masvingo, Mutare and Midlands (Radio VoP and SW Radio Africa, 17, 18 & 19/3).
- Attack on ZANU PF district chairman Joshua Gore by suspected MDC-T supporters in Harare and the alleged abduction and assault of MDC-T activist Try Karedza by unidentified men in Mt Darwin (*The Herald* and SW Radio Africa, 15 & 16/3).
- Police raid on Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition offices and the residence of its director, MacDonald Lewanika, in search of "subversive material" (*The Zimbabwean On Sunday* and SW Radio Africa, 16 & 20/3), and
- Harassment of Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum director Abel Chikomo by the police (SW Radio Africa, 16/3).

YOUR FEEDBACK

- ❖ **You are just as biased as the official media, which you attack week in week out – *Anonymous*.**
- ❖ **ZBC Ndebele news is effectively Shona news translated into Ndebele. Why is the Ndebele voice not used over the Shona voice? – *Anonymous*.**
- ❖ **Thank you four giving us good news analysis. Don't go down until Zimbabwe's media is free – *Anonymous*.**

Sms your comments on our dedicated cell phone number: 0774 432 509.

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