



Defending free expression and the right to know

**The Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe
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COMMENT

MMPZ welcomes news this week that the Zimbabwe Media Commission has finally moved to register six new independent newspapers, among them four dailies, which will bring to an end the seven-year state-controlled Zimpapers' monopoly of the daily print media market.

For the first time since the banning of the country's most popular paper, *The Daily News* in 2003, Zimbabweans will again have a choice about where they obtain their news and entertainment.

But Zimbabweans should not be grateful to the government for bringing an end to the information drought that has so badly afflicted this country for so long. Zimbabweans' constitutional rights to free expression should not be dependent upon, or impeded by the whims of a government institution and a plethora of repressive media laws that will still control and hinder our rights to access information freely.

Indeed, the new publications should beware of the regulations obtaining under the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act that will still affect their ability to operate freely – and under which the ZMC's predecessor closed down at least four publications for petty administrative offences. Other laws affecting journalistic activity, such as the Criminal Law (Codification) and Reform Act, still remain and will continue to curb legitimate investigation into the activities of the Executive and the uniformed forces, among other areas of interest.

Such excessive and bureaucratic controls over the activities of the media are

completely unwarranted in a democratic society and violate the provisions of African and even SADC protocols on the principles of freedom of expression.

Zimbabweans do not need licences to express themselves and must demand self-regulation of the media as the only solution to genuine media reforms that will free the nation's voice. Existing laws of defamation are more than adequate in seeking redress from the media, while the Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe exists to resolve issues of professional misconduct.

Only the airwaves need administrative regulation due to the limited availability of bandwidth. But an independent body must implement this equitably and free of all the political interference and control that has reduced ZBC's services to the reviled and repugnant levels of a propaganda station.

Last week MMPZ commented upon the obstacles still blocking the processing of new independent broadcasting stations. Freeing the airwaves must now be the inclusive government's most pressing priority.

The "newspaper war" that the ZMC has finally sanctioned will mostly take place in Zimbabwe's main urban communities. For most Zimbabweans, radio remains their chief source of information and entertainment.

So while MMPZ welcomes ZMC's lifting by an inch of the repressive media lid, we should only celebrate the restoration of our rights to free expression when statutory media regulatory bodies, such as the ZMC, have been disbanded - and the nation's rights to freely establish and access all forms of broadcasting have been fully restored.

THE WEEK'S TOP STORIES

President Mugabe's unilateral reshuffling of the country's judiciary, which exacerbated tensions in the coalition government, and problems holding back the constitutional reform programme, received widespread publicity in the private media this week.

Instead of highlighting the consequences of Mugabe's provocative actions, the government-controlled media justified them as constitutional without viewing them as another violation of the Global Political Agreement (GPA), which compels him to consult his coalition partners on key government appointments. However, at another level, the government-controlled media did report widely on viability problems plaguing state enterprises and local government authorities, which they cited as the major cause for poor service delivery.

Topical issues in the media

Media	Power sharing	Poor service delivery	Constitutional reform	Human rights
State-run papers	14	24	5	1
ZBC	10	29	14	1
Private papers	33	10	8	20
Private radios	9	0	2	15
Online agencies	10	0	3	1
Total	76	63	32	38

State media defend Chiweshe's 'reward'

PRESIDENT Mugabe's unilateral appointment of former Zimbabwe Electoral Commission chairman George Chiweshe as the new Judge President exposed ZANU PF's disrespect of the power-sharing agreement, which requires that he consult his coalition partners on senior government appointments.

The government media defended Chiweshe's appointment and that of four other judges on the grounds that they were appointed **"procedurally"**, citing Justice Minister Patrick Chinamasa (ZBC, 19/5, 8pm & *The Herald*, 21/5). Instead of assessing the conflict between the Constitution and the Global Political Agreement that gave rise to this latest source of friction, these media merely reproduced Chinamasa's justification for the appointments, particularly Chiweshe's, saying he had **"a lot of administrative experience"** without mentioning the controversial manner in which he handled the 2008 elections. Chinamasa also defended Mugabe's failure to consult his coalition partners by arguing that the appointments were **"not political"** but were done in consultation with the Judicial Services Commission. No attempt was made to balance Chinamasa's views with those of the MDC formations, legal experts or even civil society. Neither did these media give their audiences profiles of the new appointments.

The government media's vilification of Prime Minister Tsvangirai over repeated calls for the Zimbabwe Media Commission (ZMC) to start registering new players in the print media industry, and all-media reports of the disruption of a national reconciliation workshop by ZANU PF youths also exposed escalating friction in the alliance.

The Sunday Mail and *Sunday News* (23/5) quoted ZMC chairman Godfrey Majonga, National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) chairman Lovemore Madhuku and government spokesman George Charamba describing Tsvangirai's demands as equivalent to political interference, which it claimed had **"incensed"** the ZMC and ZANU PF.

The private media, on the other hand, reported the unilateral appointment of Chiweshe and the other judges as having further strained relations in the inclusive government and eroding confidence in its ability to revive the country.

The Standard (23/5) reported that Tsvangirai had written to Mugabe **"warning"** him that his actions were likely to plunge Zimbabwe into a fresh political crisis while *ZimDaily* and *The Zimbabwean On Sunday* (23/5) quoted MDC-T spokesman Nelson Chamisa arguing that Chiweshe's appointment appeared to be **"a clear reward for rigging the 2008 presidential elections"**.

Parastatals' poor performance highlighted

VIABILITY problems affecting parastatals and several local government authorities received wide publicity in the government-controlled media during the week, but they failed to link these with decades of neglect, mismanagement and political interference by the previous ZANU-PF government.

They identified the Zimbabwe Iron and Steel Company (ZISCO), Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA), Air Zimbabwe, Grain Marketing Board (GMB), Zimbabwe United Passenger Company (ZUPCO), the National Railways of Zimbabwe (NRZ) along with Harare, Bindura and Chitungwiza municipalities as among those facing viability problems. Among the problems facing these organizations were inadequate funding, high wage bills, overstaffing, obsolete equipment, failure by consumers to pay for services (which they considered exorbitant), and price controls imposed by the previous ZANU PF government (*The Herald*, 17 & 20/5).

None of the government media's reports questioned how the parastatals would survive if they implemented government's recommendation to reduce their tariffs as part of measures to cut the cost of living (*The Herald*, 14/5).

The private media, except for the *Zimbabwe Independent* and *The Zimbabwean*, all but ignored these issues.

The *Independent* and *The Zimbabwean* (20 & 21/5) attributed most of the problems bedeviling the country's parastatals and local authorities to mismanagement, corruption, poor government policies, and political interference.

Unprofessional conduct

THE print media ran several stories under attention-grabbing headlines that either failed to back up their claims with factual information, or exaggerated their importance.

While there was nothing much wrong with *The Herald's* report about the arrest of top lawyer Jonathan Samkange (18/5) headlined, *Top lawyer flees arrest*, the circumstances of the event did not deserve the grossly exaggerated prominence as the paper's front-page lead story. Samkange, who arrived at Harare Magistrates' Court 10 minutes late for a court hearing, allegedly **"tried to evade arrest by outsprinting"** police detectives. The **"drama"** **"unfolded"** after magistrate Olivia Mariga issued Samkange, who is facing perjury charges, with a warrant of arrest for defaulting on the court appearance. This skewed news priority even relegated President Mugabe's address to the G15 summit in Iran to second place, while news of the suspension of Bindura's mayor and two councillors took third place on *The Herald's* front page.

The Herald's front-page lead story (21/5) headlined, *Apostolic sects snub PM*, claimed that some leaders of Zimbabwe's main apostolic sects had **"snubbed"** Prime Minister Tsvangirai's address at a Unicef-organized conference in Harare to encourage apostolic sects to immunize their children against measles and other killer diseases. Although the paper speculated that the sect leaders might have boycotted the meeting in protest against reports blaming their churches for child measles deaths, none of the absent leaders was quoted confirming this and in a number of cases, senior members of the sects did attend.

In contrast, *The Standard* (23/5) reported the apostolic sects as having made **"a major climb down"** during the meeting and **"assured"** government and the donor community that they would allow their children to be immunized. Even *The Herald* reported this but gave the news no importance.

The state-run media were not alone in carrying sensational headlines and editorialized news.

The Zimbabwean's front-page lead story (20/5) compared President Mugabe to Uganda's notorious former dictator Idi Amin in its report of Mugabe's address to the G15 summit in Iran. Under the headline, *Mugabe in Amin's footsteps? Ranting and Raving at G15*, the paper reported that Mugabe threatened **"to grab"** British and other foreign-owned companies in Zimbabwe. The paper then inserted its own opinion in its news story, claiming that the threats were accompanied by **"the kind of extreme, almost incoherent rhetoric which places him in the same league as"** the Ugandan dictator who **"hounded out the Asian population from the country in the 1970s through similar racial and economic persecution"**.

Apart from editorializing its news report, the paper did not provide any evidence of the **"almost incoherent rhetoric"** to show how the two might have been similar. Notably, while Amin actually expelled the entire Indian community from Uganda, Mugabe was only reiterating his party's plans to force foreign-owned companies to cede majority shareholding to indigenous Zimbabweans.

MOST POPULAR VOICES

THE public media gave more space to ZANU PF to express its views on the power-sharing wrangle compared to its coalition partners, while the private media favoured the MDC-T formation, reflecting the polarized nature of the country's media.

The official media sought ZANU PF's views 40 times, while the two MDC formations were quoted 20 times [MDC-T (10) and MDC-M (nine)].

The MDC-T was widely quoted in the private media, having been accessed for comment 45 times. ZANU PF (10) and the smaller MDC formation (three times) trailed far behind.

The government media widely quoted local government authorities (19) and heads of state enterprises (six), reflecting their reports on problems affecting parastatals and municipalities. The private media's patchy coverage was reflected by the few quotes they accessed from local authorities and parastatals (three times each) in the five news stories they carried.

Individually, Harare City Council's town clerk, Tendai Mahachi, and Parliamentary Constitutional Select Committee (COPAC) co-chairman Paul Mangwana were the most frequently quoted individuals in the government-controlled media. They were each accessed for comment nine times, while Deputy Prime Minister Arthur Mutambara (seven), Justice Minister Patrick Chinamasa and new Supreme Court Judge Rita Makarau (five times each) followed.

Mangwana was heard announcing dates for the beginning of the much-awaited constitutional reform outreach programmes and ruling out debate on gay rights. Chinamasa was quoted defending Mugabe's unilateral appointment of judges, while Makarau was heard taking oath of office. Mahachi was quoted commenting on Harare City Council's efforts to improve service delivery.

Prime Minister Tsvangirai ruled the roost in the private media.

He was quoted 16 times, followed by MDC-T spokesman Nelson Chamisa (four times) and Home Affairs co-ministers Giles Mutsekwa and Constitutional Affairs Minister Eric Matinenga (three times each).

Tsvangirai was heard urging members of apostolic sects to immunize children, and complaining about Mugabe's unilateralism; Mutsekwa was quoted refuting claims that government had banned public demonstrations until after the World Cup, while Matinenga was commenting on progress in the constitutional reform programme.

Human rights abuses

THE media publicized nine incidents of human rights violations.

Seven of them appeared in the privately owned media and two in the public media. Even though the official media publicized incidents of rights violations, in which the police were the offenders, they did not view them as such.

- Arrest of lawyer Jonathan Samkange (*The Herald* & SW Radio Africa, 18/5)
- Police raid on Gays and Lesbians Association of Zimbabwe (GALZ) Harare and subsequent arrest of two employees, Ellen Chademana and Ignatius Muhambi (*The Standard*, 23/5)

- Arrest of former senior MDC official, Job Sikhala, for convening a meeting, at which he launched a new party, without seeking police clearance (ZTV, 21/5, 8pm), SW Radio Africa & *The Standard*, 21 & 23/5)
- Assault of MDC-T activist Abigail Bamhare by suspected ZANU PF youths in Epworth (Studio 7 & *The Zimbabwean*, 19 & 20/5), and
- Arrest of three UZ students for inciting other students to demonstrate against high tuition fees (Studio 7 & *Zimbabwean On Sunday*, 19 & 23/5).

What they said...

“We are saying there is a hidden agenda by some members of the inclusive government who want us to go against our beliefs. The health problems that the country is facing are a result of the illegal sanctions imposed on the country by the West, not by the Johane Marange members” – an unidentified spokesman for the Johane Marange Apostolic Church expressing disappointment with reports that the sect was undermining government’s immunization programmes (*The Herald*, 20/5).

I am going to summon the ZMC to my office to impress them that they are independent as per the GPA. They must just do their job. The nation is waiting” – Prime Minister Tsvangirai (*New Zimbabwe.com*, 23/5)

“As ZMC we do not accept such blatant political interference from the executive or any political manipulation as we only accept his (PM’s) ideas not his interference...” – ZMC commissioner Christopher Mutsvangwa (*The Sunday Mail*, 23/5)

“There have always been differences between us. ZANU PF is the true fighter for the people and their rights, and the MDC upholds the interests of imperialists and colonialists thereby working against the people and their rights...” – President Mugabe speaking in an interview with *The People’s Voice*, a ZANU PF publication (*New Zimbabwe.com*, 19/5).

Ends/

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