

by Elinor Sisulu

during Zimbabwe's March 2005 election, elderly Zimbabwean grandmother MaMoyo was heard asking a plaintive question: "Why is this Tony Blair coming to our country to contest elections? He is the one causing all this trouble." So effective had been the anti-Blair campaign of the Zimbabwe government in the election that poor MaMoyo believed that Tony Blair was in Zimbabwe physically participating in the elections! MaMoyo's mistaken belief was not based on ignorance or lack of intelligence but was a result of five years of sustained propaganda from the state coupled with the almost total denial of media voices to the rural populace of Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe has the unenviable distinction of having the fastest shrinking economy, the highest rate of inflation (now in the millions), one of the highest rates of employment (80%) and the lowest life expectancy in the world (34 years for women and 37 years for men). Zimbabweans today are poorer than they were 50 years ago. The scale and speed of this income decline is unusual outside of a war situation, according to the Report by the Centre for Global Development.

In fact, the income losses in Zimbabwe have been greater than those experienced during recent conflicts in Ivory Coast, Democratic Republic of Congo and Sierra Leone.

It is one of the greatest conundrums of the opening years of the 21st century that President Robert Mugabe's government continues to cling tenaciously to power in the face of an economic crisis of such staggering proportions and a multi-faceted social, political and humanitarian crisis.

The Zimbabwe government owes its staying power to the fact that its economic ineptitude is inversely proportional to its efficiency in marshalling the instruments of a repressive state to ruthlessly suppress all forms of opposition. Indeed there is a remarkable parallel between the South African regime of the 1980s and the Zimbabwean dictatorship at the turn of the century.

The attacks on press freedom, assaults on the independence of the judiciary, a battery of repressive laws, detention without trial, torture and other forms of state-sponsored violence, the use of "third force" elements such as youth militia, an unrelenting barrage of propaganda and militarisation of the state are common elements of both PW Botha's apartheid regime and Robert Mugabe's dictatorship.

The Mugabe regime however, has had a crucial advantage over the apartheid regime of the 1980s – that is the unstinting support of its regional neighbours. The support from African governments has been the mainstay of survival of the Mugabe regime. This support has been maintained through the skilful use of an anti-imperialist discourse that reduces the crisis to a conflict between the sovereign state of Zimbabwe and the former colonial power. The propaganda delegitimises authentic Zimbabwean voices by characterising them as puppets opposed to land reform. The deliberately created cacophony over the land issue drowns out the discourse over human rights violations in Zimbabwe.

Just as the apartheid regime understood the power of the media and did all it could to suppress it, so the Mugabe regime understands that its grip on power is dependent on silencing any independent media voices and supplanting them with an aggressive propaganda campaign. Draconian legislation such as the Access to Information and Privacy Act (AIPPA) the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and the Broadcasting Services Act have been used to close down media space.

Like the apartheid regime, the Zimbabwe government has closed down newspapers and carried out a vicious campaign against journalists and independent media stakeholders. Zimbabwe has been classified by international human rights and media organisations as one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists.

Media repression in Zimbabwe has had dire consequences for the populace. The massacre of 20 000 people in Matabeleland and parts of the Midlands in the Gukurahundi campaign between 1983 and 1987 were carried out under a media blackout in the affected areas. Like Gukurahundi, the catastrophic destruction that rendered 700 000 people homeless under Operation Murambatsvina, would not have been possible in an environment of media freedom.

Zimbabwe's rigged elections of 2000, 2002 and 2005 would not have been possible without the muzzling of the media. Media restrictions were eased for a short time before the harmonised presidential, senate and parliamentary elections of 29 March this year.

It is instructive that the head of the state-controlled Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation was fired after he was blamed for giving the opposition too much airtime, thereby contributing towards the victory of Morgan Tsvangirai's MDC.

The Zanu-PF master plan that unfolded in the wake of the 29 March poll had several elements – withhold the election results, close down political space to prevent any public unrest, declare a presidential run-off since neither candidate had garnered more than 50% of the vote, roll out a campaign of violent retribution and put in place structures of violent coercion throughout the country to ensure victory during the anticipated run-off.

Undergirding this strategy was an intensive propaganda drive employing the usual anti-imperialist rhetoric and resuscitating that old scapegoat – the white farmers who were targeted, along with opposition activists in previously Zanu-PF strongholds.

Throughout April, May and June the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum and Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human rights confirmed reports from all over the country of a terror campaign intended to ensure that people will be too frightened to vote for the MDC in a run-off election. Zimbabwe Association of Doctors for Human Rights (ZADHR) treated



In the grip of silence

thousands of patients suffering from severe injuries sustained from assaults by Zanu-PF militia and war veterans. In its Daily Media Update on 14 April, the Media Monitoring Project of Zimbabwe referred to "Frightening new levels of disinformation and distortion featured in the two government-controlled dailies this morning, reinforcing the impression that they are not just biased in favour of Zanu-PF but are actually used as conduits by the embattled authorities

to misinform the public." More than just misinforming the public, these reports set the stage for intimidation and violent attacks against those identified as culprits.

The arrival of SADC, AU and Pan-African Parliament (PAP) observer missions in the weeks before the 27 June presidential election run-off failed to stem the tide of violence. In fact, acts of violence were carried out in full view of some observers. By the third week of June over 80 opposition activist were reported dead, more than 2 000 people severely assaulted and tortured, hundreds of women raped or sexually abused and over 200 000 people displaced.

Fearing even greater loss of life, leader of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), Morgan Tsvangirai, was forced to withdraw from the election. President Mugabe and his government chose to go ahead with the election against the advice of SADC and the AU.

Unlike the 29 March poll, the results of the June 27 presidential run-off were almost instantly available. The massive boycott of large sections of the voting population was not reflected in the official results that indicated that Robert Mugabe has obtained at least a million more votes than he had done in the previous election. He was inaugurated on the day after the election in time to jet off to the 11th Summit of the African Union at Sharm El Sheikh in Egypt.

Despite the thumbs down from the Pan-African Parliament Election Observer Mission, the AU Observer Mission and the SADC Observer Mission, the AU resolution that emerged from the Sharm El Sheikh summit did not recommend any substantive action against the Mugabe regime. It failed to acknowledge the impact of state-sponsored violence on the Zimbabwean people or to recommend any measures to protect them from further harm.

It merely threw the fate of the Zimbabwean people back into the hands of the SADC-appointed mediator President Thabo Mbeki, urging him to continue with his efforts to seek a negotiated solution in the form of a government of national unity.

It is difficult to understand how talks between the Mugabe regime and the MDC will progress in the context of ongoing violence. Surely the violence that forced Morgan Tsvangirai out of the 27 June election will also make it impossible to enter into an agreement on a government of national unity with Mugabe?

The media blackout in many areas of Zimbabwe continues to mask the levels of violence and regrettably media focus, especially in South Africa, has moved to the "two men syndrome".

Solutions to the crisis in Zimbabwe are premised on Tsvangirai and Mugabe "sitting at a table to talk". It is as if the crisis in Zimbabwe can be simply attributed to the failure of these two men to talk as a result of personality differences, instead of the fundamental problem of the conduct of the Zimbabwean government.

It is clear that instead of the mediation in its current form, a more painstaking negotiation process must be undertaken, one that addresses the fundamental unfairness of what has taken place and seeks to redress it; one that acknowledges the great violence that has been done and that there is a need for a transitional process with outside support until the parties and civil society are able to co-operate; one that ends the violence and restores humanitarian assistance to the millions in need and, above all, one that acknowledges that Zimbabweans voted for change on 29 March 2008 and recognises, in the interests of democracy, not only in Zimbabwe but the whole continent, that their wishes should not be negotiated away in a political settlement that ignores and denies their rights.

Above all, the people of Zimbabwe must be given a voice in that process. Removal of media restrictions and repressive media laws is central not only to giving all Zimbabweans the right to express themselves about the kind of changes they want in their country, it is central to the struggle to end the violence and ensure their safety and security.



ZimbabwePictures.com/Chris Kabwato



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Staying in touch

by Arther Chatora

I have been studying in Grahamstown for five years and I now consider Grahamstown my second home. It has been fairly easy for me to settle here given the fact that Rhodes University is home to many Zimbabwean students and academic personnel. Diverse cultures merge in this town, giving it a cosmopolitan feel. Although seemingly far from Grahamstown, Zimbabwe gets a lot of representation from different media organisations.

My main source of news on Zimbabwe is the Internet. There are a couple of websites I religiously visit, which offer different views on the situation in my country. The sites I frequent include *The Zimbabwe Independent Online*, *The Standard* and *Financial Gazette*. *The Zimbabwe Independent* and the *Financial Gazette* are business weeklies which are highly critical of the government, attempting to hold public officials accountable. To balance out this critical view, I usually read *The Herald Online* and *The Sunday Mail Online*, both government publications whose representation of the country is embedded in ideologies of nation-building and protecting the country from external influence. Websites such as Zimonline, SWRadioAfrica, ZimDaily and NewZimbabwe offer an alternative different voice, often critical and hard hitting.

I have observed that different South African media organisations have different ideologies and their representations of Zimbabwe support these. I have been subscribing to the *Mail&Guardian* for the past five years and their representation of Zimbabwe is critical and often on the mark. The publication often represents issues on the Zimbabwe governance crisis, deteriorating political environment, welfare and economic environment and I find their perspective informative. Although other media publications tend to sensationalise representations on Zimbabwe, I find the general portrayal of Zimbabwe by South African media fair.

South African broadcast media also offers a different but useful lens for looking at issues in Zimbabwe. SABC and SABC Africa try to offer a balanced portrayal of Zimbabwe but it is e.tv which hits the mark for me. e.tv goes beyond informing viewers and, through investigative journalism, manages to offer well-researched stories.

I get alternative perspectives from BBC, CNN and Al Jazeera, organisations which offer different discourses which I find quite interesting. BBC and CNN are highly critical of Zimbabwe while Al Jazeera is relatively truthful and balanced in its reportage.

My other source of information on Zimbabwe is through communication with family and friends still in the country and living in the diaspora. I also assess the situation on the ground when I go back to Zimbabwe and I talk to a lot of people who update me on the issues and concerns unfolding there in my absence.