

# Operation submission: moulding the media to parrot Mugabe mantras

by Vincent Kahiya

**J**ust before the electoral sham, which retained Robert Mugabe as president of Zimbabwe, at least half the vehicles in the capital Harare carried Zanu-PF campaign paraphernalia. In the townships it was rare to see a house without Mugabe's poster. The young and the old carried portraits of Mugabe on their chests, heads and backsides (how appropriate I thought) depending on the apparel provided to carry the party slogans.

This was emblematic of a people terrorised into submission by a system bent on retaining power for Mugabe at all costs. Dissent was met with brute force executed in the form of extra-judicial killings, rape, torture, beatings, forced disappearances and destruction of property. To many, pretending to be a Zanu-PF became the best form of self protection. Relics of repression became instruments of survival for the general public.

For this second round of polling, government thought the police was more than determined to mould the media into a pliant apparatus to parrot Mugabe's mantras and completely shut out his opponent Tsvangirai. There was more. The media was also expected to turn a blind eye to the brutal campaign that preceded the polling on 27 June. If any of the incidents were to be reported, the official



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line was that the opposition was responsible for all the violence. There was no official confirmation from the police on the more than 80 people the MDC claims have been murdered between March 29 and June 27.

The draconian nature of the Zimbabwe's media laws and the Orwellian media strategy of the government of President Mugabe have been well documented. The hectic election period between March and July has reminded the world of the daily grind of a Zimbabwean journalist and how the profession has been criminalised for foreign scribes.

Foreign journalists thrown into police cells on charges of covering the election with proper

accreditation wrote horror stories of experiences they do not hope to ever experience again. Theirs was a brief dance with the devil. Ours is permanent engagement in which journalists have to learn survival tactics. They are aware that they can be arrested for simply taking a picture or covering a demonstration. In most instances, no real charges are preferred but the experience is often traumatic.

In one emblematic incident, our photographer and driver on a routine assignment to photograph foreign currency traders at a major cross-border bus stop, were threatened by men with guns. The photographer made good his escape while the driver was forced to hand over the keys to the gunmen who drove the vehicle away. The vehicle soon appeared at the central police station where the driver and photographer were summoned to give statements. No one was charged and the vehicle was handed back but the gunmen were never identified.

Ten years ago I attended a conflict reporting workshop organised by the Reuters Foundation at Rhodes University. Coming from a relatively peaceful country at the time, it was easy to dismiss the course as being only relevant to our comrades from Rwanda, the DRC and Somalia. But here I am 10 years later reciting notes from the course to the youngsters in the newsroom. "In all situations exercise common sense and use all your instincts to keep out of trouble... Look for the story, and not for trouble... Have a level of professional maturity to





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make the right call..."

This is an intimidating environment where it is easy to distrust your colleagues. The intelligence has seen fit to recruit operatives from newsrooms. Diary meetings have become different from the traditional brainstorming sessions where frankness and debate were encouraged. These days you do not know where the information will end up.

We parted ways with a senior political reporter who admitted to passing an unedited story to a third party – in this case to a state security officer. Before the paper had even hit the streets, we were hit by a court injunction by the director of intelligence barring the distribution of the paper. Subsequent correspondence from the government spooks threatened me with arrest if the story was published. We never got to publish the story as it became dated while our lawyers haggled with intelligence over the issue.

The moral of the experience was that we were becoming more vulnerable with each passing day, especially when one of our own was a conduit for channeling information to the state security.

The degree of infiltration can never be known but the incident confirmed our worst fears; we had been infiltrated and paranoia and suspicions soon became rude reality.

I also get worried when officials run to the state media to deny details of a story we are due to publish. There are subtle fishing expeditions

from officialdom to find out the sources of our information especially issues to do with the internal dynamics in the ruling Zanu-PF party – a subject we have keenly covered.

Then there is open hostility displayed in official statements describing the privately-owned press as "weapons of mass destruction" – not very complimentary is it? There are random arrests of senior newsroom staff and in between we are kept busy by civil lawsuits, some of which are as vexatious as their sponsors. The combination of arrests and lawsuits is designed to kill off newspapers' zeal to investigate and publish state excesses, policy failures and the degeneracy of individual members of the ruling elite.

This is generally the sore point between us and the state. The enactment of laws such as the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act was a bold attempt to close the media space. There is a raft of media laws that make it criminal to criticise the president or to write stories which cause disaffection in the police and the army. There are very broad definitions of these crimes.

The danger has also involved newspaper vendors who have been beaten up by thugs who confiscate their papers and rob hawkers of cash. In May a truck transporting 60 000 copies of *The Zimbabwean*, the paper printed in South Africa, was burnt and the driver was assaulted by armed thugs.

Last month, the government also imposed

punitive taxes on foreign private papers sold in Zimbabwe including the *Mail&Guardian*, the *Sunday Times*, the *Sunday Independent* and the *Star*. Even after paying the taxes and duties, authorities have in instances refused to release papers for sale.

There is all the evidence one needs that Zanu-PF's intimidating grip on national and international media effectively quashed the opposition MDC's campaign for the second round of polling. Government information handlers made sure that no pro-opposition material was aired by the state broadcasters, effectively blocking any country-wide campaign coverage. The state justified this brazen assault on civil liberties and outright disregarding of regional SADC norms and standards on the staging of democratic elections. "The MDC was using inappropriate language!" government said.

To make statements of its intent to reconstruct the state media, in May, the government fired Henry Muradzikwa, chief executive officer of the state broadcaster the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation before sending seven news staffers on forced leave. Muradzikwa was immediately replaced by Happison Muchechetere, a war veteran, and toadying Mugabe loyalist. The results were immediate. The airwaves were filled with pro-Mugabe propaganda and jingles while Tsvangirai and his party were subjected to unethical hate speech and threats of war.

To our rulers, he is the model journo.