

# A FLEDGELING PRESS UNDER SIEGE

*Delivering the second annual Raymond Ackerman Freedom of the Press lecture at Rhodes University, **TREVOR NCUBE**, editor of the *Financial Gazette* in Harare outlines the growing government pressures on the independent press in Zimbabwe*

**T**HE press in Zimbabwe, as a vital prerequisite of a democratic and tolerant culture, is going through a make-or-break period. Unfortunately, the intolerant authorities seem to think that the press is damaging their chances of remaining in power for as long as Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda did, or to hold on for as long as Life-President Kamuzu Banda has managed in Malawi.

In essence this is what Press Freedom has come to mean in Africa — a threat to the political establishment and a fermenter of social discord and discontent. Is this a true picture — I wonder?

**To understand** the press in Zimbabwe today, it is essential to look at its history.

In the old Rhodesia, the press was a direct off-shoot of the South African press. Indeed, Cecil John Rhodes had a direct financial interest in the Argus Printing and Publishing Company of South Africa.

The first operations of the Argus group in what is now Zimbabwe commenced in June 1891 with a duplicated weekly called *The Zambesian Times* edited by a South African named William Ernest Fairbridge at Fort Salisbury. This was later to be incorporated into *The Rhodesian Herald*, set up in 1892 and owned by the Argus Printing and Publishing Company of South Africa.

In 1926, the Rhodesian Printing and Publishing Company was formed in Salisbury as a separate body from the Argus Company, to publish both *The Rhodesian Herald* and *The Bulawayo Chronicle* which had been set up in 1894.

It is instructive to note that, in a largely African populated country, the Argus newspapers were directed at a minority European readership. While some might

argue that Africans were at this stage still illiterate and uncivilised natives or Kafirs, there were some papers directed at this audience. Unfortunately most of them were banned, perhaps for leading the natives too far too quickly, and those of importance were the *Chapupu*, which was started in 1958 and banned in 1962, and the *Zimbabwe Sun* which was banned in 1964.

However, it is interesting to note that as the African readership and hence advertising market grew, the Rhodesian Printing and Publishing Company took over the national *Observer* and *The New Star* in order to cater for this market segment. In the main, however, the Argus Press reflected the views, hopes and aspirations of its white readership and the white ruling elite.

The period of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence — from 1965 to 1980 — is an interesting phase for anyone interested in Press Freedom. Ian Smith's Rhodesian Front ran a virtual one-party state, with the press as a crucial supporting pillar in the maintenance of white minority rule over the black majority. The press aided and abetted the denial of basic human rights to the majority of citizens.

**During this** period the press, though allegedly opposed to the act of UDI itself and to white supremacist policies of the Rhodesian Front, never advocated nor supported the liberation forces.

Thus, while a fierce battle for political power raged on in the countryside and at some stages even in the cities, the Press was instrumental and pivotal in lulling the white citizenry into a false sense of security. With casualties and loss of life on both sides of the political fight, the Rhodesian press painted a picture of disorganised rag-tag nationalist or terrorist

forces who were dying like flies at the hands of an invincible and well-oiled Rhodesian Army.

**The press** also depicted the nationalist leaders as a bunch of communist thugs out to nationalise the wealth of the whites accumulated over a period close to a century. This helped galvanise solid white support for the RF cause. In the process, blacks were aware of some victories on the battlefield and soon sections within the white community also became aware of the increasing numbers of casualties — lost fathers, brothers and sons. And for what reason, they began to ask.

Granted, there was some censorship, but the fact of the matter is that the press at the time had done a disservice to the white community — witness the shock and disbelief when Smith succumbed to nationalist pressure and settled for negotiations.

If the truth be told, there was a relative degree of democracy and Press Freedom within the settler society. For instance, Smith was criticised quite vociferously. There was, however, a deliberate suppression of nationalist viewpoints.

It is partly because of the uncompromising posture taken by the largely Argus owned white press as regards the nationalist cause that Robert Mugabe's government sought to punish it for perceived past misdemeanors by buying its controlling interests in the Rhodesian Printing and Publishing Company.

Thus, at independence in 1980, it was widely felt within the victorious nationalist movement that the press had to change. Indeed, the feeling was that political independence would not be sufficient on its own if, for instance, the same people who ran *The Rhodesian Herald* and *The Bulawayo Chronicle* during the



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UDI period continued to do so under Mugabe.

To effect this grandiose scheme of having a sympathetic press on its side, the new government set up the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust to take over the 45 percent South African ownership of the newspaper company. This was done with financial help from the Nigerian government.

The rest of the shareholding, which was in private hands, was left intact, with the result that to this day the Old Mutual and other companies and individuals have a substantial stake in Zimbabwe Newspapers (1980) Limited which is quoted on the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange.

Zimpapers, as the company is known, presently owns two dailies based in Harare and Bulawayo, one weekly in Mutare, two Sunday papers and one vernacular paper. There are also other smaller publications.

The idea behind the trustee ownership, a novel idea in itself, was originally aimed at insulating the press from direct government ownership and control. The Trust was supposed to act as a buffer between the government and the press.

**In reality** this never happened as the government, through various ministers of information and other prominent members of the cabinet, took an active interest in the day-to-day activities of the newspaper group from leader writing and editorial policy to hiring and firing of editors. The Trust was thus reduced to mere rubber stamping of decisions taken elsewhere and up to this day, the Trust does not act independently of the government.

The position of the Trust has been further compromised by the appointment of party activists to the Trust itself and the board of the newspaper group. Mr Elias Rusike who was CEO of Zimpapers, in his book *The Politics Of Mass Media — a personal experience*, had this to say: "On the appointment I was told that I would report to the Chairman of Zimpapers board. But in practice I was being summoned to the Ministry of Information to explain why that story was published and why the President's story did not go on the front page." It is sad to know that

this is how the largest newspaper group in Zimbabwe is run.

As a result of this unfortunate situation, Zimbabwe has found itself with government-controlled newspapers, with editors who have been appointed not for what they know but who among the influential cabinet ministers they know.

This has also led to what has been termed the 'Minister said syndrome', where the official press has made its main



*Trevor Ncube and Kathy Ackerman*

business the reproduction of ministers' speeches and those of the President. Whatever the President says makes headlines, no matter how ridiculous or mundane it may be.

Those editors who have tried to stand up to their professional ethics have been quickly dealt with. First to fall out of favour with the government was the veteran journalist and politician, Willie Musarurwa, who received the boot for allegedly being anti-PAC among other reasons. The government also took the view that under his editorship, the *Sunday Mail* had acted like an opposition newspaper.

The decision to fire him was made by government through the Minister of Information, Post and Telecommunications in 1985.

The next victim was Willie's immediate successor, Henry Kuradzikwa who was lucky in that he was 'promoted' to a non-editorial job in 1987 after running a story about the alleged poor treatment of Zimbabwean students in Cuba. Mr Mugabe publically promised the Cuban government: "I shall deal with him personally", and indeed, he did.

Perhaps the most celebrated case is that of Geoffrey Nyarota, editor of the

*Chronicle*, who was also promoted upstairs in 1989 following the publication of a series of stories on what now has become popularly known as the 'Willowgate Scandal'. This involved the uncovering of a scam where government ministers and other officials were buying vehicles from the Willowvale assembly plant in Harare and reselling them at several times the officially controlled price.

This incident left an indelible mark on the state of the press in Zimbabwe. It was after this that the then Minister of Information, Witness Mangwende charged that Zimbabwe could not afford the luxury of investigative journalism, which would risk "tearing up the fragile social and political fabric of our new society".

This was despite the fact that a judicial commission of inquiry had found the *Chronicle's* reports of corruption to be accurate.

These attacks on an already largely hamstrung official press left a yawning information gap.

Indeed, these actions effectively put paid to whatever attempts at professionalism and investigative journalism there was at Zimpapers. A new breed of journalists, content with taking down speeches and reporting on them religiously and as faithfully as possible, and praise-singers became the norm rather than the exception. This led to serious information starvation which itself was central to the emergence and proliferation of independent newspapers and magazines in Zimbabwe.

**The other** factor that was critical to the emergence of the independent press was the political decay and economic decline that came as a result of a sycophantic press that was content with singing praises and not truly reflecting the wishes, desires, problems and frustrations of the entire population. The public wanted these frustrations ventilated, a task which was taken up by only a few independent papers.

The public wanted to speak out about the negative effects of socialism, the dangers of a one-party state dictatorship to which we were headed at great speed.

PLEASE TURN OVER >>>



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The independent papers of importance were the weekly *Financial Gazette*, together with the monthly magazines *Parade* and *Moto*. These were later joined by the weekly *Weekend Gazette*, which went daily on October 5, and *Horizon*, a monthly magazine which came onto the scene in 1991.

It is important to note that while independent papers and magazines were mushrooming all over, the ruling party was not to be left out, for it soon established its weekly *Peoples' Voice*. This joined the monthly *Zimbabwe News*, which concerns itself with party ideological issues. I must add that this magazine is still much more communist than Marx, Lenin, Mao and Castro put together. Luckily it is now a lonely voice of insanity in the wilderness and the party for which it purports to speak has made an ideological *volte-face*.

The issues that have concerned the independent press, apart from a mere objective and critical handling of news, are human rights violations, corruption, democracy and political pluralism and freedom of the press — all critical issues in any civilised society.

It is because of the independent press's focus on these rather uncomfortable issues that it has come under increasing verbal attack from the government and there are ominous signs that these verbal attacks might develop into something that could jeopardise the existence of a free and independent press in Zimbabwe.

On the other hand, there are signs that the existence of a vibrant independent press has nudged the docile official press out of its long slumber.

**By and large** the official attitude to the independent press has been that it is an opposition press bent on unfairly criticising the government and giving considerable space to the views of government critics and political opposition parties. Government has claimed that it would like to see more objective reporting from the independent press, but what they really mean is that they would like to see more sympathetic reporting in our news columns. They talk of constructive criticism, which in essence means "don't criticise us". Criticism of government has been equated to lack of patriotism and tantamount to treason.

Some government officials, however, have made public their displeasure with

the official Press and their preference for the independent press. More have done so in private.

President Mugabe, however, attacked the independent press recently when he commissioned a party printing press. He spoke to the effect that a propaganda war was "hotting up", orchestrated by what he called the "yellow and gutter press" with foreign funding.

**With the** independent press becoming more vocal, this displeasure has become very combative and threatening to the survival of a vibrant independent press in Zimbabwe.

A July Cabinet meeting, part of whose proceedings were leaked to us, serves to depict vividly the hardening attitudes in some government circles as regards the independent press. Top of the agenda — together with dispatching our Transport Minister to negotiate the free movement of our maize shipment from what the official press calls "apartheid South Africa" — was a lengthy discussion on a possible ban on the independent press.

Among the options that were bandied about was a complete ban of the independent press, which did not receive enough support. Various strategies of how to make the operations of this section of the press unviable were then discussed. These included:

- instructing parastatals to cease advertising in the independent press so as to undermine their financial viability;
- frustrate the operations of the independent press through foreign currency and newsprint allocations;
- making sure the independent press did not get adequate telephone lines;
- making sure there was no hurry in putting newsprint on the Open General Import licence system.

It appears no firm decision was made.

While for the most part the attack on the independent press has been on a verbal level, my latest encounter with the authorities indicates that the future is no longer where it used to be and things might actually get nasty. There might be no future to talk about at all as far as a free press is concerned in Zimbabwe.

The encounter to which I refer was as a result of *The Financial Gazette* carrying a story regarding details of a parliamentary select committee which was set up to investigate alleged corrupt dealings involving some senior government min-

isters and a vice-President who allegedly received favours from a corrupt businessman.

The reporter and I were summoned before Parliament and asked to reveal our source. Contrary to what appeared in the press at the time we did not reveal the sources of our story. In fact, one of the sources confessed to the chairman of the committee and was then compelled by the chairman to make the confession in front of the whole committee. The publisher of *The Financial Gazette* and myself appeared before the same committee after that confession.

We have no illusions at all about the intentions of these intimidatory actions against the newspaper, the reporter, myself and the publisher. This has nothing to do with government or parliament's desire to get the sources, but is rather aimed at getting at us once and for all. We have provided them with a legitimate opportunity to come for us waving and pointing at some constitutional provisions. We have been targeted as one of the most outspoken critics of government. They want to use us as an example.

**We are** reliably informed that the Attorney-General's office is presently working on invoking two pieces of colonial legislation to force the independent press to toe the line. These laws, according to a source inside the AG's office who spoke to *Parade*, "are aimed not only at the journalistic fraternity but also at the officers of government who are in the habit of leaking information to the press".

There is also talk of a Publications Act and some form of media policy which would set out the no-go areas for the press. It is clear that the free press is under siege in Zimbabwe and that its survival is in jeopardy.

Yet on a more optimistic note, the independent press has enjoyed tremendous growth and success over the past few years, phenomenal achievements considering that these have been scored in a country which missed becoming a one-party socialist dictatorship and hence a one-newspaper country by a whisker.

We have made these gains with the support of the majority of society who love, value and cherish freedom of the press. It is with their support that we will frustrate the wishes of our detractors. ●

*This paper has been edited.*