

Is Zimbabwe's independent press a SCAPEGOAT, or does it deserve the RAP?

TREVOR NCUBE:

Recent attacks on the press are a result of a government that has serious problems of its own, a government which refuses to accept reality and instead looks to the independent press as the author of all its problems. The sudden deterioration in circumstances can be attributed to years of government economic mismanagement, high levels of corruption and constitutional breakdown.

The result has been declining standards of living and growing dissatisfaction among the people over the past 19 years of ZANU-Patriotic Front rule. People are saying 'Enough is enough. We cannot go on living under these conditions'.

The people's dissatisfaction with government has allowed for the rapid growth of the independent press in the last two years. It is this independent press that is ventilating the frustrations of the people. The government sees those that are calling for the well-being of the people as challenging its authority. This is why the independent press has become such an irritant as far as the government is concerned.

The government of Robert Mugabe has never hidden its hate for the private press. He himself constantly criticises the independent press, labelling it "gutter press" and "yellow press".

The government has become richer and richer, dipping their hands into the national till, while the ordinary man is living below the poverty line. Unemployment and inflation, both lying above 45 percent, are the contributing factors for the bad publicity that ZANU-PF receives – not the independent media.

The government-controlled press never criticises the government. We say things that under normal circumstances would be said by opposition political parties. But we don't see ourselves as an opposition press. We are independent.

Despite the growing conflict between the Zimbabwean government and the independent press, we have vowed not to crumble under the government's bullying tactics.

BASILDON PETA:

The media in Zimbabwe is under siege. This government cannot take responsibility for the problems it has created. It is looking for a scapegoat – and the scapegoat is the independent press.

Because the independent press criticises the government while television, radio and other government-owned media do not, the government blames the press as the author of all its problems. Yet it has created the problems on its own.

The government can't accept this, which is why it is blaming the independent press, using it as a scapegoat. But the independent press isn't going to take it.

What we specifically want is a constitution that will guarantee the freedom of the press. Zimbabwean journalists working with various civic bodies are now calling for a revision of the current constitution and the establishment of an independent broadcasting authority to look into the issuing of broadcast licences.

When there were protests at the National Constitutional Assembly in Harare, the SABC covered the story while the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation ignored the issue. It is wholly controlled by the government. There is a crucial need for private broadcasters.

Tight bureaucratic procedures have made it difficult, almost impossible, for journalists to access information. Journalists are also barred by the Official Secrets Act which limits access to official news and access to information. Legislation like the Communications Bill has been put forward as a strategic mechanism for keeping the press in check.

The Law and Order Maintenance Act, used by the colonial government to detain Mugabe, is now being used by him against our journalists. It makes it a criminal act to publish information that causes alarm and despondency. Although Choto and Chavunduka were arrested for false reporting, their interrogators asked about their sources and never once denied the truth of the story.

The bureaucratic inefficiency, when dealing with the independent media, is frustrating, to say the least. Questions have to be directed to the Ministry of Information. They are forwarded to the Deputy Secretary of the department concerned, followed by the Permanent Secretary and Deputy Minister. The questions are referred back to the Minister, then the Vice-President and finally the President. Four weeks to six months go by before a response becomes available, if at all.

Copies of the draft Communications Bill were so scarce they became a status symbol, like a cellphone. These are the factors that have led to a conflict between the government and the independent press – a conflict which the government thinks it can control and win. But the power of the independent press cannot be underestimated.

RAYMOND LOUW:

Events in Zimbabwe show the spread of a catching disease. The attacks by Mugabe against black journalists, accusing them of acting as puppets of their white owners, mirror criticisms of South African journalists from former President Mandela.

In Namibia, President Nujoma has launched similar attacks. It shows how this whole thread of attacks on the media spreads rapidly around the region. We believe that threats to journalists anywhere are threats to press freedom.

We are concerned that the South African government has not responded to the events in Zimbabwe. A government pledged to protect democracy and freedom of expression must uphold these ideals. Here we have a clear-cut example right on our borders, with all the implications that has for an anti-media mania – and we have taken not one step.

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On the other hand, some framed the core issue as 'unprofessionalism':

"Regrettably the newspaper (Chavunduka and Chota's *Standard*) did little or nothing to confirm the rumour it picked up. Subsequent inquiries have shown no corroborating evidence. If indeed the story was only published because of sloppy and promiscuous journalism, we hope that the ZUJ will be as equal and vociferous in its condemnation of unprofessional behaviour as it was over the arrest."
(*The Herald*, January 29, 1999)

"A regulatory response by the government would be in order only if the problem emanated from criminal intent. What is required is a self-regulatory mechanism by the media to address the growing problem of unprofessionalism in media practice. Journalists are or should be trained professionals belonging to professional bodies with defined standards of ethics and practice. The problem in Zimbabwe is that media has become a free-for-all. While this is fine in terms of the expansion of the space for free expression, the development brings with it the challenge for those in the media to be the first to seek ways of promoting and enforcing high professional and ethical standards in their professions, [to] regulate themselves as a mechanism of self-protection.

It is a pity that in the political frenzy surrounding the aftermath of the illegal arrest and torture of the two *Standard* newspaper journalists, no attention has been paid to the fact that the offending story was wholly lacking from a professional point of view. The time has come for the media in Zimbabwe to take the lead in protecting its interests by insisting that its members adhere to professional and ethical standards and by sanctioning those members who fail to do so. As for the state, it should forget about strengthening libel law because the problem at hand is not criminal but professional."

(JONATHAN MOYO, *Zimbabwe Mirror*)

Zimbabwe's independent press is a mirror reflecting an image of government that President Robert Mugabe does not like. But cracking the mirror will only bring more misfortune to the country, journalists argue. In the wake of reports earlier this year of how Zimbabwean editor Mark Chavunduka and reporter Ray Choto

were arrested and tortured by the military for reporting on an alleged coup, Trevor Ncube, Basildon Peta and Raymond Louw sound the alarm....

Top:
Raymond Louw,
Trevor Ncube
Bottom:
Basildon Peta



Cracking the mirror