



Terrified by Voice of the People

by Isabella Matambanadzo

A green police truck, whose colour has evaporated from years of operating under Zimbabwe's sunshine, rolls past sputtering in its wake a dusty mix of red earth and diesel fumes.

The driver's arms are strained taut as he struggles to balance his unwieldy load. He brings the vehicle to a growling halt on the slope of the gates leading to the holding cells of the Harare Magistrate's Court at Rotten Row, a ring of a building that squats on the fringes of the inner city business zone of Zimbabwe's capital.

Young armed guards in crisp uniforms spring over the back of the truck, their morning breath steaming into a fog against the winter chill. Their cargo emerges: bare-foot prisoners walk like mismatched twins shackled together at the ankles by crimes coming before the courts. It's 15 June, 2006.

In Court Room number 4, the magistrate listens to arguments in the case of a car thief. Then the case of some men involved in a housebreaking matter comes to the fore. Finally the court calls for David Masunda, chairperson of Radio Voice of the People (VOP).

The public prosecutor leaps from his rickety chair. "This matter has been postponed your Worship," he informs the court in quick protest. Stumped, Masunda stops walking to the dock and stands suspended in the middle of the court room like a puppet controlled by powers pulling invisible strings.

He turns his eyes to VOP's lawyer Beatrice Mtetwa for directions. With a knowing gesture, she reaches for her face and gently nudges her black rimmed glasses back into place. "But as my learned friend knows, your Worship, this matter was confirmed as proceeding as late as yesterday. I personally checked with my learned friend's office and it was agreed that we would be going ahead with the trial."

Mtsetwa has for the last decade or so been defending the rights and freedoms of journalists in Zimbabwe. One of her most widely-followed cases was that of Andrew Meldrum, the American journalist who fell victim to obnoxious media regulation laws introduced by former Information Minister Jonathan Moyo. Meldrum was expelled from Zimbabwe in May 2003 after 23 years as a correspondent for the British *Guardian* newspaper.

In 2005 the New York-based media rights campaign group, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), awarded Mtsetwa their 2005 Press Freedom Award, an honour very rarely bestowed upon non-journalists.

And today it's easy to see why more than three years ago Meldrum said Mtsetwa was a "fearless lawyer", defending freedom of the press and the rule of law in Zimbabwe under the most difficult and dangerous of conditions. Hearing her voice defend you only makes his words ring that much more true.

"This matter cannot be further postponed, your Worship. My clients have been on remand since January and this is quite prejudicial to them," asserts Mtsetwa.

But the magistrate is bewildered. Before her is a separate file for John Masuku, the Executive Director of VOP. She can't seem to understand why the same case has separate documentation. Not being able to make head or tail of the particular

Voice of the People

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act in the VOP drama, she calls for a recess. The matter is redirected to court room number 1.

The lawyers grin at each other in a code of approval. Magistrate Billa who presides over court room number 1 has a reputation for upholding the law and respecting judicial procedure. His court room sends out the same air of efficiency and seriousness of business. The audio recording equipment is in full function. A young man in headphones fusses over the voice recording levels, moving microphones and quickly labelling cassettes. The translator has a very professional demeanour about him and is confident of his words.

The VOP team walks into the middle of a case of two women caught in dispute over a foreign currency deal gone sour. Then their case is called. The wooden dock is too small to hold all 10 of them: Maria Nyanyiwa-Mataruse, Takunda Chigwanda and Nyasha Boshu, staff members of Radio VOP, are the latest additions to the accused list of John Masuku, and the members of the board of trustees, David Masunda, Arnold Tsunga, Lawrence Chibwe, Nhlanhla Ngwenya, Millie Phiri and myself, Isabella Matambanadzo.

Prosecutor Justin Uladi says the case cannot proceed to trial as programmed because the state's key witness, one Obert Muganyura, the technical director of the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ), who was due to give evidence, had gone to Switzerland. There are groans and grunts of disapproval from the room. A hush of respect descends into the room when the magistrate asks for a response from VOP's lawyer.

"This is unacceptable," Mtetwa tells the court, her voice so assertive it seems to come from a public address system hooked up somewhere deep within her tiny frame. "Since January the prosecution has been telling us and even yesterday (Wednesday) they said they are ready for trial and we keep getting these postponements."

"How did it get like this?" I ask myself, taking my mind back to all the modules of media law we gobbled up ahead of final term exams at Rhodes University in the 1990s. I could not recall a case as absurd, and frankly as irritating, as this one. "Bella, this is persecution for sure," whispers Arnold Tsunga as if he can magically hear my inner voice.

Tsunga is the executive director of Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, ZLHR, a professional association of lawyers interested in promoting a culture of human rights in Zimbabwe through various means. Litigation is one of their strategies. Their members have packed the courtroom and so sound is their standing across the region that they have managed to mobilise a network of highly-regarded African and international trial observers.

In December 2005, when plainclothes police officers raided and ransacked the VOP offices, ZLHR were there in a flash. The police had a warrant for the "seizure of radio broadcasting communication equipment and its associated accessories to include: computer hardware, software and any documents related to the activities of the radio station". When they could not find any equipment of that nature they went back to the station and rewrote the warrant to say "any equipment and materials", says Otto Saki of ZLHR's litigation team, who was on the scene at the time of the raid. "That's when they took the three female members of staff, held them in police cells for four days and released them without charge."

The VOP staff members were held as "bait" to entice VOP's director John Masuku to present himself at the police station. When Masuku reported to the police station on 19 December 2005 he was detained for four days and taken to court on 23 December to answer to charges of contravening Section 27 of the Broadcasting Services Act. Masuku made bail at Zimbabwe \$4 million.

The festive holidays were an uncertain time for VOP staff and board members, who were unsure what the pre-Christmas arrests were leading to. Everything was revealed in January when a renewed spate of home raids and arrests began. It reads like a diary of well thought-out intimidation.

In the early hours of the morning of 18 January 2006 two police officers and one soldier visited the home of VOP trustee Arnold Tsunga in Mutare, the eastern border town connecting Zimbabwe to Beira, Mozambique's trading gateway. They ordered Tsunga's home staff to go to the police station, accusing them of hiding information about Tsunga's whereabouts. They were released after the intervention of lawyers without any charges being

preferred against them.

But that was not the end. The next raid took place on the weekend of 21 January, a Saturday that saw Harare police from the Law and Order Section proceeded to arrest Anesu Kamba, a driver at ZLHR, and Charles Nyamufukudzwa, a caretaker, for allegedly obstructing investigations. When the two said they knew nothing about the matter the police were referring to, the police began a spate of home raids. First, they searched Tsunga's home, taking with them a photograph displayed in the family room. They did not have a warrant to search the home or remove Tsunga's belongings.

A different set of police officers in a pick-up truck had visited the house of Nhlanhla Ngwenya, another trustee of VOP, and had threatened to take away some of his electronic appliances as ransom. More teams were hunting for the other VOP trustees. A team went to my mother's home. On the advice of our lawyer we resolved to report to the police station collectively. During our arrest, we were told by the arresting officers that their case was at the direction of officials within a structure known as the Joint Operations Command (JOC) and that there were instructions for our incarceration.

Since January we have been reporting to police stations and court rooms. In our view this is a way of intimidating us and criminalising work we do quite lawfully. Even government ministers have made remarks in the state press about journalists and non-governmental organisations that are quite threatening.

The Minister of State Security, Didymus Mutasa, was reported by the *Manica Post* newspaper as saying that government "will not sit on its laurels" and watch a "crop of journalists" sell "the country to the enemy by writing falsehoods" with the "intention" of "undermining national security" and "agitating violence in the country". He warned that although the journalists were using pseudonyms in reporting for "pirate radios, websites and other media", government had "since identified them from their closets" and that the "net will soon close in on all those who are involved in these illegal activities".

In February Justice Minister Patrick Chinamasa told security officers from the Southern African

2000
Radio Voice of the People (VOP) is registered with the High Court of Zimbabwe as a Communications Trust offering an alternative voice for Zimbabweans in the run up to that year's parliamentary elections. June: VOP begins operating, offering broadcasts in the two main local languages, Shona and Ndebele, every evening to a short wave audience 7.120KHz in the 41-metre band on short wave and 7.190KHz in summer. VOP's vision is: a Zimbabwe that respects the right to information and enables citizens to freely exchange knowledge and ideas so as to make informed choices. VOP's mission is to lobby and advocate for political, economic, cultural and social development through alternative broadcasting.

2001
The Broadcasting Services Act (BSA) is passed reinforcing the state's monopoly over all electronic broadcasting. The law gives the Minister of State for Information and Publicity the authority to determine who gets a broadcasting license and under what circumstances, to tighten restrictions on the nature, quality and quantity of information broadcast through radio and television, and to ban broadcasters who are deemed to be a threat to national security.

2002
The Public Order and Security Act (POSA) is passed. The law criminalises criticism of the president, whether his person or his office. It also prohibits the publication of a false statement that prejudices or is intended to prejudice the country's defence or economic interests, or which undermines or is intended to undermine public confidence in a law enforcement agency, and the holding of a public gathering without giving the police four days' written notice. Jonathan Moyo, then Information and Publicity Minister, lobbies for the passing of the euphemistically-named Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA). It makes provision for a Media and Information Commission (MIC) which regulates the registration and licensing of journalists. More than 30 Zimbabwean journalists and international correspondents have been harassed, arrested, and charged under its provisions. Media houses and journalists who do not register with the commission face up to two years in prison if convicted. 29 August: Radio VOP offices destroyed in a bomb blast perpetrated by unknown assailants. Police are still to bring those responsible to book.

Bomb Blast
By John Masuku
A timeline of intimidation

Major setback
VOP started operating before the June 2000 parliamentary elections, providing a discussion platform in a country where

Voice of the People was reduced to a shell.
dened at this attempt to silence us," said Faith Ndebele, chairperson of the VOP. they feel an even greater urge to continue despite this major setback.

Development Community (SADC) region who were meeting in Harare that “enemies of the state” were using the private press against Zimbabwe’s government. He said Zimbabwe’s private press needed “urgent reform” because Western-sponsored journalists were distorting the true Zimbabwean story.

“The current media set-up requires reforms as it permits enemies of the state to mislead the public to the detriment of the country’s interests,” state radio reported.

Since the introduction of restrictive media laws in 2002, four independent newspapers have been shut down and in some instances, their equipment impounded.

Scores of journalists, Zimbabwean, some from Botswana and others from overseas, have been arrested. The VOP trial comes back to the courts in the last week of September in conditions where the judiciary is marginalised, human rights lawyers are treated with contempt and state witnesses do not show. In addition, the conduct of the investigating and arresting police has been quite unprofessional. Zimbabwe is a signatory to international and regional human rights instruments such as Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, yet it is quite clear that the VOP team and other journalists are being deliberately persecuted for seeking to enjoy their rights to Freedom of Expression and freedom of the airwaves.

When considered against the history of a failure by the police in Zimbabwe to conclusively resolve the mysterious bombing on 29 August 2002 of VOP’s former offices in the Milton Park suburb in Harare, it is safe to say that there are forces in Zimbabwe deliberately intent on silencing the voices and demands for free and fair airwaves.

Why are African governments so terrified of a free, plural media? Right across the continent stories are unfolding about journalists being murdered in mysterious circumstances, journalists being arrested, media organisations and freedom of information groups being harassed. What do we do when the odds seem so stacked against us for wanting to enjoy, quite responsibly, our right to know and share knowledge? ■

2003

VOP resumes its operations with new and exciting programmes. VOP advocates for the opening up of the airwaves in Zimbabwe. American journalist and correspondent for the UK paper the *Guardian*, Andrew Meldrum, is deported. May: Zimbabwe’s Supreme Court rules that parts of the tough new AIPPA media law are unconstitutional and invalid. Chief Justice Godfrey Chidyausiku declared that the provisions of the law related to falsehoods were “struck down and... of no force and effect.” 12 September: Harare’s independent *Daily News* and its Sunday edition are shut down. Zimbabwe withdraws from the Commonwealth after its leaders ruled that its suspension, imposed after allegations of election fraud and violence, should continue.

2004

10 January: police arrest Iden Wetherell, the Zimbabwe *Independent’s* managing editor and the 2002 recipient of World Press Review’s International Editor of the Year Award, on charges of defaming President Robert Mugabe. News editor Vincent Kahiya and reporter Dumisani Muleya are also arrested. The three are released on bail on 12 January, but two days after their release, Zimbabwe *Independent* reporter Itai Dzamara and the paper’s general manager, Raphael Khumalo, are also arrested on charges of defaming Mugabe. The charges against Khumalo are dropped. The arrests follow a 9 January article written by Muleya and Dzamara, which said that Mugabe had “commandeered” an Air Zimbabwe airliner for a trip to East Asia, leaving passengers stranded at the airport. The paper noted this was the second time Mugabe had diverted an Air Zimbabwe flight.

2005

7 January: an amendment to the Access to the Information and Protection of Privacy Act of 2002 is passed providing for criminal penalties for journalists who operate without accreditation. December VOP Offices raided and staff arrested. The case is before the courts.

2006

June: Minister of Information Tichaona Jokonya addresses a press conference about “unpatriotic” journalists, saying: “The end of a traitor is always death. The unfortunate thing about a traitor is that you are killed by both your own people and the person whom you are serving. Our problem in the media is that we don’t have the umbilical cord. If you don’t have that you will serve any master.”

