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MMPZ report on media coverage of humanitarian issues: April 2009

*This report assesses the monthly media coverage of the coalition government's implementation of Article 16 of the Global Political Agreement (GPA), under which the three ruling parties pledged to ensure that state institutions and NGOs **"shall render humanitarian and food assistance without discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnicity, gender political affiliation or religion"**. It also examines the media's provision of humanitarian information for the benefit of the Zimbabwean population and humanitarian actors, including comparative analysis of Hansard's records of parliamentary debates on humanitarian issues and their coverage in the media.*

Summary

The media carried 545 stories on indicators of the country's humanitarian crisis in April, an increase of 317 stories from the March statistics. Of the 545 stories, 289 (53%) were in the public media while the remaining 47% featured in the privately owned news outlets. However, the public media's slight edge over the private media did not turn into a thorough examination of the country's humanitarian crisis. Instead, most of their reports were passive regurgitations of official statements.

Although the media also featured 66 stories on parliamentary business, none were on Parliament's discussion of the country's humanitarian problems or government's plans to address them as expected of it under the GPA. Instead, almost all the reports were on the parliamentary committee on constitutional reform. This appeared to stem from the fact that Parliament adjourned at the beginning of April 2009 resulting in most of its business being conducted outside the House through its committees, with the Constitution Select Committee the most visible.

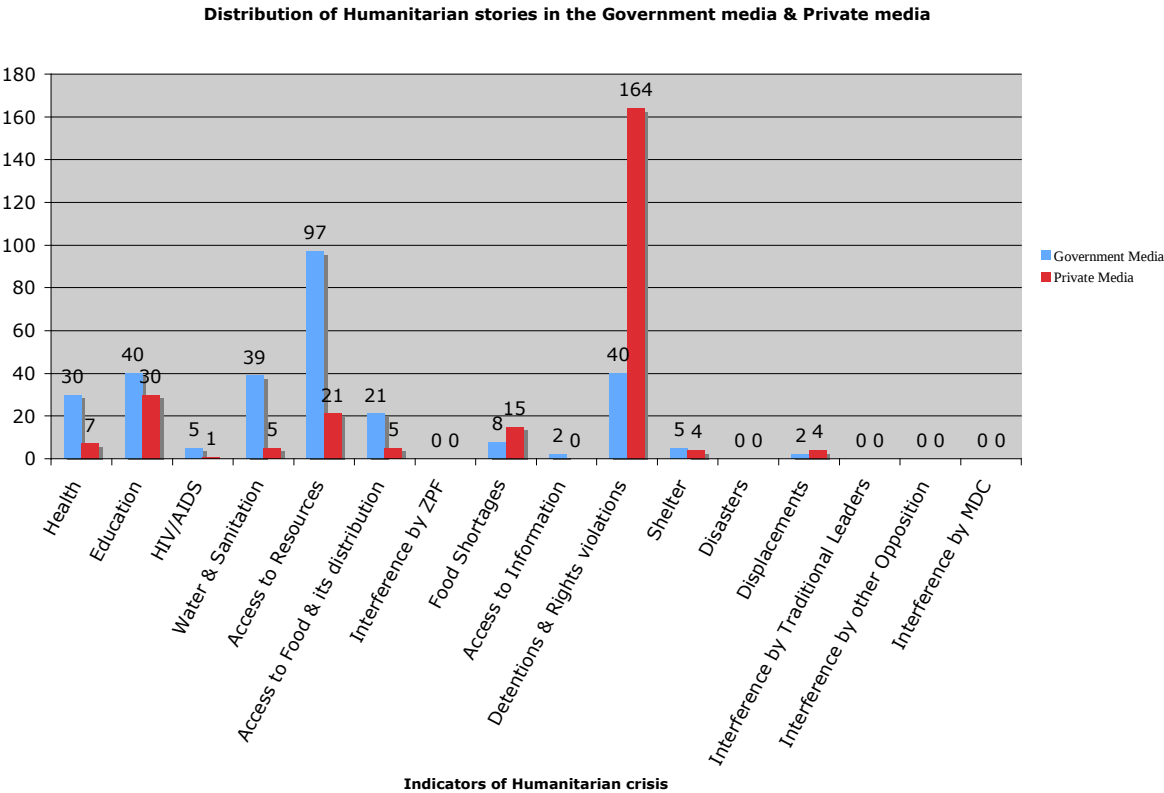
Humanitarian issues

Continued human rights violations, underlined by the detention of civic and political activists, remained the most topical of all other humanitarian issues carried in the media in April. They constituted 204 or 37% of the 545 reports the media carried on the subject. Of these, 164 (93%) appeared in the private media while only 40 (7%) were in the government media (See Fig 1).

Besides their evident under-coverage of the matter, the official media simply reported on the detentions and human rights violations as normal and not indicative of the new government's failure to institute democratic reforms as stipulated in the GPA. It was only the private media that categorically reported on the detentions and other rights violations as reflective of the discord in government and threatened its stability and effectiveness.

Instead, the government media appeared more interested in rehashing official statements that projected government as taking measures to address shortages of farming inputs and implements. As a result, they carried more stories on these issues, which translated to 34% of the 289 stories the official media carried on indicators of the country's humanitarian crisis. But this significant coverage did not reflect in-depth analysis as these media largely ignored

allegations of corruption that have plagued previous input and farm mechanisation programmes by the old ZANU PF government or assessed the sufficiency of the new government's interventionist programmes in boosting the country's precarious food levels. Neither did they openly expose the chaos on farms mainly stemming from ZANU PF-sponsored farm seizures dressed as government's drive to remedy imbalances on land ownership. Only the private media tried to expose these issues in their reports.

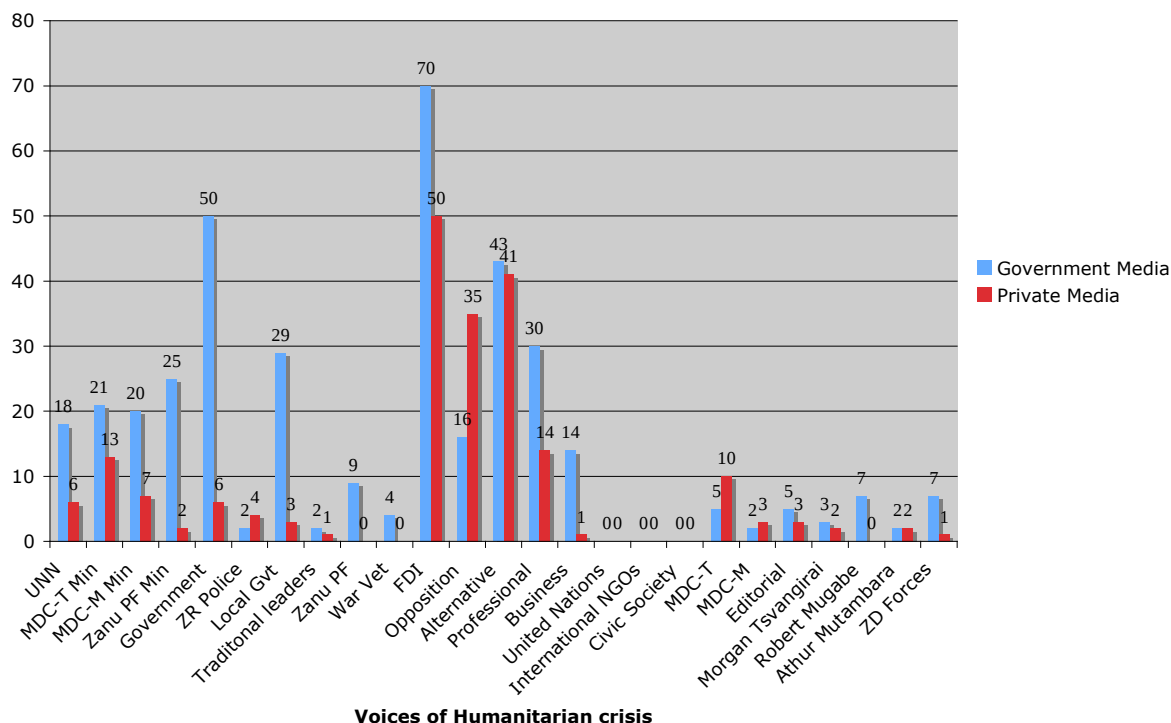


The education sector also received media attention, with stories on the matter constituting 13% of the 545 indicators on the humanitarian crisis. However, these were largely based on rehashing official statements on the new government's interventions aimed at arresting the rot in the sector. As a result, there was hardly any investigative story on the extent of the collapse in the education sector save for generalised observations. For example, none of the media comprehensively assessed enrolment and staffing levels at schools and tertiary institutions following the dollarization of the economy and their operational capacities.

Similarly, while the government media carried a number of stories on the water and sanitation problems bedevilling towns, these were piecemeal reports that failed to reconcile the scale of the problems to government's ability to resolve them. The private media were even worse as they largely ignored the matter.

The official media's failure to critically examine the humanitarian issues they carried was due to their reliance on official voices. As Fig 2 shows, while foreign dignitaries appear to have been given more space in these media, mainly promising to assist the new government tackle the country's socio-economic problems, the official voices were dominant. For example, when the official voices comprising ministers from the three coalition parties and other government officials such as ministerial secretaries and departmental heads and local authorities are merged, they total 145, more than double the 70 foreign dignitaries' voices these media recorded.

Voice Distribution in the Government & Private media



Parliament: Constitutional reform

The Parliament of Zimbabwe adjourned early in the month and as a result much of the parliamentary business was conducted outside Parliament through its different committees, particularly the Select Committee on the Constitution driving the government's constitutional reform process stipulated under the GPA.

But rather than comprehensively discuss the debate around the committee's mandate, the government media simply rehashed official statements defending its role. Consequently, there was no coherent explanation on the parliamentary-driven constitution-making process as proposed under the political pact signed by the three ruling parties and why civic society disapproved.

In fact, the official media simplistically dismissed civic society's objections as unwarranted attempts to derail constitutional reform without weighing their merits. It was against this background that civic organisations advocating constitutional reform under the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) led by Lovemore Madhuku were a subject of ridicule and attack in the government media. For example, *The Herald* (20/4) carried a derogatory cartoon mocking Madhuku's reservations on the proposed government's constitution-making process and his personal features, while the *Chronicle* (16/4) carried a story where government **"warned"** civic organizations against attempting to derail the drafting of a new constitution.

And even as they sought to endorse the government-driven constitutional reform, they barely apprised their audiences on the process as outlined under Article 6 of the GPA.

Neither did they coherently track the activities of the Select Committee, particularly its consultative meetings with civic society and members of the public.

As a result only three (8%) of the 38 stories the government media featured on parliamentary issues offered an alternative view to the government-proposed constitutional redrafting. Otherwise, 27 (71%) were regurgitations of statements by the Select Committee; five (13%) were on the appointment of parliamentary portfolio committees and three (8%) on the setting up of a parliamentary legal committee.

Of the three articles that accommodated alternative views, two were news stories in *The Manica Post* (24/4) and *Chronicle* (18/4) that fairly quoted the NCA expressing its position on constitutional reform while the remainder was an opinion piece in *The Sunday Mail* (26/4) by Independent MP Jonathan Moyo who dismissed government-sponsored constitutional writing process as flawed and worse than that adopted by the government-appointed Constitutional Commission whose draft was rejected by the public in 2000.

But while ZBC generally failed to inform its audiences adequately on the constitutional debate in its news bulletins, Spot FM (20/4) commendably gave a platform to the new government and civil society to express their positions on constitutional reform in its current affairs programme *STERP*. It quoted State Minister Gordon Moyo expressing the government's view, which it balanced with comments from the NCA senior official Ernest Mudzengi, who explained why his organisation was against a government-driven constitutional reform process.

More balanced discussion also appeared in the private media. Apart from explaining government's constitutional reform process as stipulated under the GPA, the private media gave space to independent commentators and civic society, who condemned the coalition government's proposed constitutional redrafting exercise as non-inclusive. To support their arguments they argued that the process was driven by politicians who appeared bent on imposing the Kariba draft constitution the two MDCs and ZANU PF had already agreed to while leaving little room for public consultation.

For example, *The Financial Gazette* (23/4) cited Madhuku dismissing government-sponsored constitutional reform saying it was **"parliamentary-driven, not people-driven"** and thus it would not reflect the needs of the people as parliamentarians could not be trusted with leading a constitution-making process when the Constitution was meant to keep them in check. Most of the 26 stories the private media carried on the subject echoed similar views.

However, the *Zimbabwe Independent* (17/4) disagreed with civil society's arguments, particularly those by the NCA. Its editorial argued that calls by the NCA and civil society for a 'people-driven' constitutional reform were **"beginning to ring hollow"** because **"members of Parliament represent the people, unless it can be demonstrated that those members on the select committee were improperly selected."**

It then asked: **"If the people are not represented by their elected members of Parliament, then how does Madhuku propose to represent them?"**

Earlier, the paper (3/4) shed some light on other parliamentary business, exposing ministers' failure to adequately account for the activities of their ministries. It cited *Veritas*, an independent parliamentary watchdog NGO, noting that ministers responded superficially to questions they were asked in Parliament demonstrating **"that either (they) were not fully briefed by their ministries, or that they were glossing over situations that sparked the questions"**.

However, some commentators the *Independent* quoted attributed the failure by mainly ZANU PF ministers to give coherent answers to parliamentarians to **“a lack of accountability that existed before the inclusive government”**.

The same paper reported Minister Moyo as having told civic leaders that the Zimbabwe Media Commission and the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission would be appointed “before” the end of April. None of the media followed up this matter and questioned government on why this deadline was not met.

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