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**The Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe
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COMMENT

The ‘smoke-and-mirrors’ of media reform

MMPZ notes with the gravest concern government’s latest call for the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ) to licence more players in the broadcasting sector.

ZANU PF’s Media and Information Minister Webster Shamu made the call while addressing a BAZ strategic planning workshop in Harare recently (*The Herald*, 7/10).

However, although the minister declared that this was the only way to free the airwaves, MMPZ notes that his appeal undermines efforts to establish a genuinely free and independent broadcasting community in the country in line with the Global Political Agreement.

This is so because Shamu’s call clearly attempts to lend legitimacy to the disputed composition of the broadcasting authority, while at the same time giving the dishonest public impression that the ZANU PF arm of government is making an important concession by apparently supporting the cause of genuine media reform.

Evidently Shamu is attempting to sweep the dispute over his unilateral appointment of the present board last year under the carpet.

In its present form BAZ comprises mostly ZANU PF apologists, among them a number of former military officers with the infamously biased Tafataona Mahoso as their chairman. These contentious appointments were made without consulting any of the other partners to the coalition and MDC-T dismissed them as “a legal nullity”.

Clearly, such a board cannot contribute to genuine broadcasting reforms, and Shamu provided an indication of his party’s real sentiment towards such reform of the broadcasting sector by stating that licensing new broadcasters was “***the only way to upset pirate radio stations...***”

Shamu does not need to be reminded that Zimbabweans operate the overseas-based “pirate radio stations” he refers to precisely because they were denied their right to broadcast locally by the previous government. If he genuinely believes in broadcasting reform all Shamu needs to do is to ensure these broadcasters are granted domestic licences to operate. This would also comply with Article XIX of the GPA, which recommends that they be “brought home”.

But of course that will never happen. And Mahoso was quoted on ZTV (7/10, 8pm) saying BAZ was unable to licence new broadcasters at the moment because of a lack of funding, although he promised his board would licence community radio stations next year.

Evidently, this latest attempt to address Zimbabwe’s restrictive media environment is just another fraudulent attempt to convince the public and the international community that genuine broadcasting reforms are in the pipeline when nothing of the sort is being contemplated. It is the old “smoke and mirrors” trick to create a false impression of progress.

SUMMARY

OUTRAGE by the MDC-T over President Mugabe’s unilateral re-appointment of provincial governors, which prompted strong condemnation from Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai, made headlines in the private media this week.

Although the government media publicized Tsvangirai’s statement, they distorted the context of his remarks by deliberately omitting that they had been precipitated by the re-appointment of the governors at a time when the MDC-T was still smarting over the humiliation inflicted by Mugabe’s earlier unilateral appointments to government office.

The government media devoted most attention to the death of former Matabeleland North Governor Welshman Mabhena. However, they suppressed the real reasons why Mabhena’s family had refused to have the late national hero buried at the national heroes’ acre.

Zimbabwe’s discredited constitutional reform programme remained a cause for concern in both the government and private media (See Fig. 1).

Fig 1: Topical stories in the media

Media	Coalition tensions	Constitutional reform	Mabhena’s death	Food security	Human rights
State-run media	20	27	57	6	3
Private media	32	27	17	5	21
Total	42	54	74	11	24

State media overlook source of new coalition crisis

NEWS that President Mugabe had re-appointed the country's 10 provincial governors without consultation received significant coverage in the private media towards the end of the week.

The news emerged at a Press conference in Harare convened by Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai, during which he also complained about Mugabe's other unilateral appointments, declaring his party would not recognize them.

While the government papers and ZBC radio stations distorted Tsvangirai's remarks and downplayed the implications of Mugabe's latest action, the private media reported Mugabe's behaviour as having reignited hostilities between the two main coalition parties, which had created a possible constitutional crisis.

The national television station ignored this.

Although *The Herald* (8/10) reported Tsvangirai's statement, which he issued after meeting his party's national executive committee, it did not indicate that the statement was mostly a reaction to Mugabe's unilateralism, particularly his re-appointment of provincial governors.

Instead of giving prominence to this story, *The Herald* relegated it to page two, preferring news of Mugabe's opening of a women's village bank in Gokwe as its front-page lead.

The paper exposed its bias against Tsvangirai and his party by heavily distorting the meaning of Tsvangirai's statement. Under its misleading headline: *MDC-T in new boycott threats*, the paper trivialized the statement as having been made "**in solidarity with white commercial farmers and party treasurer Mr Roy Bennett**". It claimed that Tsvangirai had demanded the inclusion of Bennett in the coalition government "**or else they would not recognize several other members of the executive and civil service**". Without providing any evidence, *The Herald* claimed that Tsvangirai had been "**pressurized by the party's financiers to take a stand for Mr Bennett even if it means boycotting some functions of government**".

Radio Zimbabwe and Spot FM (8/10, 1pm) were equally dishonest. They restricted their coverage of Tsvangirai's statement to his pledge that he was committed to the total implementation of the GPA, including the lifting of sanctions, without providing any context.

The private media however, clearly reported Tsvangirai's statement, including excerpts that exposed President Mugabe's alleged intransigency.

Strangely though, none of these media sought ZANU PF's response to the issue.

The *Zimbabwe Independent* (8/10) quoted Tsvangirai dismissing Mugabe's linking of the issue of governors to the removal of sanctions as ***"rank madness and utterly nonsensical"***.

The private media also publicized Tsvangirai's criticism of politically motivated violence plaguing the constitutional outreach programme, which the government media censored. Tsvangirai attributed the violence to ZANU PF and ***"rogue elements of the security agencies..."*** He viewed it as having been ***"clearly designed to deny"*** Zimbabwean citizens ***"their right to have their views heard"*** (NewsDay, 8/10).

The Standard (10/10) reported Tsvangirai's statement as a reflection of his ***"deep frustration"*** with Mugabe's continued intransigence. Political analysts however, argued that Mugabe and his party were unlikely to be moved by Tsvangirai's threats, which they described as ***"belated"***, as the MDC-T leader had allegedly spent most of his time telling the world that the inclusive government was working well (SW Radio Africa & *The Standard*, 8 & 10/10)

Fresh row plagues constitutional reform

THE conflict between ZANU PF and the two MDC formations over the direction Zimbabwe's controversial constitutional reforms should take remained in the spotlight this week.

While all the media reported the debate as having been re-ignited by Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai's calls for a negotiated constitution, the government media suffocated the fact that Tsvangirai had made the suggestion on the basis that the current process had been blighted by politically motivated violence. The official media even censored the Prime Minister's condemnation of the violence, which he attributed to ZANU PF and **"rogue"** state security agents, while addressing a Press conference in Harare (*NewsDay*, 8/10).

Although the government and private media reported the friction as more apparent among the coalition parties, the government media reported the MDC-T as also divided over its leader's proposal.

However, none of the government media's reports analyzed the implications of these contradictions.

The Herald (7/9) reported that some senior MDC-T members were opposed to Tsvangirai's suggestion on the grounds that it was **"undemocratic"**, a position shared by ZANU PF. One of them, Copac co-chairman Douglas Mwonzora, expressed reservations about Tsvangirai's views, reportedly endorsed by MDC-T spokesman Nelson Chamisa, as they were not a reflection of **"the sentiments of the national council"**. Although the paper claimed that other members of the MDC-T were considering pulling out of the constitutional reform programme, it did not back up this.

The same paper quoted MDC-M secretary-general Welshman Ncube arguing that problems plaguing the outreach programme had vindicated his party's position that the discredited Kariba Draft should be used as the basis for writing a new constitution.

Instead of investigating the truth of Tsvangirai's complaints of violence, the government media quoted Justice Minister Patrick Chinamasa and war veterans refuting this (*The Herald*, 5/10). *Herald* columnist Tichaona Zindoga (7/10) accused the MDC-T of using **"isolated"** incidents of violence as **"an excuse to...ditch the whole programme"**.

However, both the official and private media paid little attention to the administrative aspect of the constitutional outreach programme. None of them, for example, asked the Copac to disclose the number of outreach meetings left, apart from Harare, as well as a breakdown of the number of people who had participated in the outreach and the figure it had targeted.

Neither did these media seek comment on the consequences of a possible rejection of the outcome of the outreach programme and the referendum scheduled for next year.

While the government media dismissed reports of violence in the outreach programme, the private media quoted another Copac co-chairman Paul Mangwana confirming its existence (*The Financial Gazette*, 7/10).

SW Radio Africa (4/10) quoted the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) and the Zimbabwe Students Union (ZINASU) urging Zimbabweans to reject the outcome of the outreach, which the MDC-T described as “**a circus**” (Studio 7, 5/10).

Rights violations tumble

REPORTS on human rights violations remained on a downward trend this week. While the government media recorded no incidents, the private media publicized four fresh occurrences.

They comprised:

- The alleged intimidation of Chipinge villagers by suspected ZANU PF supporters for listening to foreign-based radio stations (*The Zimbabwean*, 7/10).
- News that ZANU PF officials were barring suspected MDC-T supporters from accessing food aid in Mberengwa (*The Zimbabwean On Sunday*, 10/10).
- The torture of a victim of armed robbery, Herbert Ncube, by Gweru police. Gweru magistrate Douglas Chikwekwe refused to put Ncube on remand and ordered the State to prosecute the policemen who tortured him (*NewsDay*, 9/10).

THE MOST HEARD

THE government media generally gave ZANU PF and the MDC-T equal opportunity to express their positions on important national issues but, of course, distorted the context of the MDC's comments.

ZANU PF was quoted 29 times, while the MDC-T was heard 28 times. The smaller MDC formation (six times) continued to play second fiddle.

ZANU PF was mostly quoted heaping praise on the contribution to the liberation struggle of the late national hero, Welshman Mabhena, and downplaying his family's refusal to have Mabhena buried at the national shrine.

Most political commentators they quoted criticized the MDC-T for allegedly lacking a clear position on national issues, particularly the constitutional reform programme, and for attending a congress of the British Labour Party.

The private media gave the MDC-T more space to express its views than its coalition partners.

Out of the 61 voices these media devoted to the coalition parties, the MDC-T was quoted 40 times (66%), while ZANU PF was heard 17 times (28%). The Arthur Mutambara-led MDC was accessed four times.

These media also acted as independent forums for divergent views.

Copac co-chairman Paul Mangwana (12 times) was the most frequently quoted individual in the state-controlled media mostly defending Copac's outreach programme. His colleague, Douglas Mwonzora (10 times), followed, mostly reported "clarifying" what Tsvangirai meant by a **"negotiated constitution"**.

Prime Minister Tsvangirai (seven), MDC-T spokesman Nelson Chamisa (five) and MDC-M secretary-general Welshman Ncube (four) competed for attention too. Tsvangirai was heard issuing a Press statement, which touched on various power sharing issues, while Chamisa and Ncube were mostly quoted defending their parties' position on the new constitution.

Tsvangirai (17 times) dominated the private media.

He was mostly heard expressing disgust at Mugabe and his party for violating the GPA. Mwonzora (five) and UZ political science lecturer John Makumbe (four) trailed. Mwonzora commented on constitutional reforms, while Makumbe mostly criticized Mugabe for acting unilaterally.

Quotes of the week

“In terms of who we sell our minerals to, America cannot dictate the markets to us. If they say our diamonds are bloody they can keep their money or go to hell. Zimbabwe has the right to choose its markets” – MDC-T Mines and Mining Development Deputy Minister Gift Chimanimikire (*NewsDay*, 8/10).

“What they (MDC formations) say depends on the weather or voice of their Western masters. They are politically dishonest by their very nature and the outreach programme has exposed them. They were caught with their pants down...” – pro-ZANU PF analyst Jonathan Moyo criticizing the MDC formations for allegedly ***“flip-flopping”*** on the new constitution (*The Herald*, 5/10).

“The MDC formations hardly make wise decisions; they called for the imposition of sanctions against their own country. They thought that the use of money and NGOs would influence people of Zimbabwe (on the new constitution) but the people of Zimbabwe are very clear about their heritage, values and their wishes” –ZANU PF-aligned commentator Godwills Masimirembwa (ZTV, 6/10, 8pm).

“Zimbabweans will know that I have desperately tried to avoid a constitutional crisis in Zimbabwe. I have worked tirelessly to try and make this transitional government work, in the interest of all Zimbabweans. I have worked and spoken in support of this government. But neither I, or the MDC, can stand back any longer and just allow Mugabe and ZANU PF to defy the law, to flaunt the constitution and to act as if they own this country” - Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai (*New Zimbabwe.com*, 7/10).

Ends/

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