Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe
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Weekly Media Review 2011-47

Ministry subverting broadcasting reforms

COMMENT

BARELY a week after the disputed Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ) courted controversy by awarding the country's first ever free-to-air independent national commercial radio station licences to two companies linked to ZANU PF, the authority was making headlines again with advertisements seeking applications for more, free-to-air local commercial radio broadcasters.

BAZ, whose members were unilaterally appointed by the ZANU PF-controlled Ministry of Information in 2009, flighted adverts in *The Sunday Mail* (27/11) inviting applications from potential broadcasters to establish private local radio stations, one in each of 14 towns and cities around the country.

Given BAZ's irregular appointment and clearly partisan allocation of national broadcasting space, this latest effort by the authority to appear to be reforming Zimbabwe's restricted broadcasting environment is sure to reignite fierce debate over the unity government's desire to implement genuine media reform as envisaged under the Global Political Agreement.

It is on record that, as a result of its irregular appointment, the Principals in the Government of National Unity have agreed to reconstitute the BAZ governing board in terms of the Broadcasting Services Act as amended in 2007.

Until this is achieved, the activities of the group of individuals claiming to be representing BAZ should be considered to be of no legal force or effect and should be dismissed as the actions of an illegitimately appointed body.

Indeed, civil society, media watchdogs and two of the three parties in the unity government have all dismissed BAZ's allocation of national broadcasting licences to Zimpapers' *Talk Radio* and AB Communications' *Zi fm stereo,* owned by former ZBC newscaster Supa Mandiwanzira, as exactly that.

But instead of paying attention to the self-evidently necessary legal requirement for it to be reconstituted, BAZ is pressing ahead with its media reform window-dressing by seeking applications for local private broadcasters.

It is equally self-evident that for BAZ to do so it must have the support of the Ministry of Information and Publicity that supervises its activities.

It can only be concluded that BAZ's present invitation for local radio broadcasters constitutes a deliberate, arrogant violation of the unity accord under which a genuinely representative and independent broadcasting authority would be appointed to oversee genuine broadcasting reforms that would give Zimbabweans a diverse choice of radio stations.

Clearly, the ZANU PF-controlled Ministry of Information – which has already admitted that it has brought in eight radio transmitters for broadcasting purposes – believes it can get away with subverting this process and present it to SADC – as the brokers of the GPA – as the media reforms required under the agreement.

This brazen disregard for the rule of law is nothing more than fraud – and should be exposed as such with immediate effect.

Press feast on Tsvangirai 'marriage'

AS this report went to Press, Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai finally broke his two-week silence to clear the air over the rumours and speculation in all the media regarding his relationship with local businesswoman Locadia Karimatsenga Tembo.

In his Press statement reported on by the country's four major dailies (1/12), Tsvangirai admitted to have had a ***"relationship"*** with Locadia, who was allegedly pregnant by him, but had since had the relationship terminated. He said his ***"genuine intention has been betrayed"*** after the purported marriage rituals became a subject of ***"frenzied"*** and ***"choreographed"*** media publicity allegedly to cause ***"political damage"*** to his reputation, apparently by an ***"underhand and active political hand"***.

Added Tsvangirai: ***"Reputations have been bruised and mutual trust upon which such relations are built and maintained has been lost… When these values are undermined, that relationship is irretrievably doomed from the start."***

Tsvangirai's comments follow widespread media publicity that he had paid US$36,000 bride price for Locadia at her father's plot in Christon Bank. The "scandal" threatened to overshadow the national budget presented by Finance Minister Tendai Biti in the same week.

The media speculation sparked by the marriage rituals conducted by Tsvangirai's emissaries at the Tembo home attracted a spate of coverage in 32 stories, several of them front-page headlines. Of these, 12 appeared in the official Press, while the remaining 20 featured in the private media. Significantly, ZBC ignored the story altogether.

None of the media however, quoted Tsvangirai, members of his family or Locadia, confirming the marriage.

The breaking news reports on the payment of lobola, remarkably similar in detail across the country's four dailies (*The Herald*, *Chronicle*, *NewsDay* and *Daily News*, 22/11) as if it had been revealed at a news briefing, were mostly based on the accounts of members of the Tembo family and unidentified sources, most of which were vehemently refuted by the PM's office.

One such claim was that Tsvangirai was part of the delegation that visited the Tembo family to pay the bride price (*The Herald*, *NewsDay* and *Daily News*, 22/11).

Comments by the PM's spokesman, Luke Tamborinyoka, denying reports that his boss had married, appeared to expose poor public relations skills by his information department.

One such comment bordering on the hysterical appeared in *The Herald* (22/11) where Tamborinyoka was quoted saying: ***"If you can believe that my brother, it is the same as believing that former South African President Nelson Mandela is now 12 years old***".

NewsDay (24/11) carried a similar retort from Tamborinyoka: ***"If you believe that you may as well believe that Jonathan Moyo is white"***.

Despite the denials, *The Herald* (28/11) carried a follow-up story reporting Locadia as having visited Tsvangirai's rural home where she was introduced to the family and performed traditional duties expected from a new wife.

But it was only *The Herald* (1/12) that pointed out that Tsvangirai's statement did not explicitly clear up the essential mystery of whether he did actually marry Locadia under customary law.

NATIONAL BUDGET

No money for elections

THE presentation of the $4 billion 2012 national budget by Finance Minister Tendai Biti also competed for attention in all the media.

Highlights of the budget included the setting aside of $30 million for the constitutional referendum, expected to be held early next year; the increase of the tax-free threshold by $25 to $250 and tax-free bonus to $700, up from $500; and the allocation of $226 million for agriculture.

But the major talking points were the exclusion of funding for national elections, which President Mugabe and his party have repeatedly said must be held next year; and the budget's failure to factor in salary increases for civil servants.

These issues were contained in 40 reports the government media carried on the budget. Notably, none of these reports contained the usual propaganda against Biti and his MDC-T party. They gave Biti, his critics and supporters the opportunity to express their opinions.

In one such case, ZTV (25/11, 8pm) reported Biti justifying his decision to omit funding for elections in the budget while addressing a business breakfast meeting in Harare, saying: ***"There are no allocated reserves for this and we haven't made a comment on that. I don't think that the issue of elections is about resources; it's about commitments that the principals themselves have agreed on. They have agreed to agree on a roadmap first to those elections."***

The Herald (26/11) reported former Finance Minister and Mavambo leader Simba Makoni interpreting this as an indication that Zimbabwe was unlikely to hold elections next year, while ZTV (25/11, 8pm) quoted officials from the two MDC formations defending Biti's decision.

One of them, MDC-N secretary-general Priscillah Misihairabwi-Mushonga, said: ***"There are too many issues that would make it problematic for him to allocate money for elections…you can't time it until you go through the referendum and all the things that are supposed to happen"*** (ZTV, 25/11, 8pm).

On the other hand, civil servants unions criticized the Finance Minister for ***"failing to address the plight of their members"***, while farmers ***"castigated"*** him for being ***"reluctant to significantly support the agricultural sector"*** in line with his party's perceived stance (ZBC, 24 and 27/11, 8pm).

The private media's coverage of Biti's budget was also varied.

Not only did these media help unpack the various aspects of the budget, such as the projection to achieve national economic growth of more than nine percent next year and containing inflation below five percent, they also reported economic commentators arguing that some of Biti's projections were unrealistic (Studio 7, SW Radio Africa and *ZimOnline*, 24 & 25/11).

Parties campaign despite uncertainty over polls

THE media continued to report Zimbabwe's main political parties as being in election campaign mode despite indications that the country's post-referendum elections might be held later than expected.

Although President Mugabe and his party have widely been reported insisting elections should be held next year, the omission of funds for these from the 2012 national budget represented the biggest hint yet that Zimbabwe might not hold elections next year.

ZANU PF's campaign activities attracted coverage in 75 of the government media's 83 stories on the country's preparations for the next elections. Six were on Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai's MDC party, while the remaining two were on administrative aspects of the polls.

All the government media's reports on the MDC-T were negative. They were mostly based on accusations by ZANU PF and its allies that the MDC-T was delaying the conclusion of the constitution-making process because it was afraid of elections; that Finance Minister Tendai Biti was underfunding agriculture and Zimbabwe's empowerment programmes because the MDC-T perceived them to be bedrocks of ZANU PF policy; and that Tsvangirai supported gays (ZBC, 21, 23, 24, 25/11, 8pm).

ZANU PF was presented as the most suitable party to govern the country, citing its provision of farming inputs around the country; advocacy for black economic empowerment; an increase in civil servants salaries; and fierce opposition to homosexuality (ZBC, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, 27/11, 8pm).

The private media generally viewed the omission of funding for elections in the national budget as an indication that Zimbabwe would not hold elections next year.

They also cited delays in the conclusion of constitutional reforms; the ongoing dispute over media reforms; non-implementation of the electoral roadmap, and other outstanding issues under the Global Political Agreement (GPA) as other indicators (SW Radio Africa and Studio 7, 21, 23, 24 & 25/11).

This was reflected in seven stories about the administration of Zimbabwe's polls. The other 27 reports were on the campaign activities of Zimbabwe's major political parties. Of these, 15 were on ZANU PF, while the remaining 12 were on the MDC-T.

Twelve of the ZANU PF reports were neutral, while the remaining three were negative. Of the 12 MDC-T reports, 11 were neutral while one was negative.

HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES

THERE have been fewer incidents of political violence reported in the media since Zimbabwe's political leaders convened a joint Press conference last month denouncing politically motivated violence.

This week, the private media recorded five new incidents.

They included:

- The arrest of eight civil society leaders by the police in Bikita for holding an 'unsanctioned' meeting (Radio VoP, 26/11), and
- Coercion of Bulawayo market traders by ZANU PF youths to attend the party's meetings. Manicaland residents were also reported as facing the same problem (SW Radio Africa and the *Zimbabwean On Sunday*, 21 & 27/11).

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