

The Western Media And The Crisis In Zimbabwe

Knocks Tapiwa Zengeni

Abstract

The crisis in Zimbabwe in the past decade has many dimensions. One of the underestimated dimensions is the impact of Western media reportage on the unfolding drama in the country. Biased reportage by some mainstream Western media channels on Zimbabwe has had a negative and damaging effect both on the Mugabe regime as well as the country's economy. It has also highlighted the excesses of the Mugabe regime in its quest to ensure regime security. In response to these Western media blitz, the Mugabe regime has countered them by stifling media independence in the domestic arena in a calculated strategy aimed at cushioning itself from unfair and biased media attacks. While there is some truth in what is being reported about the Mugabe regime by the Western media, on balance, this paper argues that the role played by the Western media in the ensuing political crisis in Zimbabwe has done more harm than good. In a big way, the Western media has aggravated the political and socio-economic crisis in Zimbabwe in the past decade.

Keywords: Western Media, Mugabe Regime, Crisis, Zimbabwe

Introduction

One of the most significant factors in Zimbabwe's relations with the West is the ever-increasing influence of the media, which appears to have played a role in aggravating the crisis in Zimbabwe. Since the late 1990s Western policy towards Zimbabwe has largely been shaped by a regime change agenda. In this regard, Western media has played a pivotal role in propagating this new strategy aimed against Robert Mugabe's regime. A propaganda campaign was launched to depict Mugabe as an imminent threat to human rights and development. The campaign, timed to the onset of Mugabe's controversial fast track land reforms in 2000,¹ has been highly successful in shifting attitudes in the international community. It drove Western public opinion against Mugabe and his acolytes. However, this biased role of Western media has aroused deep concern within the Mugabe regime which has responded by limiting media freedom within its borders. Consequently, the political temperature in the country increased thereby worsening the political crisis. Thus, Zimbabwe is apparently one of those countries which is becoming increasingly vulnerable to the power of media. Despite this apparent influence of the media on events occurring in Zimbabwe in the past decade, there remains minimal

academic attention on this crucial matter. This paper primarily seeks to highlight the nature and impact of the Western media on the ongoing crisis in Zimbabwe. Its main purpose is to provide critical analysis of the media role in the unfolding drama in Zimbabwe that has resulted in the decline of the so-called 'Jewel of Africa'. Zimbabwe, once the epitome of political stability and economic prosperity in Southern Africa, is now an integral component of the continent's growing crisis statistics.

The growing influence of the media

With more information travelling around the world faster than ever before, information has become an important instrument of governments' power in both domestic and inter-state relations. Increasingly, public opinion and the media have become critical elements in understanding international politics. As noted by Piers Robinson we "live in a world of instantaneous communication facilitated by technologies such as the internet and satellite-based communication as well as the arrival of global 24-hour news channels such as CNN, and Al Jazeera" (Robinson, 2008, p. 138). In the case of global television or media, wealthy states have expanded their soft power. Western global media houses such as the *Cable News Network (CNN)* and the *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)* have increased Western global power by enabling the West to frame issues from their perspective or setting the agenda. When Zimbabwe expropriated farms from white farmers, the fact that the *CNN* and the *BBC* are basically Western firms helped frame the issue worldwide as unjust (analogous to Idi Amin's actions in Uganda), rather than as a justified attempt to reverse colonial injustice. In an information age, the crisis in Zimbabwe and its coverage has demonstrated American and British soft power. Generally, television images of human rights abuses in Zimbabwe has given the propaganda victory to the West.

Undoubtedly, the media over which information travels shape the way ideas take form and spread from one place to another. The western media platforms such as CNN and the BBC have the strongest political impact because of their global reach. Although the media and public opinion can independently influence policy makers to follow certain courses of action, in most cases the media and public opinion are subservient to political elites. From this angle, media have a rather less independent form of influence, acting merely as mouthpieces for government officials, operating to mobilise the public in support of respective policies. This form of behaviour is mostly seen in media reportage on foreign policies where media platforms tend to follow the flag. For instance, Lance Bennett's (1990) indexing hypothesis, describes how US journalists follow foreign policy elites in terms of both the news agenda and the framing of foreign affairs issues, rather than reporting independently (Robinson, 2008, p. 143). The foregoing arises from the need to avoid upsetting major political and economic interests, the deference of journalists towards official sources due to their importance in supplying vast quantity of information. Furthermore, the extent to which audiences are able to consume news and, in turn, form their own, independent opinion is limited by media roles of agenda setting, priming and framing. Agenda setting denotes the media's ability, by focusing on some

issues rather than others, to direct people to think about those issues highlighted. The concept of priming which was popularised by Iyengar and Kinder (1987) refers to the ability of media to prepare and direct the public to the issues by which they should judge leaders (Robinson, 2008,p. 143). Framing refers to the way solely in which the actual presentation of news information influences how people view specific issues.

It is commonly known by policy makers and analysts alike that Western public opinion can make or break policy decisions. Public opinion can nurture strategies when the public responds to media coverage or campaigns. Thus extensive media coverage of emaciated Zimbabweans in drought-prone areas, and incidents of human rights abuses have ensured a suitable international outcry aimed at eliciting the 'do something' response from the Western electorate. The extent to which governments can frame the media debate and thereby choose the place and moment of intervention should not be underestimated in the present crisis in Zimbabwe. Broadcasting or electronic media is a type of information dissemination that has long had an impact on public opinion. By focusing on some conflicts and human rights problems, broadcasters have pressed politicians to respond to some foreign conflicts rather than others, for instance, Zimbabwe rather than the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Unsurprisingly, governments have sought to influence, manipulate or control television and radio stations, and have been able to do so with considerable success. Information can be used against governments as well, by foreign governments, NGOs, or domestic political opponents. Governments, especially authoritarian ones, fear the free flow of information, for obvious reasons. When information is allowed to circulate freely among a population, ideas become a powerful force that can sweep aside governments or regimes (Goldstein and Pevehouse, 2010,p. 375). The media has become a powerful tool of domestic opposition movements and their allies in foreign governments. It is therefore not surprising that extensive television, print and online coverage have fed popular discontent regarding the present political situation in Zimbabwe.

The foregoing discussion shows that the information revolution has not equalised power among states in the era where politics has become a contest of competitive credibility (Nye and Welch, 2009, p. 287). Powerful states particularly from the West tend to elicit credibility in the eyes of the general public due to their more competitive political values of democracy and human rights. Unsurprisingly narratives from Western media have assumed more importance globally thus giving them an edge when they compete with other governments in the propaganda arena. Witness the struggle between the West and the Mugabe regime to frame the interpretation of events in Zimbabwe. Prior to the watershed elections in 2008, the majority of adult Zimbabweans were tuned to the Voice of America's Studio 7². In contrast, a minority of Zimbabweans listened to the state-controlled radio station. Moreover, the domestic media alternatives such as independent print media and internet websites provide news which are more often pro-Western.

The impact of Western media on Zimbabwe

The negative western media reportage of events in Zimbabwe has contributed to the ongoing political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe. It is not surprising that the presence of western media is high in the country because it appears that Zimbabwe has aroused more passion in the West than they do among other African states with limited white populations. As noted by Willems (2007) countries with a large white population like Zimbabwe generate a lot more interest in Western countries as compared to others like Rwanda where there are no meaningful white population. Therefore western media platforms such as *BBC*, *CNN*, *The New York Times* and *The Telegraph* have escalated their campaigns of vilification against the ZANU PF regime and the economy of Zimbabwe. For more than ten years, as previously mentioned, the daily press and the television networks in the US, Europe, and in Australia have joined their governments to outdo each other in denigrating President Mugabe and his ZANU-PF government. The Western media have labelled Mugabe a “ruthless dictator”, accused him of being massively corrupt, even called him “mad” and generally tried to identify him as an enemy of democracy. With remarkable unanimity, the Western media outdo themselves with horror stories about the alleged situation in Zimbabwe now. Full page articles are devoted to detailed accounts of ritualistic gang rapes allegedly carried out as policy by ZANU supporters.

At the same time land reform has been portrayed as a “gimmick” policy being pursued by a black racist regime intent on targeting whites. In a media campaign of a type not seen since the height of the Cold War the anti-ZANU-PF, anti-Mugabe message has been stridently pressed, with scant regard for truth or fairness. Even the white controlled media in South Africa has joined in the fray and has approached the Zimbabwe question from the standpoint of demonising Mugabe as a dictator and defining the primary challenge as that of democracy, understood as a need to have a strong opposition. The hallmark of the racist element in global media over the Zimbabwe issue was in full view in Rupert Murdoch’s *The Australian*, of September 4, 2002. The main political cartoon in the paper, in full colour, depicted President Mugabe as a clone of Idi Amin, his chest adorned with medals. Concurrently, the cartoon ridiculed the idea of black Africans operating their own farms, exemplifying the racism that underlies much of the anti-ZANU PF campaign and land reforms in Zimbabwe.

A close analysis of global media channels show that the reportage on Zimbabwe is biased particularly against the Mugabe regime and designed to shape international opinion against the regime (Nl dukula 2009 int.). For example, the British tabloid *The Telegraph* in a news report entitled “Robert Mugabe’s mobs invade last white farms” reported on 17 April 2008 that more than half of Zimbabwe’s remaining white farmers have seen their land invaded by ‘mobs’ loyal to President Robert Mugabe since the bitterly disputed election of 2008. In this report the white farmer is presented as the innocent victim. A farmer in Masvingo province, who allegedly declined to be identified for fear of reprisals, was cited as having said that his plight had worsened dramatically and had been left with nowhere to graze his animals, which were being stolen (*Telegraph Online*). Continuing

with its theme of treating the complex land issue as a project targeted at innocent white farmers, *The Telegraph* on 28 February, 2009, in another news report headlined “New threats against white Zimbabwe farmers as Robert Mugabe celebrates 85th birthday” indicated that ZANU PF was planning to evict the remaining white farmers as a birthday present for the octogenarian leader. In another related story with the headline “Zimbabwe land invasion threaten last of white farmers with extinction”, *The Telegraph* reported on 3 April 2009 that Zimbabwean farmers had accused the new coalition government established in 2008 for betraying the plight of white farmers through failing to stop a fresh wave of farm invasions (*Telegraph Online*). The following table 1.1 provides a sample of some the negative news stories on Zimbabwe carried by one of the top British media houses, *The Telegraph* in recent years:

Table 1.1

Daily Telegraph news reports headlines

Date	Title
11 Jun 2010	White farmers in Zimbabwe struggle against increasing violence
26 Jul 2009	Robert Mugabe labels top US official ‘an idiot’ in latest outburst against African Americans.
7 Jul 2009	Zimbabwe farmers leader murdered in axe attack
26 June 2009	ZANU PF and military profiting from diamond massacre
3 Apr 2009	Zimbabwe land invasion threaten last of white farmers with extinction
17 Mar 2009	Robert Mugabe’s pilot tried to stay in UK illegally because he feared President
12 Mar 2009	Roy Bennet ‘shared Zimbabwe cell with 5 dead bodies’
9 Mar 2009	Even Zimbabwe is laughing at Gordon Brown’s economic mismanagement
28 Feb 2009	New threats against white Zimbabwe farmers as Robert Mugabe celebrates 85 th birthday
24 Feb 2009	Zimbabwe’s vice president tried to sell gold in Europe
14 Feb 2009	Robert Mugabe loyalists plan final eviction of white farmers as his birthday present
11 Dec 2008	Britain must not abandon the Zimbabwean people to Robert Mugabe
27 Jun 2008	Robert Mugabe, lonely monster
23 May 2008	Zimbabwe: Robert Mugabe shuts church over Movement for Democratic link
16 May 2008	For Robert Mugabe, democracy means war
17 Apr 2008	Mugabe mobs invade remaining white farms
4 July 2008	Zimbabwe does not want UK firms, says Robert Mugabe
24 Sep 2007	Zimbabwe’s great diamond rush brutally suppressed by Robert Mugabe’s regime

(Source: *Telegraph Online* 2010)

Similarly, other Western media organizations such as the BBC and the CNN have also negatively carried news reports about Zimbabwe. Some of the negative and biased CNN news reports on Zimbabwe which were disseminated in 2008 and 2009 are cited below in table 1.2:

Table 1.2

CNN news reports headlines

29 October 2009	Zimbabwe power sharing crisis
15 October 2009.	Zimbabwe judge orders opposition politician back to jail
25 September, 2009.	Mugabe slams Us, Western ‘filthy antics’
23 September 2009.	Desperation stalks Zimbabwe’s white farmers
24 September, 2009.	Zimbabweans scrounge for food
24 September 2009.	White lawmaker: Mugabe is racist
24 September 2009.	Zimbabwe education crumbling
16 September 2009.	Zimbabwe farmers under siege,
15 September 2009.	Disunity in Zimbabwe
June 19 2009	Help for Zimbabwe,
31 May 2009	Diamonds deaths in Zimbabwe
17 April 2009	Mugabe ally implicated in Zimbabwe farm seizure
April 9, 2009	Farms raided in Zimbabwe.
March 18, 2009	Zimbabweans surviving on beer and cigarettes on
March 3, 2009	Attorney: Despite ruling, release unlikely for Mugabe opponent
February 22, 2009	Mugabe: Party amid poverty
February 28, 2009	Mugabe hosts lavish party despite national crisis
February 22, 2009	Dire economy shaking Zimbabwe
Feb 19, 2009	Surviving in Zimbabwe
February 15, 2009	Zimbabwe accuses new minister of terrorism
February 14, 2009	Zimbabwe disunity government
January 28, 2009	Cholera in beleaguered Zimbabwe out of control
January 20, 2009	Hunger strikes demand end to suffering in Zimbabwe
January 16, 2009	Zimbabwe activist: I feared for my life
January 16 2009	Zimbabwe on the brink
January 11, 2009	Zimbabwe opposition: Help us find abducted members
January 2, 2008	Zimbabwean lawyer: Law has broken down
31 December 2008	Zimbabwean activist remain locked up
December 25, 2008	Zimbabwe police ignore order to release activists
December 23, 2008	Mugabe: US and West ‘stupid and foolish’
December 19, 2008	New Zimbabwe \$10 billion note buys bread on
December 19, 2008	Thousands of Zimbabwean youths flee to South Africa
December 17, 2008	Zimbabwe’s Mugabe blames the West
December 17, 2008	Mugabe shuts down aid groups

December 17, 2008	Mugabe restricts aid
December 17, 2008	Violence called Mugabe’s norm
December 17, 2008	UN may sanction Mugabe
December 17, 2008	Violence continues in Zimbabwe
December 17, 2008	Pressure mounts on Mugabe

(Source CNN Online)

The above are some of the negative news reports which form part of a well coordinated media blitz targeted at tarnishing the image of Zimbabwe and also to mobilize Western domestic constituencies as a prelude for possible military intervention in Zimbabwe. In July 2008 Western powers lobbied for United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions that would have blessed their attempts to militarily intervene in Zimbabwe and effect a regime change. However, the UNSC machinations were foiled by China and Russia vetoes. South Africa has also continued to play a major diplomatic role in lobbying against possible Western-inspired UN sanctions. The possibility of Western military intervention in Zimbabwe is not without merit. In his recently published memoirs, *A Journey*, launched in September 2010, the former British prime minister, Tony Blair noted that not toppling Robert Mugabe, the president of Zimbabwe, was one of his regrets in power (*Guardian* online 2010). Blair indicates that the task to topple Mugabe was “impractical” because President Mugabe enjoyed support from fellow African leaders (*The Herald* 3 September, 2010). *The Herald* report also added that in 2007, former British armed forces chief, General Lord Charles Guthrie, also indicated that he had discussed attacking Zimbabwe with Blair. He said, “We used to talk about things. I could say anything to him, because he knew I wasn’t going to spill the beans.” Subjects discussed included invading Zimbabwe, “which people were always trying to get me to look at”. “My advice was, ‘hold hard, you’ll make it worse’.” At the time of Guthrie’s revelations, Zimbabwe said it was well aware of such plots and the “idea had not been abandoned”. Furthermore a British official indicated that the doctrine of ‘responsibility to protect’ should be evoked on humanitarian grounds to bless military intervention in Zimbabwe ostensibly under a South African-led force to stop the ‘brutal Mugabe regime which has caused suffering to thousands of farm workers; committed mass genocide during the Gukurahundi era in the 1980s and ; consistently committing political violence” (Fish 2009 int.)

A key component of the US regime change agenda in Zimbabwe has been its financial and material support for the media, including the expansion of community newsletters. To this end, US Ambassador James McGee in an unclassified memo in 1997 pointed out that the US sponsored media programmes that disseminated independent information (opposition propaganda) such as the US-funded Voice of America’s Studio 7. The US has been supporting Voice of America (VOA) broadcasts which have beamed into Zimbabwe since 2002 without Zimbabwe’s approval. The program consisted of English, *Shona*, and *Ndebele* broadcasts for an hour and a half per day, five days per week, until July 2007, when broadcasts were expanded to seven days a week. McGee boasted in the memo that Studio 7 has become the most popular independent news program with an estimated audience of just over one million daily listeners (75% rural and 25% urban). It is beyond

doubt that the VOA program is having a significant impact in getting MDC views and opinions to a wide Zimbabwean audience. However, in defence of its sovereignty the Government of Zimbabwe (GOZ) started jamming VOA broadcasting to the country on the medium wave frequency. To combat jamming, the US increased funding to expand broadcast time and days of the week, add alternative means of delivery, increase the shortwave audience, and increase marketing efforts. The efforts of Studio 7 are also complemented by the British-sponsored SW Radio Africa, a studio in London which, broadcasts via shortwave and online to Zimbabwe. In addition to Studio 7, the US government supports the development and distribution of newsletters that provide unbiased information about issues relevant to local communities as a means of mobilizing action.

The above negative electronic media campaigns against Zimbabwe are essentially 'pirate' radio stations which illegally broadcasts into Zimbabwe. For instance, the relevant fact that should be emphasized is that under the auspices of the US sponsored Voice of America, Studio 7 is illegally broadcasting on a medium wave frequency which the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) has allocated to the sovereign republic of Zimbabwe in accordance with applicable international treaties and protocols. In other words, Voice of America which broadcasts Studio 7 is abusing a frequency that the ITU has set aside for Zimbabwe's national use. The fact that Studio 7 uses a medium wave frequency reserved for Zimbabwe via medium wave transmitters in Botswana means it has illegal national coverage within Zimbabwe. The operations of Studio 7 are also complemented by other illegal broadcasts by British-funded SW Radio Africa, a studio based in London, which broadcasts via shortwave and online to Zimbabwe; and the Dutch-funded Voice of the People (VOP) which broadcasts to Zimbabwe from hired shortwave transmitter in Madagascar.

Other media forms of attack on Zimbabwe

Other demonisation media campaigns in the print media included the publications of biographies about Mugabe by some Western writers or those sympathetic to the Western position on Zimbabwe. Despite the enduring power of his reputation that had preceded him, by 2002, Mugabe begun to receive notoriety. The authors of these biographies approached their narratives from a psychosocial analysis of history and their interpretations cited greed, power, lust, corruption and incompetence among the factors. This is a common theme of demonisation of Mugabe and his political allies (see Holland, 2009; Norman, 2008; Blair, 2002 and Meredith 2002; 2007). Since 2000, several psychoanalyses of the Zimbabwean leader were published with an eye toward the general public. Martin Meredith's *Our Votes, Our Guns: Robert Mugabe and the Tragedy of Zimbabwe*, and *Mugabe : Power, Plunder, and the Struggle for Zimbabwe*; David Blair's *Degrees in Violence: Robert Mugabe and the Struggle for Power in Zimbabwe*; Andrew Norman's *Mugabe: Teacher, Revolutionary, Tyrant*; Stephen Chan's *Robert Mugabe: Life of Power and Violence*, and Heidi Holland *Dinner with Mugabe*. All these books, in their own way, provide a biographical perspective on Mugabe. They paint a portrait of a

man who has helped drive a once-promising African nation into rapid decline; a leader following the course of Idi Amin instead of Mandela.

Meredith's *Our Votes, Our Guns* and Blair's *Degrees in Violence* are narrative works that focus on similar themes. Both authors focus predominantly on domestic developments in Zimbabwe. They trace the post-independence political challenges to the ruling ZANU-PF's authority and the consequent repression by the Mugabe regime. Both authors show *Third Chimurenga* as chaotic and little more than another form of political patronage and gimmick. Meredith and Blair emphasise that, throughout his career, Mugabe's modus operandi has been one of intimidation and political violence when confronted with political opposition of any sort. Similarly, in her book, *Dinner with Mugabe*, Heidi Holland (2009) describes Mugabe as a "classic case of a genuine hero – the guerrilla idol who conquered the country's former leader and his white supremacist regime – turning into a peevisish autocrat" (2009: xv). The book is basically about the story of a hero who lost his moral compass, with dire consequences for many others. Andrew Norman in his book *Mugabe : teacher, revolutionary, tyrant* characterises Mugabe as someone lacking in both humanity and compassion. According to Norman, Mugabe has brought Zimbabwe to its knees. Martin Meredith recent book, *Mugabe: power, plunder and the struggle for Zimbabwe* (2007) is another biographical account of Mugabe, which chronicles a tragic political story of what transformed Zimbabwe and its leader into a tyrant and a country beset with violence and lawlessness. Nevertheless, such idiosyncratic approaches, however, tend to be the least analytically rigorous because they discount the significant role of institutions, however weak, as well as interactions and the international context.

The objective of this media 'blitz' has always been to make people disaffected with the Mugabe regime, and to make the country polarised and divided. Robert Mugabe who personifies the ZANU-PF government has been on the receiving end of the 'demonising' strategy. At the same time, the international media is not balanced in its portrayal of Morgan Tsvangirai the opposition leader and his party the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Too often Tsvangirai and the MDC are viewed in the Western media as the saintly alternative to the villainous ZANU-PF. In fact, in the eyes of Western media the media monopolises victimhood and heroism. Furthermore Western media continues to mislead the international community that the general sanctions espoused by the US sanctions legislation the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic recovery Act (ZIDERA) are only targeted at persons in or associated with ZANU PF (PF) and its government. Yet as mentioned earlier, ZIDERA proposes and authorizes comprehensive financial sanctions on Zimbabwe especially within the Breton Woods system.

Two scholars, Nkosi Ndlela (2005) and Wendy Willems (2007) examined the crisis in Zimbabwe from a media perspective. The two examined the various ways the Western media have framed and presented events in Zimbabwe since 2000. In his article "The African Paradigm: The coverage of the Zimbabwean crisis in the Norwegian media", Ndlela concludes that the Norwegian mainstream media has reduced the complex crisis into a typical African story of tragedy and despair. He is disappointed by the empathic

framing of the land crisis which gave considerable coverage to the plight of white farmers despite the fact that the conflict claimed more black lives than white farmers. He also castigates the tendency of Western media to attribute sole responsibility for the crisis in Zimbabwe to President Mugabe as unfair because the role of western nations and their policies on Africa are normally under scrutinised.

Arguing along similar lines, Willems (2007) in her article “Remnants of empire? British media reporting on Zimbabwe”, discusses how Zimbabwe has been represented in the British media and why its case has attracted so much attention. Willems points out that the main factor behind British media interest in Zimbabwe is the large white population in Zimbabwe. Like Ndlela, she also laments the fact that the British media sought to frame recent events in Zimbabwe in terms of racial conflict between black and white. The findings of the above two studies by Ndlela and Willems confirms the contention that what has been portrayed about Zimbabwe and Mugabe in Western media is largely biased and not entirely true. Supporters of the Mugabe regime argue that the fortuitous factor that white farmers are among the victims of the land reform guaranteed more international attention for Zimbabwe than would otherwise be the case. Consequently developments in Zimbabwe have occupied many editorials and commentaries, with diverse opinions being proffered on how Britain should react. The following case of the late Eddisson Zvobgo, a cabinet minister is very instructive to the foregoing. As reported in *The Herald* of 5 May 2000, Zvobgo was asked by a foreign journalist how he felt about the killing of Mr Olds a white farmer. Zvobgo remarked:

Before I answered him, I asked if he knew any names of black people who had also died as a result of violence to which he fidgeted and said he knew none. So to foreign journalists the death of blacks does not make news. (The Herald 5 May 2000)

The international media's obsession with the plight of white commercial farmers has given Mugabe's liberation and anti-racial mantra resonance in many African quarters. Considerable coverage of the plight of white farmers often identified by names clearly showcase the race card in the crisis. Thus, the crisis in Zimbabwe since 2000 has been constructed through the dichotomy of either a radical nationalist redistributive project carried out as a historical redress in the face of neo-liberal orthodoxy, or a breakdown of the norms of liberal governance through the machinations of an authoritarian political figure (Raftopolous 2005).

Impact on Zimbabwe

The impact of the Western media in tarnishing the image of the country has been devastating to Zimbabwe. Tourism a key sector in the economy has been severely affected by unfair media coverage. *The Report of the Fact-Finding Mission to Zimbabwe to assess the Scope and Impact of Operation Murambatsvina by the United Nations*

Special Envoy on Human Settlements Issues in Zimbabwe, by Anna Tibaijuka, also highlights the impact of negative reportage on tourism. The report suggests that Western sanctions have contributed to the “polarisation of national and international media and the domestic political environment and also led to negative travel advisories that have heavily affected the tourism industry” (Tibaijuka Report 2005: 16). Negative perception has also adversely affected foreign investment as investors shy away because of perceived country risk. To illustrate this point, in 1998, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) amounted to US\$444, 3 million and by 2006 it had declined to US\$50 million. It is within this context of regime change that there has been media obsession, travel advisories, external support for the opposition and civil society.

While the western media reports have been demonizing Mugabe and his reign it can not be denied that it has in some ways exposed some of the failings of the ruling elite in Zimbabwe. The theory of media dependency states that for countries in states of crisis or instability such as Zimbabwe, citizens are reliant on mass media for information and as such are more susceptible to their effects (see Loveless 2008:162). In so doing they are more likely to be influenced by mass media. In other words, citizens of countries in transition or crisis like Zimbabwe, are likely to be heavy media consumers in order to inform themselves. This reinforces the notion that in periods of crises, mass media can serve as a source of information to help understand political developments. In this regard, the western media has played a very important role in Zimbabwe in bringing about the crisis in the country to the attention of the rest of the world. In a number of incidents which involved killings during farm invasions and political violence, it was the Western media that highlighted the true course of events which the government was trying to cover up. It was also the media that followed up on the disappearance and kidnappings of human rights and political activists, until they reached a level that it just would not go away. These cases have greatly raised the human rights consciousness of a lot of Zimbabweans.

Mugabe’s response to Western media attacks

One of the implications of Western media campaigns against Zimbabwe has been the deepening of regime security within the ZANU PF establishment. The regime survival strategies of ZANU PF and Mugabe have brought about serious political and socio-economic consequences on the country. Since 2000, ZANU PF has seemingly become more determined to remain in power. Against all odds Mugabe has remained in control despite murmurings that he is partly to blame for the ills of the country. Fear, paralysis and uncertainty best characterize the country’s political situation since the onset of political problems. There is widespread understanding that Mugabe retains the support of the security organs of the state and party. One of the main strategies, namely, is the stifling of the media which has worsened Zimbabwe’s political problems. The escalation of violence in the country since 2000 due to fierce contestation over power between the ruling ZANU PF and the opposition MDC, the land invasions and biased foreign media reportage created an environment whereby the prospects of liberal reforms in the media

completely vanished. Western media journalists were deported from Zimbabwe by authorities including Joseph Winter of *BBC*, Mercedes Sayagues (*Mail & Guardian*) in 2001. Furthermore, the Zimbabwe government denied the extension of British *Daily Telegraph* reporter David Blair's temporary work permit. On July 26, 2001 the government suspended the accreditation of *BBC* on allegations that it distorted and misrepresented events (Media relations with the *BBC* were only normalized in 2009 after the inclusive government was established). On the local front, attacks upon the private media, detentions and harassment of its journalists became widespread. These include the two bomb attacks on the *The Daily News* offices and printing press on 22 April 2000 and 28 January 2001. The ZANU PF government castigated the private and western media of falsifying information in order to cause alarm and despondency and being totally unpatriotic (Ndlela, 2003,p. 27). However, opposition elements have also attacked journalists working for state controlled media.

Restrictions on local media

The high level of governmental control of the state-owned media and its intolerance of privately owned newspapers have increased polarisation and intimidation in the country. Nevertheless, despite the attacks and arrests, the independent press remains robust, and continues to be an important component in efforts for change. Since the emergence of a strong opposition, the government tightly controls the state-owned news media, including the *Herald* and *Chronicle*, the *Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC)*, and the news agency *New Ziana*. These have become government mouthpieces with little credibility from the Zimbabwean public. Government control of the state media increased noticeably under former Information Minister Jonathan Moyo, who was appointed after the June 2000 elections. Zimbabwe's thriving privately owned newspapers and media provide independent and critical coverage of events and of the government. Two weeklies, the *Financial Gazette* and *The Zimbabwe Independent*, have uncovered numerous corruption scandals and provide information on issues, which the state media conveniently ignores. *The Standard* also reports critically on the government. However, there have been incidences in which the state has acted against the privately-owned media. For instances, two journalists, *The Standard* editor Mark Chavunduka and reporter Ray Choto, were arrested illegally by the army in January 1999 and were held for several days. Their report which had insinuated that an abortive coup had occurred within the army over the dissatisfaction over the Congo war infuriated the ZANU-PF army leadership. The government viewed the media action as an attempt to bring disaffection in the security forces. Similarly, following a Supreme Court judgement that the state could not hold a monopoly on broadcast networks, a privately owned radio station, Capital Radio, was launched in October 2000. The police quickly shut the station down and seized its transmitting equipment. The courts later ruled this was illegal. However, new legislation has made it extremely difficult for an independent broadcasting station to get a license (ICG Africa Report No 32 2001:12). In 2002 new laws including the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and the Broadcasting Services Act were enacted. These pieces of legislation

were attacked by the Western community, opposition parties, the private-owned media and non-governmental organizations as highly repressive. Viewed collectively these laws have affected the media and in turn, the democratic process in Zimbabwe.

However, in order to fully comprehend the dynamics behind the enactment of these tough laws it is worthwhile to examine the political context, particularly ZANU PF's insecurity vis-à-vis Western regime change machinations. The deliberate moves by the Mugabe government to control and influence media was partly influenced by the biased media reportage in Western media platforms which tend to favour the opposition. The reasoning of the ZANU PF mandarins is that the local media environment should be controlled by them since the opposition has the support of the foreign media. In a way, the attempt by ZANU PF to impinge on freedom of expression within its borders is perceived as just in terms of mitigating the biased effects of Western media which have influenced international and local audiences against its ruling regime. From their perspective, the passing of repressive legislation is an attempt of levelling the political field.

Conclusion

The news coverage of the Zimbabwe crisis by Western media channels demonstrate how media focus has led the international community to define the crisis as one of the most important political issues in the past decade. The media has both set the agenda and directed the public as to what was the most important issue to think about, that is, the repressive nature of the Mugabe regime. Generally, the media analysis in western media houses also demonstrated that the public were accordingly primed to judge the Mugabe regime harshly. The media coverage was framed in terms of event-oriented (episodic) coverage focused on negative political and socio-economic matters. Not surprisingly, this framing of the news tended to increase viewers' disdain of Robert Mugabe's regime in Zimbabwe. However, the constant international media coverage of the ongoing crisis in Zimbabwe, has given it an international profile it could never expect to achieve otherwise. Continued media attention on the ongoing crisis might not help resolve the problem in Zimbabwe because its impact has been largely negative. Thus its role in the ongoing crisis in Zimbabwe should not be underestimated. The foreign media's emphasis and bias on the plight of white commercial farmers has underlined and reinforced the widespread belief in Africa that the West is concerned about Zimbabwe only because white property interests have been threatened. It is therefore not surprising that the international community remains deeply divided about its response to the crisis in Zimbabwe. This has allowed President Mugabe to exploit the policy fissure between the West and Africa. Nonetheless, negative reportage has damaged the image of Zimbabwe and in the process affecting the country's tourism and investment climate. In some ways, the international media has also played a positive role in Zimbabwe. The media has certainly not let abuses of power go away unnoticed and acts of political violence unreported. Although there will always be a danger of media manipulation, an even greater evil is to constrict the freedom that the media rightfully deserves. It is likely that the ongoing crisis in Zimbabwe stands a better chance of being resolved when it is placed

under greater international scrutiny by the media, both local and foreign without fear or favour.

Notes

¹Zimbabwe's land reform is perhaps the most crucial and the most bitterly contested political issue surrounding the country today. It can be divided into two periods: from 1979-2000 a principle of willing buyer, willing seller was applied with some funding assistance from the former colonial master, Britain and secondly, starting in 2000 the chaotic, and rapid land occupations, the 'fast-track land reform'. Under the fast track land reform most of the large land owners of agricultural fertile areas usually white owners were forced off the land, often together with their farm workers, who were often of foreign descent. Initially, this happened often violently and without compensation until the programme was supported by constitutional provisions.

² Voice of America Studio 7 is one of the several radio stations established by Western countries to beam alternative news information into Zimbabwe. Studio is wholly funded by the United States government and the station is generally considered to be pro-opposition. Studio 7 uses a medium wave frequency reserved for Zimbabwe via medium wave transmitters in Botswana and its operations are considered illegal and hostile by the Zimbabwean government. The work of Studio 7 is also complemented by the British-sponsored SW Radio Africa, a radio station in London which, broadcasts via shortwave and online to Zimbabwe.

References

Blair, David. (2002). *Degrees in Violence: Robert Mugabe and the Struggle for Power in Zimbabwe*, London, Continuum Books.

CNN news online available at: www.cnn.com.

Goldstein, Joshua S. and Pevehouse, Jon C. (2010). *International Relations, Ninth edition*, New York: Pearson.

Holland, H. (2009). *Dinner with Mugabe*. London. Penguin Books.

Loveless, M. 2008. Media Dependency . Mass Media as Sources of Information in Democratizing Countries of Central and Eastern Europe. *Democratization*, 15 (1): 162-183.

Meredith, M. (2002). *Our Votes, Our Guns: Robert Mugabe and the Tragedy of Zimbabwe* New York, Public Affairs.

Meredith, M. (2007). *Mugabe - Power, Plunder and the Struggle for Zimbabwe*. New York: Public Affairs.

Ndlela, Nkosi. (2003). *Critical Analysis of media law in Zimbabwe*. Harare: Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

Ndlela, N. (2005). The African Paradigm: The coverage of the Zimbabwean Crisis in the Norwegian Media, available at: www.wmin.ac.uk/mad/pdf_art5.pdf, accessed 14.1.2008.

Norman, A. (2008). *Mugabe- Teacher, Revolutionary, Tyrant*. Gloucestershire: The History Press.

Nye jr, Joseph S. and Welch, David A. (2009). *Understanding Global Conflict and Cooperation: An Introduction to Theory and History, Eighth edition*. Boston: Pearson.

Raftopoulos, B. 2005. The Zimbabwean Crisis and the Challenges for the Left. *Public Lecture delivered at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, 23rd June*.

Robinson, Piers. (2008). “ The role of media and public opinion” in *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*. Eds. Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield and Tim Dunne. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Telegraph Online news available at: www.telegraph.co.uk.

The Australian, 2002, 4 September.

The Herald (Zimbabwe), 2000, 5 May

The Herald (Zimbabwe), 2010, 3 September.

United Nations, *The Report of the Fact-Finding Mission to Zimbabwe to assess the Scope and Impact of Operation Murambatsvina by the United Nations Special Envoy on Human Settlements Issues in Zimbabwe, Anna Tibaijuka* (Tibaijuka Report), 18 July, 2005.

Willems, W. 2007. Remnants of Empire? British media reporting on Zimbabwe, available at: www.westminister.ac.uk/mad/pdf/zim-art6.pdf, accessed 20.12.2008.

Interviews

Dr. Ray Ndlukula, Deputy Chief Secretary to the Cabinet and President responsible for Reforms, Modernization and Administration, 27.11.2009, Munhumutapa Building, Office of the President and Cabinet, Harare. Zimbabwe. 27.11.2009.

Dave Fish, Head of the Department for International Development (DFID) in Zimbabwe, British Government, British Embassy, Harare. Zimbabwe. 3.12.2009.