

Democratic Transition or Change without Change? Critical Reflections on the Media Reform trajectory in Post-Mugabe Zimbabwe

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Abstract: The Post-Mugabe government is confronted by a crisis of expectations. The Zimbabwean citizenry and the world at large, expect the Emmerson Mnangagwa led “new dispensation” to usher democratic reforms not only in the media sector but in all political, economic and social spheres. The media sector is under spotlight and is certainly one of the key sectors that the international community is going to employ as a barometer, to gauge the extent to which the “new dispensation” has departed from the Mugabe era human rights violations. This paper gives therefore utilises the political economic approach and the polarised pluralist model as theoretical lenses to critically reflect on the progress, that has been made in instituting media reforms in Post-Mugabe Zimbabwe. The study is based on mixed methodology comprising of qualitative in depth interviews, document analysis and an ethnographic study of the Zimbabwean media environment. In light of the findings, the paper argues that although, the Post-Mugabe government has started instituting media reforms, no meaningful progress has been made as yet. The current media environment therefore, largely depicts a continuity from the Mugabe era or what this paper has dubbed “change without change”. Thus there is still need for sincerity and political will,

Keywords: Transition, Media reform, Trajectory, new dispensation

I. INTRODUCTION

“Press freedom is an essential constituent of democracy” (Holtz-Bacha, 2004). The essential role played by a free press in promoting democracy has been acknowledged by various scholars Smith(2007:40) aptly sums up the central role that a free press plays in a democracy by asserting that, “A free press is essential for exposing corruption, the purchase of favours, unwarranted secrecy, abuse of office, and violations of human rights”. It is important to note that press freedom has achieved global recognition as being one of the foundations of human rights. Since press freedom is viewed as a foundational human right it is internationally protected, in various human rights instruments. Article 19 of the Universal declaration of Human Rights provides that “Everyone has a right to freedom of opinion and expression, this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media, regardless of frontiers”. (<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr>, accessed 3 January 2020)

Despite the global emphasis on press freedom, in a Zimbabwean context, the notable reality is that, the country has not enjoyed meaningful press freedom since the country gained independence and Robert Mugabe assumed power in 1980. In the Mugabe era, Zimbabwe could be described as an authoritarian state that radically stifled communication spaces (Chitagu,2018) The Mugabe led government did so by emasculating the mainstream national media, attempting to influence public opinion in its own favour by manipulating the state owned media to dish out government propaganda, by regulating the flow of information in the country and muzzling the private press. Although the shrinking of the Zimbabwean public sphere can be traced as far back as the early years of independence, it became even more pronounced around 1999, when a major opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change(MDC) was formed and the political environment became even more polarised. It can be argued that, since the birth of a major opposition party in 1999, the Zanu PF government has been trying to sustain a ‘domineering’ and ‘hegemonic’ narrative, resulting in a shrinking media space. As (Mabweazara and White, 2018) argue, in post-2000 Zimbabwe, the state’s tactics of repression assumed both legal and extra-legal dimensions, as the state sought to crush increased political dissent.

The land reform programme created a situation that led to a violation of basic rights including information rights. This crackdown was supported by a number of harsh legal provisions such as the Public order and Security Act (POSA), the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act(AIPPA) and the Broadcasting Services Act(BSA). As Manganga (2012) advances, with the enactment of legislation such as the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and the Public order and Security Act (POSA) since 2002, freedom of the press has been under threat in Zimbabwe. AIPPA, was described by the then chairman of the Legal Parliamentary Legal Committee and one of the sharpest legal minds to ever emerge out of Zimbabwe, the late Eddison Zvobgo, as “the most calculated and determined assault on our (constitutional) liberties, in the 20 years I served as cabinet Minister”(Parliamentary Debates volume 28, No 46)

The repression of the press under Robert Mugabe persisted right up to the November 2017 military coup or what has been officially labelled as a ‘military assisted transition’ or

‘operation restore legacy’, that dramatically toppled the late African Strongman, after 37 years of Uninterrupted rule. The ouster of Robert Mugabe and his subsequent replacement by his erstwhile deputy, Emmerson Mnangagwa, was celebrated by the media fraternity as it was widely expected to herald a new era for freedom of expression in Zimbabwe. However, three years down the line it has become apparent that the media fraternity celebrated ‘a cloud that does not bear water’. The harsh media laws, intimidation, harassment of journalists and other tactics that were used by Mugabe to curtail media freedom are sadly still in place. One of the major features of these repressive tactics is the capture of vital state institutions such as the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) by the hegemonic ruling elite. It is against this background that, this paper seeks to critique the state of the media in Post-Mugabe Zimbabwe. It shall start by outlining the methodology as well as theoretical perspectives of the paper. The analysis will be kick started by focusing on the legislative environment, with particular emphasis on legislative reforms and then go on to focus on the treatment of journalists. The paper shall also plunge into the liberalisation of the airwaves debate and in the process focus on the controversy surrounding the licensing of broadcasting stations. It will further interrogate the diversity and plurality of the Zimbabwe print media in the “new dispensation”. The paper will also examine the issue of media polarisation, another thorn in the flesh for the Zimbabwean media. Last but not least the paper will focus on the interesting subject of the social media and the political transition.

II. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Methodology

This paper is a product of intensive research carried out through mixed methodology, comprising of in-depth interviews, document analysis and an ethnographic study of the Zimbabwean media environment. The study heavily relied on qualitative in-depth interviews and the following key informants were interviewed: 2 media experts (1 Media studies Lecturer from the Zimbabwe Open University (Respondent 1), 1 National University of Science and Technology (NUST) Media and Journalism Studies Lecturer (Respondent 2), 2 Journalists (1 from the private media (Respondent 3) and 1 from the public media) (Respondent 4), 1 political analyst (Respondent 5) and 1 civil society media activist (Respondent 6). The interviews were conducted over a period of more than a year (between January 2020 and May 2021), so as to capture the media changes that took place, within this period. The paper focuses on Post-Mugabe Zimbabwe, a period which stretches from November 2017 to date. All the interviewees chose to remain anonymous and the writer respected their right to anonymity, hence their names are not disclosed in this paper. The study also used document analysis during the data gathering process. Althea cited in Hilde van den Black (2002) advances that document analysis refers to an integrated and conceptually informed method for

identifying, retrieving and analysing documents for their relevance, significance and meaning. The researcher carried out a document analysis of newspapers such as *The Herald* and *The Chronicle*, Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA-Zimbabwe) reports, Veritas-Zimbabwe reports among others, to acquire vital information on the Post-Mugabe Zimbabwe media environment. The document analysis focused on issues such as the treatment of journalists, the legislative environment and the Post-Mugabe media reform trajectory in general. The researcher also conducted an ethnographic study of the current Zimbabwean media environment. In other words, the researcher made an effort to experience the daily life (Garcia et al., 2009) of the Zimbabwean media by carefully observing and studying the operating environment experienced by media practitioners, newspapers, broadcasting stations (both state and privately owned) and even the new media technologies such as Social media, in Post-Mugabe Zimbabwe. This ethnographic approach informs some of the assertions advanced in this paper.

Theoretical Perspective

The paper’s analytical perspective is largely informed by the ideas propounded by the **political economic approach to the media** (Golding and Murdock 2005; McChesney 1952). This approach studies the powerful influence exerted by politics, ownership patterns and advertisers on media operations. The question of power—who is dominant? and what is the impact of that dominance on the media environment? is pivotal to this study. This paper submits that, the media policies of the Post-Mugabe government and their implications on the operations of the media should be understood within the political economic approach to the media. The capture of the media by political and economic forces and the resultant polarisation, arguably locates Zimbabwe’s media system within Hallini and Mancini’s (2004) **Polarised Pluralist model**. The notion of political pluralism stems from Hallini and Mancini’s comparative study of media systems between western and southern European countries. They advanced that a ‘Polarised Pluralist’ media model is to a greater extent characterised by a high degree of political parallelism, with the state playing a central interventionist role in the media (Muneri 2012; Chuma 2013). The media in Zimbabwe tend to be polarised along party politics, with the public media supportive of the ruling party, while the private media lean towards opposition politics. The coverage of the Zimbabwean story by the Zimbabwean media is therefore to a significant extent influenced by politicians. As Davis (2007) argues, politicians, even though they may not be final gatekeepers of what gets published, influence the final news product. This political influence leads to polarised reportage which Mabweazara (2011) describes as the ‘framing dilemma’ that gives rise to contesting and contrasting discourses due to a media space that is hotly contested by interest groups and individuals. The Zimbabwean media can also be situated within the ‘Polarised Pluralist’ model, basing on the fact

that, the government has a very dominant role in the country's media, both print and broadcasting.

The Media Legislative environment in the new dispensation: Does it signal change or continuity?

The Zimbabwean media legislative environment has been characterised by harsh media laws that have severely curtailed media freedom. This has been the case since the enactment of a plethora of harsh media laws by the Mugabe led government. These laws include the Broadcasting Services Act (BSA) in 2001, the Access to Information and Protection of privacy Act (AIPPA) in 2002, the Public order and Security Act (POSA) and the Criminal Law Codification and Reform Act in 2005, among others. Although the "new dispensation" has repealed the much criticised AIPPA and POSA, some restrictive laws such as the Broadcasting Services Act remain firmly in place. Therefore, the government has to move with speed to review and extensively amend the Broadcasting Services Act and ensure compliance with constitution and other regional and international instruments such as the African Charter on Broadcasting (Chikakano 2018; MISA 2020).

However, the enactment of the Freedom of Information Act and the Maintenance of Peace and Order Act by the "new dispensation" are two giant media reform steps, that can not be ignored. The Freedom of Information Act, which was passed into law on the 1st of July 2020, has been hailed as a milestone in the Mnangagwa led government's media legislative reform agenda. Commenting on the enactment of the Freedom of Information Act, the Minister of Information, Publicity and Broadcasting Services, Monica Mutsvangwa, said:

Once again, the enactment of the Freedom of Information Bill into law serves as testimony of President E.D Mnangagwa's total commitment to instituting reforms in line with international best practices. (Monica Mutsvangwa in Government of Zimbabwe office of the President and Cabinet, 2 July 2020).

The above sentiments were echoed by the Public media journalist (Respondent 4) who argued that:

The Freedom of Information Act demonstrates the government's desire to usher media reforms, that make the work media of practitioners easier, through promoting greater access to information (Respondent 4, Personal communication, 10 March 2020).

The enactment of the Maintenance of Peace and Order Act (MOPA) which replaced the widely criticised Public Order and Security Act (POSA) was also greeted with some degree of optimism. One of the Key informant interviewees, a Zimbabwe Open University Lecturer (Respondent 1) expressed cautious optimism about MOPA, as he advanced that:

Although some provisions of MOPA replicate the repressive sections of its precursor, the repeal of POSA And the

enactment of MOPA, could play a role in promoting press freedom, since some of its provisions are a step in the right direction but much depends on its implementation matrix. (Respondent 1, Personal communication, 14 March 2020)

However, the response of the Zimbabwean civil society groups and the citizenry in general to the repeal of AIPPA and POSA and the enactment of the Freedom of Information Act and Maintenance of Peace and order Act (MOPA) has been largely characterised by scepticism, from the time they were bills until they became law. The government moves to repeal AIPPA gathered momentum on 5 July 2019 when government gazetted the Freedom of Information Bill which seeks to repeal the Access to Information and Protection of privacy Act (AIPPA) and to give effect to Section 62 of the Constitution which provided for the right to access information as enshrined in the Declaration of Rights. The Freedom of Information Act is one of the three which came out of the repeal of AIPPA along with the protection of Personal Information Bill and Zimbabwe Media Commission Bill (www.zimfact.org, accessed 14 July 2020) however, media watch dogs and legal experts have cried foul saying government is not sincere and has wasted a great opportunity to carry out authentic media reforms that meet global standards. The media watchdog Misa-Zimbabwe in a statement in response to gazetted law says the law does not go far enough. Misa argues that the law in its current state fails to give effect to either the letter or spirit of the right to access information found in Section 62 of the constitution. Misa further asserts that the law has similarities with the outgoing AIPPA unlike the all stakeholders draft which closely resembled the African Union's Model Law on Access to Information. (<https://zimbabwemisa.org>, accessed On 3 July 2020). Veritas – a watchdog that provides information on the work of the courts, Parliament of Zimbabwe and the Laws of Zimbabwe has accused government of behaving badly saying the law contains none of the contributions from media stakeholders and contains marked differences from ministerial draft circulated previously. (<http://veritaszim.net>, accessed on 3 July 2020). There has also been a serious outcry over the Maintenance of Peace and Order Bill (MOPA) which replaced POSA. Several legal experts and opposition politicians have described the legislation as a regurgitation of the outgoing repressive Public Order and Security Act (POSA). The MDC Alliance legislator for Mutare central, Hon Innocent Gonese is quoted in Newsday (April 26, 2019) describing the bill as "not progressive at all" and a mere replica of the draconian POSA. "There are no changes at all in this new Bill compared to POSA. Actually the changes are just cosmetic and it is very similar to the previous law (POSA) because we will still have the same problems of criminalisation and abuse of people who fail to notify police when they engage in demonstrations or gatherings." Gonese said. The above analysis of AIPPA and POSA clearly depicts that the Mnangagwa led government has merely applied cosmetic changes to these two laws whilst retaining most of

the undemocratic features, that made media practitioners dread these laws. It can be further argued that the repealing of these laws is meant to hoodwink the international community to believe that the Mnangagwa led government has shifted from the old style Mugabe media repression tactics. This view is supported by one of the key informant interviewees, a political expert, who was interviewed and argued that:

The current initiative to reform laws such as AIPPA and POSA, is aimed at securing the much needed support, from a highly sceptical international community (Respondent 5, Personal communication, 10 March 2020)

One of the key informant interviewees a NUST Media and Journalism Studies Lecturer (Respondent 2) was equally critical of the laws, he opined that:

What the Mnangagwa led government has done is merely retrieving AIPPA and POSA from the archives, removing their dust and changing their names before returning them to the media shelves. This is exactly the same manner, in which the Mugabe led government retained colonial laws to post-independent Zimbabwe under different names. (Respondent 2, personal communication, 24 July 2020)

In light of the above sentiments, this paper submits that although the repealing of AIPPA and POSA have been hailed as milestones in some circles, there is widespread consensus that, the contents of both the Freedom of Information Act and Maintenance of Peace and Order Act, reveal a grand scheme by the Zimbabwean government to depict change of titles as substantial reform of the country's most criticised media laws. The sad reality is that the Freedom of Information Act and Maintenance of Peace and Order Act regurgitate AIPPA and POSA and therefore foster the endurance of these dreaded laws, in spite of formal repeal. However, it is undeniable that the new laws contain some positive provisions, which signal a slight departure from AIPPA and POSA, the implementation of these laws, is therefore a legitimate site for further democratic inquiry.

Journalists suffer as the regime un.masks?

The removal of Robert Mugabe from power in 2017, made Zimbabwe's embattled media professionals believe that better days were coming. The optimism, however soon evaporated, as the Mnangagwa led government tightened its stance on dissent and journalists also suffered the repercussions. When the current government assumed power, there was remarkable decrease in cases of attacks on journalists. It is, however quite sad to note that the harassment of journalists sharply increased in 2019. The documented cases of abuse of journalists in 2019 rose to 18, up from only one case in 2018 (<https://zimbabwemisa.org>, accessed 24 April 2020). What makes the harassment cases even more tragic is that they are perpetrated by the police, who should in fact protect the journalists. For instance, Fanuel Mapfumo was attacked by the police and fractured his left arm in August 2018, whilst filming a banned protest. Another journalist Costa Nkomo,

was injured by police officers in January 2019 while reporting on a Skirmish with unlicensed street vendors in downtown Harare. In August 2019, journalist Leopold Munhende was arrested alongside a group of rural Teachers demonstrating for better pay (<https://www.afp.com>, accessed 6 January 2020). Blessed Mhlanga a Newsday journalist was barred from covering a defence forces graduation ceremony at Zimbabwe Staff College in Harare on 28 November 2019. According to Mhlanga he was told that only public media journalists from *The Herald* and ZBC, were allowed to cover the event, despite the fact that he had been invited. The government has preached on the need to protect journalists but no concrete action has been taken to guarantee the safety of journalists. Government spokesman Nick Mangwana told AFP that the information ministry had "engaged the police over the issue of safety for journalists". But he also said police had raised concerns about journalists "causing mayhem" by failing to respect safe distances without clearly identifying themselves. The issue of journalists protection seems to be quite problematic, because even the press cards issued by government do not always guarantee protection. Leopold Munhende who was arrested alongside rural Teachers in an incident that was mentioned earlier on, told the AFP that "A policeman grabbed me by the belt and ordered me to join the Teachers, said Munhende, who was detained for seven hours. He added that "I produced my accreditation card, but he wasn't interested". On the other hand, MISA, which alongside with other groups has organised several meetings with police officers, complained about lack of cooperation (<https://www.afp.com>, accessed 6 January 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic posed one of the greatest tests to Zimbabwe's respect for media freedom. During the lockdown to contain the spread of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe, which took effect from 30 March 2020, the post-Mugabe government, regrettably failed to exhibit adherence and respect for the right to media freedom as provided for under section 61 of the constitution, which also promotes freedom of expression. This was demonstrated by arrest and harassment of journalists by the police during the lockdown. The Zimbabwe chapter of the Media institute of Southern Africa (MISA) strongly condemned this ill-treatment of journalists, stressing that the pandemic is the enemy not the media. MISA added that, by harassing and arresting journalists, using flimsy excuses, the police violated the right to media freedom, stood in the way of national efforts to fight the corona virus and dented the country's respect for journalistic rights (<https://zimbabwemisa.org>, accessed on 24 April 2020)

One of the key interviewees, a private media journalist, was asked to put across his views on the treatment of journalists by the current government and commented as follows:

The new dispensation had created a much better working environment for journalists. However, the sudden increase in attacks on journalists revokes sad memories of the Mugabe regime, which brutally cracked down the private press. (Respondent 3, Personal communication, 2 March 2020)

The arrests of journalist, Hopewell Chino'ono heightened accusations that the Zimbabwean government was persecuting journalists. The first arrest of Hopewell Chino'ono was allegedly for a tweet supporting an anti-corruption protest, however it is widely believed that the real reason for the arrest was that, he used the social media to expose a Covid-19 medical supplies scandal involving the former Health Minister, Obadiah Moyo that resulted in him being fired. The second arrest in November 2020, followed a tweet criticizing Zimbabwe's Chief Justice. The same journalist was also arrested in 2021 on allegations of falsely posting a tweet that falsely reported the death of a child after a physical by the police. The arrests of Hopewell Chino'ono have been criticised by many media groupings including the Zimbabwe Chapter of Media Institute of Southern Africa, Committee to protect Journalists and regional editors forums (Chikowore, 2020). The head of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) in Zimbabwe, Tabani Mpfu, aptly captured the implications of Hopewell Chino'ono's arrests on the practice of journalism, as follows:

“One step forward, 10 (steps) backwards: Cracks on investigative journalism: Case of Hopewell Chino'ono”. (Tabani Mpfu in Mavhunga, 2020)

However, the Zimbabwean government has maintained that Hopewell Chino'ono's arrests were about upholding the law, not cracking down on press freedoms. (Mavhunga, 2020).

To journalists like the private media journalist (Respondent 3) the arrest of Hopewell Chino'ono represents the gradual criminalisation of the journalism practice, he posited that:

The constant arrest of Hopewell Chino'ono for practising journalism, is a clear testimony that the new dispensation, has reneged from its promise of democratising the media landscape, instead the Zimbabwean government is gradually criminalising the practice of journalism. (Respondent 3, Personal Communication, 29 April 2021)

This writer contends that the Mnangagwa led government's initial treatment of journalists was informed by the desire to lure the entire media fraternity, to join the international re-engagement crusade. However, the government's failure to institute meaningful economic, social and political reforms, as well as increasing government corruption has resulted in heightened criticism from the private media and freelance journalists such as Hopewell Chino'ono, on social media. The government cannot tolerate the criticism, hence it has decided to remove its “media tolerance mask” and take the critical media practitioners head on. This scenario has arguably resulted in Zimbabwe backsliding to a repressive press system, as illustrated by the Press Freedom Index of 2020, which ranked Zimbabwe 130 out of 180 countries. Only time will tell, whether the current media reform initiatives such as the repealing of AIPPA and POSA, will translate to an improved operating environment for journalists.

Liberalisation of the airwaves under the new dispensation wave : Genuine opening up of airwaves or perpetuation of an elitist broadcasting system?

The Liberalisation of the airwaves has been a bone of contention in the media sector for years. In the Mugabe era, the broadcasting sector was characterised by a strongly entrenched state monopoly, hence a determined campaign for airwaves liberalisation by the media fraternity. These campaigns unfortunately did not bear much fruit, as little progress was made, in terms of airwaves liberalisation, under Mugabe. The new dispensation has not yet ushered a genuinely liberalised and diverse broadcasting sector. For instance, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) television station, remains the only television station in the country three years after the ouster of Robert Mugabe. The Zimbabwean government however, licensed six more television stations, towards the end of 2020. Amongst the licensed television stations is state-controlled Zimpapers Television Network (ZTN) and Rusunguko Media Pvt Ltd which is owned by the Ministry of Defence. Other television stations that were awarded television licences include Acacia media group's Kumba TV, Fair Talk Communications' Keyona TV and Channel Dzimbahwe's Channel D (Moyo, 2020). The awarding television licences to state aligned television stations has been hugely criticised by media and pro-democracy activists. One of the Key informant interviewees, who happens to be a civil society media activist (Respondent 6), also criticised the issuing of television licences to state aligned broadcasters, she asserted that:

The issuance of television broadcasting licenses to ZTN which falls under state controlled Zimpapers and Rusunguko media, which is owned by the Ministry of Defence, is not only a serious hindrance to media plurality and diversity but also a huge blow to media democracy, as it guarantees the continued dominance of the state, in the television broadcasting sector. (Respondent 6, Personal Interview, 12 November 2020).

What makes some media critics further doubt the sincerity of the Zimbabwean government in opening up the television broadcasting sector, is the denial of licences to some media institutions that are deemed to be pro-opposition. For instance Heart and Soul Television, which is owned by Trevor Ncube was denied a licence. Ncube is also the owner of Alpha Media Holdings, which publishes newspapers deemed hostile to the regime- *Newsday*, *The Zimbabwe Independent* and *The Standard*. (Moyo, 2020).

This paper contends that, although the “new dispensation” has made commendable strides in liberalising the airwaves, through the licensing of new players, it has not yet ushered in a truly plural and diverse broadcasting sector. The broadcasting licensing regime is arguably, still stuck in the Mugabe era tradition of issuing broadcasting licences to either state aligned media institutions or broadcasting stations owned by individuals linked to the ruling party (there was conflation between the state and the ruling party in the Mugabe era). The private radio stations awarded licences during the Mugabe

era, include ZI-FM owned by Supa Mandiwanzira, who was a government Minister and member of parliament for ZANU PF, during the Mugabe era, Star FM owned by state controlled Zimpapers and Skies Metro owned by Qhubani Moyo, a commissioner in the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission. (Alfandika and Gwindingwe, 2020).

The issuance of licences in the radio sector under the current government is still questionable, it betrays the government's duplicity in preaching reforms on one hand while stifling the genuine liberalisation of the airwaves on the other. For instance, in 2018, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation was awarded licences by the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe and launched two regional commercial radio stations, namely Khulumani FM and Central Radio in Bulawayo and Gweru respectively. This is problematic, in the sense that, it depicts the government's desire to maintain a stranglehold over the broadcasting sector, by awarding licences to state aligned broadcasters, at the expense of private players. This writer agrees with the MISA Zimbabwe's argument that the Broadcasting Services Act must be amended before a genuinely diverse and plural broadcasting environment can be realised in Zimbabwe (<https://zimbabwe.misa.org.accessdate> 5 January 2020).

McQuail (in Freedman 2005) describes pluralism as a political concept of independence from the state, which includes a struggle for resources. Hence, a competitive media system is a requirement for real media diversity. (Freedman 2005). A plural media reflects contrasting voices and interests within society. Therefore, it must enable access to media channels that make this possible, through products and services available for audience consumption (McQuail in Freedman 2005).

The community radio 'comatose' amidst controversy

Most Southern African countries except Zimbabwe, have a vibrant community radio sector, whose history dates back to the dawn of a new millennium (Masuku, 2019). The current state of the community radio sector in Zimbabwe, was fashioned by the Mugabe regime, which was reluctant to license community radio stations. This reluctance, can be attributed to general fear and mistrust of community radio stations. This fear was probably informed by the view that, if allowed to operate, community radio stations would be used by oppositional forces to pursue an anti-Zanu PF agenda. The prevailing community radio 'Comatose' suggests that the Mnangagwa led government is gripped by the same fear.

This point is buttressed one of the key informant interviewees, a civil society media activist (Respondent 6) who was interviewed by this writer and argued that the current government is jittery about community radio stations, due to the fact that, it perceives them as potential channels of an alternative discourse, which might threaten the state's hegemonic control over sources of information. She added that, "the Minister of Information Monica Mutsvangwa is on record as having argued that community radio stations should not be funded by external institutions. A perception which the

interviewee believes, depicts the tragic fact that the government is more concerned about the funding mechanisms of community radio stations than creating an environment that promotes the establishment of community radio stations, for the benefit of local communities. A classic display of the Zanu PF government's determination to stifle the community radio initiative, was the controversial issuance of community radio licences to eight commercial stations by the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ) in 2015. The Zimbabwe Association of Community Radio Stations (ZACRAS) described the move as a shame. "The ones we have are far from being community radio stations, they are commercial." The government is not willing to license genuine community radio stations based all over the country" said ZACRAS programmes officer Kudzai Kwangwari, at that time (www.thedailynews.co.zw.access date 6 January 2020). The licensed "so called" community radio stations at that time were as follows:

- AB communications, trading as Gogoi FM operating in Masvingo
- Ray of Hope trading as Ya FM operating in Zvishavane
- Kingstons trading as Nyaminyami FM operating in Kariba
- Fairtalk Communications trading as Breeze FM operating in Victoria Falls
- Zimpapers trading as Diamond FM operating in Mutare
- Fairtalk Communications, trading as Skyz Metro FM operating in Bulawayo
- Kingstones trading as KE100.4 operating in Harare
- AB Communications trading as Faya FM operating in Gweru

The Mnangagwa led government wedged into the community radio controversy when it licensed Khulumani FM, a ZBC owned, Bulawayo based radio station and Central Radio, another ZBC owned, Gweru based radio station. Some media analysts perceived the licensing of these radio stations, as a further attempt to introduce commercial stations that are disguised as community radio stations, when in actual fact, the motive is to further entrench the ZBC monopoly. The Mnangagwa led government is conveniently using these 'so called' community radio stations to dupe Zimbabweans and the world at large into believing that the country has community radio stations. One prominent government official has been on record as saying that there is need to revisit the definition of community radio, probably in a bid to twist the minds of the citizenry into believing that some of the existing community based but commercial stations can be classified as community radio stations.

The Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ) commendably licensed six community radio stations between 2020 and May 2021. The licensed community radio stations include Mbembesi Development Trust, Ntepe-Manama community radio trust, Nyangani community radio trust,

Beitbridge-Shashe community radio broadcasting, Avuxen FM which covers Chikombedzi, Chiredzi, Rutenga, Maheny and Malipati as well as Lyeja-Nyayi Development Trust that covers Hwange and Victoria Falls. (The Chronicle, 2 May 2021)

However, some media critics and activists are still not convinced that government is genuinely committed to fair licensing of community radio stations. One of the key informant interviewees, a Nust Lecturer (Respondent 2) advanced that:

The recent licensing of community radio stations is mere tokenism and an attempt to portray the government as being sincere in licensing community broadcasters but the fact that all the recent licences were awarded to rural based radio stations raises eyebrows, since there are a number of urban based community radio stations that have been denied licences for years. The licensing system raises suspicion that, urban based community radio stations are being denied licences for political reasons, since urban areas are considered the bedrock of opposition politics. (Respondent 2, Personal interview, 14 May 2021).

The civil society media activist (Respondent 6) was equally sceptical, she argued that:

Despite the licensing of a few community radio stations, the grim reality is that the community radio initiative in Zimbabwe is literally dead as it is still far behind other African countries. The government therefore needs to urgently licence a number of genuine community radio stations that are still being denied licences, so that community radio stations sprout throughout the country. (Respondent 6, Personal interview, 14 May 2021).

This paper however, submits that the licensing of community radio stations is a positive move, since some rural communities will soon benefit from the much needed broadcasting. Therefore, this marks a clear departure from the Mugabe era, which was characterised by apparent lack of political will to licence any genuine community broadcasting station. The current government however, needs to transform the licensing regime, so that it accommodates all interested players, across the societal divide.

Print Media diversity and plurality still a mirage

The state of the print media is one of the barometers that can be used to measure the level of press freedom in a nation. One of the major characteristics of a nation that promotes press freedom is the presence of a diverse and plural print media. The press model that Zimbabwe pursued under the leadership of Robert Mugabe can be construed as largely authoritarian, as it did not promote the growth of a diverse and plural media. In the Mugabe era there were a lot legal provisions that curtailed the growth of a diverse and plural print media. The Media Institute of Southern Africa Annual Report (2002) argued that AIPPA and POSA had contributed to increased assault on the private media and denial of freedom

of expression in Zimbabwe. For instance, the *Daily news* was closed in 2003 for failure to register as per the provisions of AIPPA. This closure came after the tragic bombing of its printing press by suspected state agents. The *Tribune* newspaper was also closed in the same year, dealing a major blow to press freedom in Post-independent Zimbabwe. The Government of National Unity (GNU) which was a transitional power-sharing agreement between Robert Mugabe and Morgan Tsvangirai formed in February 2009, ushered in a few democratic measures that opened up the print media sector. Chuma (2010) illustrates some of the little democratic reforms that took place during the GNU era such as the scrapping of import duty on newspapers printed outside the country and the establishment of the Zimbabwe Media Commission which regulates the media. He also lauds the licensing of three daily newspapers by the Zimbabwe Media Commission in the GNU era as a positive development.

Thus, it can be argued that, whilst the democratic media reforms of the GNU were grossly inadequate, at least some progress was made. For instance, the GNU era is credited for the bouncing back of *The Daily News* and the licensing of the Alpha Media owned *Newsday*, which is now one of the country's major newspapers. The end of the GNU in June 2013 and the ushering in of the post-GNU period, under the Mugabe led Zanu PF, was a major setback for the print media sector. In this period the print media suffered stunted growth, as no meaningful progress took place in the print media sector. The above mentioned era, could be described as a dry spell for the print media because no major print media publication was established. The new dispensation, has unfortunately brought another dry spell for the print media.

Apart from media growth rhetoric the current government has not taken concrete steps to create a viable, plural and diverse print media sector. Unlike the broadcasting sector where a few players have been licensed in this era, the print media sector has no new players. As Nyamutumbu (2018) argues Zimbabwe's print media is structured along a dichotomy of state owned/controlled private media, in a manner that has not changed, even in the post-Mugabe era. The current state of the print media is aptly summed up by one of the key informant interviewees, a Media Studies Lecturer at the Zimbabwe Open University who was interviewed by this writer and advanced that:

The print media, is one sector that illustrates the dismal performance of the 'new dispensation' on media reforms, as the government has failed to introduce far reaching changes that create a vibrant press environment. This failure can be largely attributed to the slow pace of legislative reforms and the current economic meltdown, which is militating against the establishment of new print media projects. If the government does not take steps to urgently institute media reforms, the achievement of a free, plural and diverse print media will remain a mirage. (Respondent 1, Personal communication, 19 February 2020)

It can be argued that this lack of diversity in the print media sector locates, the contemporary Zimbabwean media system within the Hallin and Mancini(2004) ‘Polarised Pluralist’ model. The two scholars described a ‘Polarised Pluralist’ media model as to a greater extent characterised by a high degree of political parallelism, with the state playing a central interventionist role in the media.

Media Polarisation amidst hyper-partisan and toxic politics

Zimbabwe is a highly polarised nation. It can be argued that, the polarisation can be traced as far back as the early years of independence, when the major political protagonists of that era namely Robert Mugabe of Zanu PF and Joshua Nkomo of PF Zapu got involved in serious political struggles, which polarised the nation and plunged it into civil conflict. The hostilities were however eased by the signing of the Unity Accord between ZANU PF and PF ZAPU in December 1987. The polarisation however, strongly re-emerged, with the formation of the Movement for Democratic(MDC) in 1999. This birth of a stronger opposition party also coincided with the emergence of more vibrant private press particularly *The Daily News*, which literally became the mouthpiece of the MDC. In light of these developments, the ruling ZANUPF intensified its control of the public press, so that it could counter the opposition as well as support its land reform and electoral policies. A disturbing development in this era was the degree to which ZBC and Zimpapers colluded in government’s attacks on the private media, often adding their own contributions against their media colleagues (Saunders, 1999). The media polarisation was worsened by the personal attacks of the then President, Robert Mugabe on the private press. For instance, Robert Mugabe is cited in Saunders(1999:35) addressing the ZANUPF central committee in March 1999 describing sections of the private Press this way:

They are filthy tabloids clearly of the gutter type, and are edited and run through fronts of young Africans they have employed as puppet editors and reporters. In some cases these are also their homosexual partners and that is true(Robert Mugabe in Saunders 1999:35).

The wider impact of these kinds of political statements is that they created a ‘cold war’ between the public press and private press. This had negative consequences on the nature of reportage. Public media institutions like ZBC and *The Herald* became blatantly pro- Zanu PF whereas the private media publications like *The Daily News* were openly pro-MDC. Due to the foregoing polarisations, the framing of and exposing the Zimbabwean story has been largely through the subjective lens marked by binaries of ‘Pro-ruling Party’ and ‘anti-ruling party’ reportage. It has been argued that two models of journalism are evident ‘Patriotic’ versus ‘Oppositional’ journalism(Chuma,2005). This impartiality strongly manifested during election times, when the public media unshamedly would campaign for Zanu PF and on the other hand, the private press would unapologetically campaign for MDC. The ushering in of the “new dispensation” was

expected to halt the polarisation but sadly the Zimbabwean media is tragically lost in the jungle of hyper-partisan and toxic politics. During the 2018 elections the media neglected their important role of helping voters make informed choices and chose to plunge deep into partisan politics. As Ncube (2018) illustrates, impartiality became a difficult task for most journalists during the elections due to the “fear factor” posed by the military with some previously respected media personnel acting as political commissars of ZANU PF and MDC Alliance, the two main contesting parties. It was common to see state media journalists and support staff clad in campaign regalia of the main presidential candidates, clearly casting doubt on the professionalism of Zimbabwe’s media.

One of the reasons why the Zimbabweans media is perpetually Polarised has been the conflation of the state and ruling party. There is little to none distinction between government and the ruling party. As such the state owned media have an editorial inclination of supporting the ruling party. Zimbabwe’s state controlled media has normalised this, to the extent that it worsens during the electoral period. On the other hand, the offering of more space to the opposition by the private media, could probably be a business decision on their part given that most private newspapers circulate in areas that are dominated by the opposition (Nyamutumbu, 2018).

In the current Post-electoral period, the media polarisation is manifesting itself through conflicting reportage on the state of the nation. For instance, the dominant narrative in state controlled newspapers such as *The Herald*, is that the leadership of the “new dispensation” is doing everything possible to improve the country’s economic, social and political outlook. On the other hand the recurrent discourse in private newspapers such as *The Daily News*, paints a picture of a failed government, whose disastrous policies have plunged the nation into economic, social and political chaos. The writer sought the views of one of the key informant interviewees on Media Polarisation and the political analyst commented as follows:

Media Polarisation is rampant across the globe but in Zimbabwe, it is worsened by the toxic nature of the political environment, that is characterised by perennially disputed elections. The current government is unlikely to address Media Polarisation because it is an active player in the polarisation and employs it to meet its political ends.(Respondent 5, Personal communication, 10 March 2020)

The Polarisation that still characterises the Zimbabwean media, can arguably be understood within the political economic approach to the media as propounded by (Golding and Murdock 2005; McChesney 1952). This approach studies the powerful influence exerted by advertisers, politics and ownership patterns on media content. The Zimbabwean media perfectly fits into the political economic approach, as the influence of politics on media is demonstrated by the manner in which the Mnangagwa led ZANU PF continues to tightly

control public media institutions like *The Herald* and ZBC. It is also shown by the tight grip of opposition politics on private newspapers such *The Daily News* and *Newsday*, particularly the heavy and unrelenting grip of the major opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (Alliance). The ownership patterns can certainly not be ignored as the Post-Mugabe government wields enormous power in terms of public media ownership. Hence, it's tight control over the public media, which heavily compromises its impartiality. Furthermore, basing on the economic imperative advanced by the political economy approach, the owners of the private media, arguably rally behind the opposition's regime change agenda, motivated by the prospects of better economic fortunes post-Mnangagwa. A development that they probably hope would resuscitate their media outlets, which are struggling in the prevailing Post-Mugabe economic meltdown. The influential role of advertisers should also be considered, since for the private media, a positive change in economic fortunes, in the event that the current Mnangagwa led government is removed, presumably opens up more opportunities for the much needed advertising revenue.

Social Media and the Political Transition

Social Media are tools that are used to give people the ability to connect and unite in a crisis. They raise awareness on an issue worldwide, and usurp authoritarian governments (Sheedy, 2011). In the same vein Weist (2011) posits that new communication technologies have become resources for the mobilisation of collective action and the subsequent creation, organisation and implementation of social movements around the world. The advent of the social media in Zimbabwe provided the citizenry with tools to finally stand up to Robert Mugabe's repressive administration. McCorley (2016) argues that social media mobilisation is more fluid and dynamic than traditional protests such as trade Union strikes that tend to require the building of solidarity and common position among workers in an industry. The political potency of social media in Zimbabwe can be traced to as far back as 2013, which saw the emergence of the mysterious figure of Baba Jukwa on Facebook. Baba Jukwa was a shadowy character on Facebook who posted the nation's political secrets online (globalvoices.org, access date 26 January 2020). The major drawing point of Baba Jukwa was that he posted sensitive political information that the mainstream media had no access to. Baba Jukwa attracted international attention with foreign media likening him to other whistle blowers like Julian Assange, Bradley Manning and Edward Snowden. Although Baba Jukwa was more of a whistle blower than a revolutionary figure, he shook the corridors of power and made the ruling elite ponder on how to control the social media. However, the real Political mobilisation power of the social media was seen at the twilight of Mugabe's rule. In April 2016, Evan Mawarire, an unknown pastor inadvertently started a wave of online activism, when he started the # This Flag movement in a Facebook post and within hours, copycats had appeared online and the ZANU PF regime found itself party of an

upsurge in online and offline criticism (McCorley, 2016). This led to the hugely successful # zimshutDown 2016 on the 6th of July 2016. The Mugabe led government responded by attempting to clampdown on social media activism. The leader of # This flag movement, Pastor Evan Mawarire was arrested, he was eventually cleared by the courts and fled to the United States of America. Following # Zimshutdown 2016, the government became more hostile to the social media. On August 5 2016, all mobile phone operators suspiciously suspended data promotions, meaning that internet access became significantly more expensive in Zimbabwe. Two days later the government announced draft legislation to address the so-called cyber-terrorism (McCorley, 2016).

The political transition initially seemed to herald a new era for the social media in Zimbabwe. When President Mnangagwa assumed office, he opened Twitter and Facebook accounts to interact with citizens "I want to hear the views of all Zimbabweans. Facebook helps me to do this. In the new Zimbabwe, we must engage all people more than ever". (<https://www.techzim.co.zw>, accessed 3 January 2020).

The Mnangagwa led government's positive attitude towards the social media, radically shifted when it realised that it could threaten its power. As Obadare (2005) advances, ignoring the power of digital technologies is no longer an option for oppressive regimes. The January 2019 protests that occurred in Zimbabwe unmasked the Mnangagwa led government, as it clearly showed that it had not departed from Mugabe's ways of clamping down on media freedom. The protests emanated from the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) calls for a 3 day nationwide stayaway from 14-16 January 2019, following the announcement of a fuel price increase by President Emmerson Mnangagwa on the night of 12 January 2019. The calls were joined by the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) Youth wing and popular Social Media activist Pastor Evan Mawarire of # This Flag (www.pindula.org, access date 3 January 2020).

In a clear sign that the Mnangagwa government was now determined to clamp down on the social media, on 15 January 2019, the government ordered internet service providers to shut down internet, resulting in citizens not being able to access Whatsapp, Facebook and other Social Media platforms. The government also arrested Social Media activist, Pastor Evan Mawarire on charges of inciting violence via Social Media (World Report: Zimbabwe Human Rights Watch, 2019). The desire to clampdown on Social Media is also illustrated by the Mnangagwa led government's moves to regulate the Social Media. The Minister of Information, publicity and Broadcasting Services Monica Mutsvangwa is quoted in the Chronicle (18 January 2019) revealing that:

Zimbabwe is working on a cyber bill which has passed the Cabinet Committee on legislation and is about to be tabled to parliament. The Bill seeks to guide the formulation of a Zimbabwe cyber policy that will ensure that internet and related technologies are used for the good of society, not to

violate national security.(Monica Mutsvangwa quoted in the Chronicle,18 January 2019)

This paper therefore, submits that, the Mnangagwa led government is just as jittery about the social media, as the Mugabe led government was. Despite pretences to the contrary, the current government only tolerates the social media in instances, where it does not threaten its hold on power.

From Media Hangman to Reformist?

The current Post-Mugabe era is characterised by expressions of intent to reform the media sector. It is also characterised by a few notable reforms so far. The writer contends that any objective attempt to critique the Post-Mugabe media reforms in Zimbabwe, must also acknowledge, the positive steps, that have been taken to reform the media so far. It would be grossly unfair to dismiss all the current media reform efforts. This paper submits that the Mnangagwa led government should be given the benefit of doubt. One hopes that, like the Biblical Paul on the road to Damascus the Zanu PF government has realised the errors of the past and is prepared to usher democratic media reforms.The current media reform efforts of the Post-Mugabe government,validates the assertion advanced by Chuma which acknowledges that media policies in Zimbabwe are not static but,

The relationship between the press,state and capital in Zimbabwe is not viewed as a linear one,or rather it comes as a complex dialectic that is conditioned by factors which sometimes are located outside these institutions,and which shifts in time and space(Chuma,2007:76)

In light of the above assertion,it can be argued that,the Post-Mugabe government is trying to dismantle,some of the repressive media policies that were inherited from the Mugabe era,with the aim of rebuilding the country's tattered international image,so as to attract international capital.Therefore,the ongoing media reforms need to be construed,in light of the above.

One of the key interviewees a Media Studies Lecturer at Zimbabwe Open University was optimistic that the current media reforms might positively transform the media sector. He advanced that:

The current reforms efforts reveal that the media might shift from the hands of Mugabe-the Media hangman to those of Mnangagwa- the reformist.Perhaps the current administration needs to be given time, after all Rome was not built in a single day(Respondent 1,Personal Communication,19 February 2020).

The writer agrees with the notion that the media reform journey is bound to be arduous and time consuming. A media system that was designed over decades cannot be dismantled in just three years. The pace of the Post-Mugabe media reform journey may be slow but the direction is not completely wrong,if one takes into consideration some of the laudable

media reforms instituted so far such as the repealing of the notorious AIPPA and POSA and the licensing of new broadcasting stations.

III. CONCLUSION

This study has however, established that the Post-Mugabe media reform trajectory is littered with contradictions.The contradictory nature of this trajectory,is evidenced by the fact that,whilst “new dispensation” exhibits a strong desire to break away from the dark past of media repression by implementing positive media reforms,such as the ones outlined above,the media reform trajectory is also characterised by negative media policies,which betray a desire to cling on to the past. These include the resurgence of the harassment and imprisonment of journalists (a prominent example being that of Hopewell Chin’ono), a politically biased broadcast licensing regime,failure to create a truly free,plural,diverse and vibrant print media and renewed determination to clampdown on the social media.The Zimbabwean experience has proved that political transitional processes are gruelling,especially in post-dictatorial dispensations. The Post-Mugabe government, like most transitional authorities assumed power with an amazing zeal to institute governance reforms. The media was one of the key sectors earmarked for reform. The reform trajectory has been a delicate balancing act, in the process of instituting media reforms, the government has also been forced to contend with power retention imperatives. The new dispensation apparently has a serious desire for media reform that is probably motivated by the need to cleanse the country’s human rights record and rejoin the family of nations after decades of isolation. However, the current economic meltdown and resultant upsurge in resistance has forced the government to revert to media repression, as a power retention strategy. At the same time the government is confronted with the mammoth task of dismantling deeply entrenched repressive media systems and dealing with internal resistance to change. Despite all these hurdles, the Mnangagwa led government has to forge ahead with media reforms. These reforms are a vital tool for international re-engagement as well as economic, political and social progress.In these reflections,it has been noted that,media reform is deeply embedded in context,where local as well as global socio-economic and political dynamics play a role.Future studies may therefore examine the impact of emerging global dynamics such as the COVID-19 ‘Crisis’ on the Zimbabwean media reform trajectory.With this paper,the writer seeks to steer debate on Post-Mugabe Zimbabwe’s media reform trajectory and hopefully contribute to the birth of a more democratic media system.

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