

PRESSURE ON MEDIA RAMPED UP

With state media brought to heel, the authorities are targeting private newspapers.

By Jabu Shoko in Harare

As President Robert Mugabe intensifies his crackdown on political dissent in the run-up to the second round of the presidential election, the media have become prime targets.

Journalists have been arrested, articles rejected by the state press, and a shipment of newspapers set alight in the government's attempts to silence voices critical of Mugabe.

"Under these circumstances, the June 27 presidential election run-off cannot, for all intents and purposes, be called a free and fair contest," said Gordon Moyo, the executive director of Bulawayo Agenda, a political pressure group.

Analysts fear that Mugabe is going for broke as he fights for re-election and his ZANU-PF party's political survival. They accuse the government of ignoring the guidelines for democratic



Credit: Lazele

Vendors sell newspapers along a street in Harare. Picture taken April 2.

June 27 ballot cannot be a "free and fair contest"
Gordon Moyo of Bulawayo Agenda group.

elections agreed by the Southern African Development Community, SADC.

By contrast, the first round, held on March 29, took place in an atmosphere of relative calm. The result was a parliamentary majority for the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, unchanged even after a recount demanded by ZANU-PF;

NEWS IN BRIEF

- President Robert Mugabe used his controversial appearance at a United Nations meeting in Rome to lash out at countries he regards as his enemies. Addressing a UN summit on the global food crisis, he said the West was exacerbating his country's economic problems and backing the Zimbabwean opposition in the hope of achieving "illegal regime change".
- More news of political violence emerged this week, with Voice of America reporting attacks by ZANU-PF supporters in Manicaland and Mashonaland East.
- Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, leader Morgan Tsvangirai has written to South African president Thabo Mbeki, saying the latter is no longer fit to play the role of mediator as he is not a neutral figure.
- Arthur Mutambara, leader of the smaller MDC faction, is due in court to face charges of publishing falsehoods and contempt of court.
- The government has banned Care International from distributing food aid. It alleges that the group was politically active on behalf of the opposition during the March 29 elections, a charge that Care denies categorically.
- Three drivers working for Sky News have been jailed for six months for transporting TV equipment deemed illegal by the Zimbabwean authorities. The three are South African nationals.

and a hotly disputed outcome to the parliamentary ballot, ending in a decision to hold a run-off on June 27.

This time round, the gloves are off. Widespread violence by regime supporters and paramilitaries appears to be designed to smash the MDC's support and organisational capacity, particularly in traditional ZANU-PF heartland areas where the opposition performed unexpectedly well.

Truckload of newspapers burned to prevent them being distributed.

MDC rallies have been banned, the latest being two public meetings which party leader and opposition candidate Morgan Tsvangirai was due to attend in Victoria Falls and Hwange on May 31 and June 1.

Police refused to sanction the rallies, which would have been Tsvangirai's first public meetings since a long tour abroad. He spent his first week back in Zimbabwe attending funerals and visiting victims of state-sponsored violence, which his party said had cost the lives at least 50 supporters so far.

Meanwhile, the small but vibrant private media sector has come under attack.

On June 1, riot police raided the house of Arthur Mutambara, leader of the smaller faction of the MDC, and arrested him on charges of publishing falsehoods and contempt of court in an opinion article he wrote for the privately-owned Standard newspaper in April.

The Standard's chief editor, Davison Maruziva, was arrested on May 8 for publishing the article, which accused Mugabe of running down the Zimbabwean economy and pursuing a campaign of terror in rural areas.

Mutambara's arrest followed the torching of a South African haulage

truck bringing in 60,000 copies of The Zimbabwean on Sunday for distribution in the country.

According to the paper's editor Wilf Mbanga, armed men waylaid the vehicle on May 25 and set it ablaze with its load of newspapers near the town of Masvingo. The driver, Christmas Ramabulana, a South African national, and his assistant Tapfumaneyi Kancheta were badly assaulted and had to be hospitalised.

Kaitira Kandjii, executive director of the Media Institute of Southern Africa, MISA, condemned the attack on the truck, noting that it was testimony to the heightened levels of violence targeting critical voices as well as innocent citizens.

"The attack on The Zimbabwean newspaper is a heinous act that demonstrates the breakdown of law and order in Zimbabwe. From reports on the manner in which the attack was orchestrated, it is clear that this was a well-planned and executed political attack, which the state cannot absolve itself from," said Kandjii, whose group is based in Namibia.

"As of today the state media has been quiet about this incident and the police have not said anything either. This attack is reminiscent of the brutal attacks on The Daily News since 2000 and the bombing of the Voice of the People Communications Trust offices. All these criminal acts ... remain unsolved."

The Voice of the People, an independent radio station, was bombed in August 2002; two years earlier, the printing press of The Daily News was blown up.

Quoting The Zimbabwean's editor Wilf Mbanga, Kandjii noted that the attack came soon after a leading ZANU-PF official and Mugabe ally, Emmerson Mnangagwa, blamed the newspaper for his party's electoral defeat.

"Zimbabwe remains a serious cause of concern as a result of the attacks on any forms of free expression, association and dissent," concluded Kandjii.

Meanwhile, three drivers employed by Britain's Sky News were given six-month jail terms on June 2 for transporting TV equipment belonging to the broadcaster. Bernet Hasani, Resemate Chauke and Simon Maodi were arrested on May 23 in Matabeleland South. Sky News, like the BBC, CNN and other foreign news organisations, are banned from reporting in Zimbabwe.

State media no longer willing to carry pro-opposition political adverts.

Analysts note that the campaign to silence alternative sources of information follow a clampdown on state media. On May 14, the government dismissed Henry Muradzikwa, chief executive at the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, ZBC, apparently for failing to slant coverage towards Mugabe and ZANU-PF ahead of the first round of elections. Insider sources say the ZBC got the blame for carrying MDC political adverts that were better than those produced by ZANU-PF.

Muradzikwa's replacement, Happison Muchechedere, is a senior broadcast journalist at the station and a staunch ZANU-PF loyalist. Within days of taking over, he rejigged ZBC's schedules to feature programmes glorifying Mugabe's role in the 1970s war of liberation and demonising Tsvangirai.

In a change to their policy ahead of the March election, state-owned media outlets are now refusing to carry Tsvangirai campaign advertisements and pro-opposition editorials, apparently on the instructions of George Charamba, a senior information ministry official who is Mugabe's spokesman.

Jabu Shoko is the pseudonym of a journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

MDC LEADERSHIP VACUUM HARMS POLL PROSPECTS

Opposition officials agree Morgan Tsvangirai's absence has made it difficult for the party to roll out its run-off campaign.

By Jabu Soko in Harare

The seven weeks that Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, spent outside Zimbabwe following the March election have raised fears among supporters that he may have conceded some ground to President Robert Mugabe.

Tsvangirai returned home only on May 24, with just over a month to go before the June 27 presidential run-off.

MDC members privy to the way Tsvangirai operates say that although his absence occurred while his supporters were reeling from the alleged brutal retribution wrought by Mugabe and his militia, Tsvangirai used those seven weeks to better his and his party's image in the eyes of the region, the continent and the West.

But MDC insiders have been charging that in the wake of violence in both rural and urban areas for the past month, Tsvangirai had not helped matters by "over-staying" in South Africa at a time when his followers were reportedly being persecuted by militia and state security agents linked to ZANU-PF — which, having lost parliament to the MDC, is counting heavily on winning the presidential run-off.

There was a general consensus among MDC officials and supporters that Tsvangirai's continued absence had created a leadership vacuum in the party, making it difficult for it to adequately roll out its election campaign, especially in the no-go areas created to give Mugabe an



Credit: Lazele

MDC president Morgan Tsvangirai speaks to reporters soon after returning from his extended tour abroad. Picture taken May 27.

edge over Tsvangirai in the three Mashonaland provinces, Masvingo, Manicaland and some parts of the Midlands. Thousands of MDC supporters have fled the violence in the rural areas.

Supporters say Tsvangirai used his time abroad to improve his party's international image.

Party officials had felt that the no-go areas and the displacement of opposition supporters could distort the outcome of the run-off poll — hence the need for the MDC leader to move with speed to outline strategies to break into those areas, a strategy they said did not warrant a long absence from the country.

However, Takura Zhangazha, a political analyst, while agreeing that Tsvangirai had stayed for too long

outside the country, felt he had used his absence wisely by launching a successful diplomatic offensive in and around the globe.

"It was necessary to meet regional, continental and world leaders as well as any other leaders to make the plight of the country apparent," said Zhangazha, who is also acting director of the Zimbabwe chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa. "The success of his diplomatic offensive is all there for all to see. He has been well received in SADC [Southern African Development Community], the AU [African Union] and even had a chit-chat with the secretary general of the UN."

The MDC leader's foray into the region forced the SADC's current chairman, Zambian president Levy Mwanawasa, to call an extraordinary meeting to discuss the political stalemate in Zimbabwe after the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, ZEC, delayed announcing the results of the elections. The meeting coincided with the start of ZANU-PF's retribution

campaign, which the MDC says has left hundreds of its supporters injured and 45 dead.

South African president Thabo Mbeki, the SADC-sponsored mediator in the Zimbabwean crisis, visited the country twice as he attempted to break the political impasse in Harare. “Were it not for [Tsvangirai’s] diplomatic initiative, all these events would not have unfolded,” said Zhangazha. “It has made an impact. People should now be happy that he has come back to lead from the front as all leaders should do.”

Critics say the opposition leader needed to move fast to counteract President Mugabe’s tough election strategy.

Eldred Masunungure, a professor of political science at the University of Zimbabwe, concurred. “While his absence caused some consternation, it looks like his diplomatic initiative has scored some successes,” he said, but added that “it is not good for a leader to be away from his people for so long, especially considering that his supporters are facing the brunt of the violence. Politicians should know that politics is risky business”.

Useni Sibanda, a political analyst based in Bulawayo who works as a coordinator for the Christian Alliance, attributed Tsvangirai’s continued stay outside Zimbabwe to threats on his life. “I don’t think he was safe,” said Sibanda.

“Remember, the security chiefs are on record as having said that they would not salute Tsvangirai. The threat was real. There was no need for him to rush to Zimbabwe and turn out to be a dead hero.”

Sibanda said that in any case, the diplomatic offensive helped Tsvangirai

pick up valuable support in the region, on the African continent and in the West.

Like Zhangazha, he pointed out that Tsvangirai attended the extraordinary summit of SADC in Lusaka and subsequently visited the individual countries that made up the bloc.

“Also attitudes within SADC, which have been siding with Mugabe, have changed. Some SADC leaders are now openly supporting the MDC,” he said.

While in South Africa, Tsvangirai also held discussions with the United Nations chief Ban Ki-moon and visited traditional allies in Europe.

Tsvangirai was due to return to Zimbabwe after attending a conference in Northern Ireland on May 16. He was, however, reportedly advised by his security staff that his safety could not be guaranteed after allegations that top security chiefs wanted him dead, so as to avoid an election which analysts say Mugabe could lose if the contest was free and fair.

“People should now be happy that he has come back to lead from the front” — political analyst Takura Zhangazha.

According to MDC spokesman Nelson Chamisa, the number of opposition supporters reached 45 on May 21, following the discovery of the body of Tonderai Ndira, a well-known MDC activist who was allegedly abducted by state security agents two weeks ago in the poor suburb of Mabvuku just outside the capital.

As well as allegedly letting loose his militia to terrorise MDC supporters, Mugabe has closed off all the democratic space for Tsvangirai and his MDC, including the state media.

Under SADC principles and guidelines on the staging of elections in member countries, all contestants should be given equal access to the media. This was the case during the first round of voting.

This time, however, the MDC says ZANU-PF and the government are banning its rallies and refusing to allow its advertisements to be carried in state media.

“The threat was real. There was no need for him to... be a dead hero” — Useni Sibanda of the Christian Alliance.

Last week, the MDC had to seek redress from the courts after police denied the party permission to hold a rally in Bulawayo.

At the same time, says the opposition, the police are giving ZANU-PF officials carte blanche to hold political meetings, including their infamous “night vigils” in rural areas, at which villagers are allegedly subjected to prolonged “political reorientation” sessions.

“Tsvangirai must now know that the struggle is in Zimbabwe. He can now afford to send his other executive members to the region and overseas,” said Zhangazha.

The true test of Tsvangirai’s leadership will be how he organises his campaign in rural areas where the majority of voters reside, and how he counters ZANU-PF’s propaganda blitz in the official media.

By the time Tsvangirai arrived in Harare, the ruling party had been taking out full-page adverts in the official media for weeks, and state radio and television were constantly broadcasting ZANU-PF jingles.

Jabu Soko is the pseudonym of an IWPR-trained journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

ELECTION STAFF UNDETERRED BY RUN-OFF THREATS

Head of teaching union says threat of violence won't dissuade members from serving as polling officers.

By Joseph Nhlanhla in Bulawayo

A teachers' union has vowed to play an active role in the upcoming presidential run-off, despite continued assaults on its members by ZANU-PF supporters.

Enock Paradzai, an official with the Progressive Teachers' Union of Zimbabwe, PTUZ, representing about 13,000 teachers, said members would not be deterred from acting as polling officers in the second round, in spite of the crackdown mounted against them since the March 29 elections.

The union representative — who is currently fighting for a salary increase for teachers — also said it was important for the organisation's members to vote in the June 27 election if democracy was to triumph.

PTUZ has long been a thorn in the side of government, with the authorities accusing union leaders of being political activists.

In the harmonised parliamentary and presidential polls two months ago, the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, led by Morgan Tsvangirai, made massive gains in rural constituencies — previously seen as ruling party strongholds — for the first time since its emergence in 2000.

ZANU-PF accused teachers — who were the main polling officers during the elections — of fiddling the results and of encouraging villagers to vote for the MDC.

In the past, President Robert Mugabe's loyalists have also accused



New agriculture-sector cheque issued by the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe.

teachers of informing rural people that the hardships they are suffering are a direct result of ZANU-PF's flawed economic policies.

As a result, members of the profession appear to have been high on the hit list of ruling party activists in rural areas.

The Progressive Teachers' Union has long been a thorn in the side of government.

The union says that countrywide political violence has claimed the lives of a number of its members and thousands across the country have failed to report for work, fearing attacks.

While the country's acting attorney general Bharat Patel claims violence has receded across the country, PTUZ says nothing has changed.

However, Paradzai said the union's members were in defiant mood.

"We are still hunted down, but even if the harassment continues, this will not stop us from participating as polling officers," he told IWPR.

But, he said, if the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, ZEC, sends those teachers who volunteer to be polling officers to serve in faraway districts where they are not registered to vote, they should not go.

"We are telling our members that if they are deployed [to serve as polling officers] outside the constituencies where they are registered, they must opt out and remain where they will be able to vote [in the run-off]," he said.

Exercising the right to vote, he said, is worth more than the allowance paid to volunteer polling officers by ZEC.

"Every vote counts. We cannot allow this to continue unabated. Voting is more important than the allowances teachers will get from the voting exercise," continued Paradzai.

PTUZ has just made fresh demands for a massive salary increase, as independent economic analysts said the country's hyperinflation this month crossed the one million per cent mark.

“Even if the harassment continues, this will not stop us from participating as polling officers” — PTUZ official Enock Paradzai.

Currently, teachers are paid less than five billion Zimbabwe dollars a week, just enough to buy two litres of cooking oil. They are asking for 76 billion dollars a month.

“We will not disclose the course of action we will take if these demands are not met, as our leaders have in the past been kidnapped for mobilising members,” said Paradzai.

Previously, the government has simply ignored PTUZ's demands, while the rival Zimbabwe Teachers' Association, long accused of siding with ZANU-PF, has not lobbied as hard for better salaries and working conditions.

While Zimbabwe's education sector was once celebrated for the high standards that gave the country one of

the best literacy rates in the world, in recent years it has been hit by a massive skills flight, as teachers leave in droves to seek work in neighbouring countries.

Previous increases in teachers' salaries have been followed by massive price hikes, rendering them useless.

Poverty in the profession has led to some teachers trying to augment their salaries by selling items, such as sweets to their pupils, drawing complaints from parents, who accuse the teachers of neglecting their core duty to provide education.

Union says teachers should only work as polling officers in constituencies where they can vote.

PTUZ says the country's volatile political landscape has also affected the traditional mid-year public examinations, which offer candidates the opportunity to sit for their papers early rather than wait until the end of the year.

Although the education authorities are yet to announce the dates for school examinations due in June, Paradzai

said that if teachers in rural areas continued to be hunted down by government supporters, the exams were unlikely to be held this year.

Political turbulence casts school exams in doubt.

“It is totally unbearable. Even if the dates are set, where will the teachers come from, as they are fleeing the rural areas?” he said.

This week, one secondary school headmaster — who is one of many professionals turned into a pauper by the economic meltdown — joined the hordes of people who walk to work in the face of prohibitive transport costs.

He related how teachers at his school were “coming to work whenever they feel like it”.

The headmaster, who declined to be named, went on, “It is terrible, but understandable. But it is worse for schoolchildren. What kind of education are they getting?”

Joseph Nhlanhla is the pseudonym of an IWPR-trained journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

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