

When editorial cartoons cross the line

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Editorial cartoons can be important as signposts of history. They are good too as mirrors of social-political developments in any country. But in a deeply polarised political environment, as was the case in Zimbabwe before the establishment of the inclusive government, editorial cartoons tend to mirror one-sided political ideology while disregarding rationale.

An unsigned cartoon published online on April 30 2008, a month and a day after the Zimbabwe harmonised elections polling date, is a good example. It shows two members of the public walking in front of a high-density suburb while looking at a billboard that read, "Tsvangirai seeks asylum in Botswana". One of the men remarks, "that should read, 'elected leader flees unelected leader...'", while the second man smiles, seemingly in agreement with the first.

The cartoon makes reference to post-election events in Zimbabwe in April 2008 where the then main opposition leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, left Zimbabwe while he and the entire nation were awaiting the announcement of results for the presidential elections that he had taken part in. Tsvangirai said he was seeking temporary refuge in Botswana as a direct result of "fear of being attacked or jailed if he returned to Zimbabwe".

Tsvangirai added that going back to Zimbabwe would compromise his political effectiveness, and he concluded with the rhetorical question, "Do you want a dead hero?"

His stay in Botswana, a country with a new leader vigorously opposed to president Mugabe's rule, was, however, scoffed at by the Zimbabwe Government. Harare insisted that he was playing to the gallery and forcing the Zimbabwe issue on the international agenda.

The cartoon's argument though is not whether or not Tsvangirai's reasons for leaving Zimbabwe were justifiable. The billboard on the left side of the frame accurately contextualises the situation at the time. It simply mentions that Tsvangirai had left the country seeking to be sheltered temporarily in a neighbouring state.

The use of the word "asylum" in the traditional sense refers to an indefinite stay a member of the public in a country other than theirs for fear of physical, mental or emotional harm in their native state. But here, it is used to mean a temporary "exile" by an opposition leader.

The timing is vital. The Presidential election was contested by four men - president Mugabe, Tsvangirai and Simba Makoni, a former government minister who had just quit government and the ruling party to run as an independent. Then there was Langton Towungana, an independent "wild card" whose name most Zimbabweans were hearing for the first time during the election period.

According to Zimbabwe laws, a candidate could only be proclaimed winner of the election if he/she gets at least more than 50% of the votes. In the event that none of the competing candidates accumulated enough votes, a run-off pitting the two candidates would be called.

When the cartoon was published, the election results had not been announced, but estimates by Zimbabwe Election Support Network, a non-governmental poll-monitoring body, had predicted Tsvangirai would get 51,8 percent.

The supposed objective media that attended the Press briefing reportedly reacted to the claims with rapturous applause. The 50,3 percent figure was much lower than the 60 percent the MDC party also claimed from earlier "projections".

Two things are certain here -- firstly none of the projected results were valid and therefore not a basis for any analysis and, secondly, only the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) had the mandate to pronounce a winner. The cartoon went further than just give figures; like the MDC's Biti, it identifies Tsvangirai as the official leader of Zimbabwe.

It may be argued that it was somewhat irresponsible and malicious for the paper to publish an editorial cartoon likely to cause alarm and despondency in a country that was understandably gripped by anxiety following the delayed announcement of results of an election. In fact, it was worse, because there were two main contenders widely viewed as joint favourites.

The seriousness of the insinuations carried by the cartoon is exemplified by the fact that Biti had to face treason charges, punishable by death, that the presiding magistrate in the case asserted, "after a careful perusal of the submissions by both the State and defence, there is a reasonable suspicion that the accused (Biti) committed the offence". The irony that an elected leader would flee one with no political power is the chief emphasis of the editorial cartoon.

There is little attention paid to caricature - the proportions and size of object is remarkably photograph-like and exaggerations are kept to a minimum. Besides the two men representing Zimbabwe's working population, there are no other obvious metaphorical representations in the compositions as the creator appears intent on dispersing a message in a life-like setting. Zimbabwe's workforce is diverse and very well informed on topical events.

Source: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201207250081.html>allAfrica

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