

# Zimbabwe: Brute force to silence the media

By Wilf Mbanga 12 Jan 2011

One of the first casualties in the onslaught against democracy is always the media. Elections, a key cornerstone of democracy, have been characterised in Africa generally, and in Zimbabwe in particular, by massive election fraud, voting irregularities, vote buying, voter and opposition party intimidation, bogus voter registration, rigged polling stations, corrupt election commissioners and so on.



These trends were common in 2010 in many African countries including Rwanda, Uganda, Nigeria and Egypt. In 2011, "elections" will be held in Zimbabwe, Chad, the Central African Republic, Malagasy, Uganda, Zambia, Nigeria and other countries.

## Trend 1: more stolen elections

As Zimbabwe limps towards elections, the government is becoming increasingly paranoid about criticism from independent media. Robert Mugabe and ZANU PF have begun once again to unroll the apparatus of violence in preparation for polls in 2011. The partisan police force has resorted to manufacturing charges against journalists in an attempt to silence them.

## Trend 2: persecution of journalists

"Publishing falsehoods" is a crime under the draconian and mis-named Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act - AIPPA - that demands the registration and licensing by the state-controlled Media and Information Commission of all newspapers, media outlets and journalists. In its first two years, the MIC closed down five independent newspapers. Hundreds of journalists were arrested and many beaten - not one conviction was secured. The trend continues.

In November and December several journalists and editors were arrested, beaten up, locked up - all guilty of one thing: practising journalism. All were released, but face lengthy and expensive court cases.

In November the state media carried announcements from the police spokesman, Andrew Phiri, that a warrant had been obtained for my arrest and that the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) was on a "manhunt for Mbanga - believed to reside in the UK". My telephone number and email address are published in every issue of the paper and I have made no secret of the fact that I am in self-imposed exile in the UK! Phiri has subsequently stated that the ZRP have asked Interpol to assist in "apprehending Mbanga".

## Independent media, the enemy

Since its power began to wane in the late 1990s, ZANU PF has seen the independent media as its enemy. Not only independent journalists operate in a constant climate of threats and fear. State editors and reporters, too, live in constant terror of the chop - and worse.



Before, during and after both 2008 polls, the state-controlled media went into overdrive - its ham-fisted spin and sickeningly blatant deception would have been laughable had it not been so tragic.

And if early indications are anything to go by, the 2011 elections will see similar, if not worse, horror. These pre-emptive strikes against independent journalists are the first, familiar, salvo.

## Formidable state media empire

Lined up against the formidable state media empire - which includes a total monopoly of radio and television, two national dailies, two national Sundays, several urban and rural weeklies, the national news agency Ziana and the Zimbabwe Information Service, with correspondents in the country's 52 districts, is a tiny array of independent voices.

These comprise one local weekly, *The Independent*, one local Sunday, *The Standard*, as well as *The Zimbabwean* and its Sunday sister - trucked in from South Africa because of the restrictive government licensing requirements. And the *Sunday Times*. On the broadcasting front, there is the London-based SW Radio Africa, South Africa-based Voice of the People and the US-based VOA Studio 7.

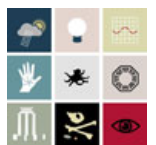
And still ZANU PF fails to control the hearts and minds of Zimbabweans - even rural Zimbabweans, whose levels of literacy and political sophistication surpass those of most other Africans. The widespread hunger for news is evidence that the state media has totally lost all credibility.

## Trend 3: The decent will endure

The ordinary, decent people of Zimbabwe, those without their snouts in the ZANU PF feeding trough, will continue to hunger for justice and truth and to endure with admirable courage the dastardly oppression of the Mugabe regime.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wilf Mbanga is the founder of *The Zimbabwean* and its Sunday sister, which he has edited and published from the UK since January 2005. The newspaper circulates widely in Southern Africa and Zimbabwe as well as in the UK. The full contents are available free on [www.thezimbabwean.co.uk](http://www.thezimbabwean.co.uk). Contact Wilf on [mbanga@thezimbabwean.co.uk](mailto:mbanga@thezimbabwean.co.uk) or follow the Zimbabwean on Twitter via [@thezimbabwean](https://twitter.com/thezimbabwean).