

Summary report on the national public broadcasting corporation's prime-time coverage of Zimbabwe's two national elections in March and June 2008

(Detailed coverage of ZBC's news bulletins form the subject of a separate report)

August 4th, 2008

Introduction

This report documents the performance of the national public broadcaster, ZBC, in the 2008 March and June national elections and reveals how its undisguised allegiance to the ruling party, ZANU PF, has resulted in the organization violating the country's election broadcasting laws with impunity and subverting its public mandate to provide fair and equitable coverage of election contestants.

Eight years after the Supreme Court of Zimbabwe declared the monopoly of the state owned Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation unconstitutional, the government has still not awarded an operating licence to any prospective private broadcaster.

As a result, ZBC continues to enjoy an illegal monopoly of the airwaves perpetuated by an abusive government that has benefited from unfettered access to the broadcaster for propaganda purposes. This situation directly conflicts with its public service mandate to provide fair and equitable coverage of all news and opinion at all times in its pursuit to promote the free flow of information in the public interest.

In an electoral context, public media are strictly mandated to provide non-partisan information about election contestants and to act as an information service with regard to electoral procedure; they should not favour one party or candidate over another.

In the two elections of March and June 2008, ZBC was blatantly biased in favour of ZANU PF, granting the ruling party a total of 210 hours and 39 minutes' airtime for its campaigns compared to its coverage of all the other political parties, which only received 16 hours and 44 minutes' airtime in the March election. In addition, most of this coverage portrayed the opposition in a negative light.

This overwhelming bias in favour of ZANU PF became even more extreme in the run-up to the June presidential election where all dissenting voices were silenced, including a ban on the coverage of all MDC campaigns on the national broadcaster. The few times that ZBC stations referred to the MDC, the party was a target of political vilification. The same stations unquestioningly promoted ZANU PF and its presidential candidate, Robert Mugabe.

The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, the body responsible for enforcing regulations on media coverage of elections, made no effort to force ZBC to redress this extreme bias and ignored the broadcaster's unprofessional conduct.

Voter Education

The duty of a public broadcaster at election time is to provide the public with information that will allow the electorate to exercise their franchise effectively on the

basis of their ability to make informed decisions. ZBC partially fulfilled this role in the March election campaign where all stations aired voter education advertisements from different stakeholders, among them the Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network, The Women's Trust, NASCOH and the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, reminding the electorate about the nature of the elections and how to vote.

During the March election campaign ZBC stations aired 524 voter education advertisements totaling 619 minutes' airtime, 171 (219 minutes) of which were ZEC advertisements.

To this extent at least, ZBC provided some form of an electoral education service. But many of these advertisements, including ZEC's, were generic in nature and provided little specific information that would have assisted voters. In addition, the public broadcaster devoted no time to producing its own programmes on voter education. And ZEC too, which holds the sole legal mandate and obligation to conduct voter education, only began airing its voter education advertisements on February 19, while ZESN for example, started advertising almost two weeks before, on February 6.

However the "progressive" era at ZBC was short-lived as ZEC forced the public broadcaster to stop airing ZESN advertisements on its stations. This development followed reports that ZEC had banned ZESN from airing advertisements [SW Radio 19/2]. The reports stated that ZEC had invoked electoral regulations from 2005 identifying it as the sole authority (apart from political parties) to conduct voter education. Although the regulations also invest ZEC with the authority to grant permission to other institutions to conduct voter education, its action in stifling ZESN's non-partisan education campaign reinforced concerns that ZEC's alignment to ZANU PF had clouded its judgment and compromised the supposedly independent body's autonomy.

Direct Access and Editorial Content

Section 6(1) of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (Media Coverage of Elections) Regulations, 2008 states that each of ZBC's stations "*shall allocate four hours of available purchasable time during an election period for election advertisements, which shall be distributed equitably to political parties and candidates...taking into consideration the number of constituencies being contested by the respective political parties.*"

However, this regulation was only gazetted on March 7, just three weeks before the harmonized elections. Until then ZBC made no attempt to comply with its more fundamental mandate to provide equitable access to the political contestants contained in its public service mandate. As a result, ZBC allowed ZANU PF advertising material to dominate the airwaves until the last three weeks of the election campaign, which eventually saw the appearance of advertising material from opposition parties, most notably the MDC. Significantly, little known political parties, such as the Zimbabwe Development Party, Multiracial Christian Democrats, Voice of the People and the Zimbabwe Youth Alliance, also received airtime on the broadcaster.

While it was true that diverse opinions could now be heard on the national broadcaster during an election campaign, the distribution of airtime among the political parties remained gravely skewed. MMPZ's monitors noted the fact that ZANU PF still received more coverage than any other party. For example, between

March 7th and March 29th, in the three weeks leading to Election Day, ZBC stations awarded ZANU PF 755 minutes of campaign airtime outside their news bulletins (and including paid-for advertisements), as against 310 minutes for the MDC (Tsvangirai) faction, 155 minutes for the MDC (Mutambara) faction and 217 minutes for independent candidate Simba Makoni. Seen in another way, ZANU PF was awarded 52.5% of the available airtime, while the other three parties shared the remaining 47.5% clearly exposing ZBC's bias in favour of ZANU PF.

News content on all stations also remained heavily biased in favour of ZANU PF. For example, news content on ZTV favoured ZANU PF, with 8 hours and 44 minutes of its main news bulletins (7am, 6pm and 8pm) being devoted to the party's campaign activities (189 reports) between March 1st and 28th 2008. This was out of a total of 9 hours and 20 minutes of reporting on contesting parties. In other words, only a paltry 36 minutes were granted to news coverage of the opposition parties. ZANU PF was awarded a massive 93.5% of airtime whilst the remaining 6.5% went to Simba Makoni (14 reports), the two MDC factions (31 reports) and two reports to minor political parties.

Radio stations' news bulletins followed a similar trend, with Radio Zimbabwe carrying 161 stories in all its news bulletins (6am, 1pm and 8pm). Of these, 140 reports (87%) were favourable reports of ZANU PF's activities, while the opposition parties received coverage in only 21 stories; both MDC factions with 12 reports (7.5 percent) and Simba Makoni nine (5.6 percent) for the same period. Spot FM featured 246 stories on political parties' activities in its news bulletins for the same period, 213 of them (86%) were pro-ZANU PF.

ZANU PF also benefited from ZBC's skewed sourcing, whether in current affairs programmes or news items. For instance in programmes that involved more than one political party ZANU PF received greater representation than the other parties. MMPZ's monitors also discovered that in most of their programmes ZBC repeatedly restricted themselves to all manner of ZANU PF apologists as sources of information. For instance, well-known ZANU PF supporters such as Chinondiyachii Mararike, Claude Mararike and Vimbai Chivaura were presented in most programmes as defenders of the country's heritage, which was portrayed as being under threat from Western colonial interests, when in fact all they did was to articulate positions that promoted ZANU PF's campaign message.

There were also incidences when panel selection was obviously unbalanced whereby three ZANU PF sympathizers would be invited to "gang up" against one member of the opposition under the pretence of a debate. Such bias in sourcing could only work in favour of ZANU PF at the expense of the opposition.

The manner in which ZBC managed coverage of the MDC (Tsvangirai) faction epitomized the broadcaster's prejudice against opposition parties. Often, the party was accused of serious offences but was never given a chance to respond to the allegations. At times the accusations came from ZBC reporters or presenters. For example on June 2nd ZTV aired the programme *Zimbabwe Today*, where ZBC's newly appointed chief executive officer, Hapison Mucshetere, who presented the programme, blatantly stated that the "***MDC came with violence and they came with sanctions and now they have come with McGee as their soul commander***".

ZANU PF's abuse of the national broadcaster was also evident in the numerous programmes aired on the stations, which clearly supported the incumbent regime. ZBC stations covered ZANU PF events as if they were national events, while events of equal importance organized by other political parties were at times ignored or not given much attention. For example, Mugabe's birthday that falls on February 21st was covered extensively days before the actual event. Programmes disguised as a celebration of the President's life, such as *Cde Robert Mugabe, From Humble Beginnings to Man of the People*, aired on ZTV on February 18th, served to promote Mugabe and the policies of the ruling party ahead of the March elections. In the week dating February 20th to 26th, eight current affairs programmes (360 minutes) were aired on ZTV, all of which were in celebration of Mugabe's life and achievements. February 29th brought with it 240 minutes of propaganda on each station as the party launched its campaign and disrupted all normal programming for this occasion. Simba Makoni and Morgan Tsvangirai's inaugural rallies were hardly given any attention.

The launch of the ZANU PF campaign before the June 27 election also received extensive coverage, which was not extended to the MDC's candidate, Morgan Tsvangirai. For example, on May 25th, ZBC (all stations) awarded a massive 861 minutes to ZANU PF's campaign launch.

ZANU PF also benefited from ostensibly non-political national events where its leader, Mugabe, often took the opportunity to campaign for the party. ZANU PF used the *Launch of the Third Phase of the Farm Mechanization Programme* on March 8th and the *First Phase of the Medical revival and Skills Retention Scheme* on March 27th as ruling party election campaign platforms. Both programmes were aired extensively on ZTV.

After the March 29 harmonized elections in which the MDC presidential candidate Morgan Tsvangirai garnered 47.9% of the presidential votes against Mugabe's 43.2%, ZBC reverted to its pre-March 7 editorial policy which shut out all opinions that differed from those of ZANU PF. The March 29th presidential poll result exposed ZANU PF's hold on ZBC as the broadcaster's former chief executive officer, Henry Muradzikwa, was fired on May 15th, allegedly because ZBC had allowed too much airtime to the opposition MDC-T in the March elections.

In the run-up to the June 27 presidential run-off ZBC's policy on political parties' news and current affairs coverage now totally excluded the MDC, only covering ZANU PF. The MDC was completely denied access to the public media, while programmes supporting ZANU PF received generous coverage on all ZBC stations. For example in May and June, ZBC (all stations) awarded documentaries, current affairs programmes, politically motivated music and campaign advertisements favouring ZANU PF and its candidate an incredible 144 hours and 4 minutes in airtime. MDC was only mentioned negatively in the context of ZANU PF's campaign, portraying it as a puppet of Western imperialist interests.

All ZBC stations also deliberately rejected the MDC's advertising campaign material. According to the Secretary for Information in the Office of the President, George Charamba, Radio Zimbabwe quoted him saying on June 23rd that the MDC had taken their time to bring in their political advertisements and the content was subversive and disrespectful of Zimbabwe's leadership and ZBC was thus unable to air them.

The MDC endured constant vilification in an increasingly repressive environment, that became marred by violent attacks, abductions, loss of property, displacements and loss of life on the part of its supporters. ZBC gave systematic and extensive coverage to political comments by ZANU PF officials, from the highest office downwards, that portrayed these incidents as an illusion on the part of the opposition, with only “*isolated reports of politically motivated violence*” that, for example, police spokesperson Oliver Mandipaka regarded as “*not something alarming*” (*Media Watch* 12/5).

ZBC stations also provided ZANU PF officials and supporters with a platform to accuse the MDC of being responsible for politically motivated violence in Zimbabwe, the xenophobic attacks in South Africa, and of trying to sell the country back to its former colonisers without a shred of evidence to support such claims. For example, on May 27 ZTV aired the programme, *Exposed: MDC violence in Zimbabwe*, which exclusively blamed the MDC for all the political violence in the country without comment from the police. The programme *Musoro Wenyaya* aired on Radio Zimbabwe on May 30 blamed the MDC and the white community for the xenophobic attacks in South Africa without providing any evidence to support this absurd claim.

The opposition was not afforded the right to defend itself in all these cases. It is also important to note that at no time did ZBC stations blame ZANU PF for any politically motivated violence. In the instances where ZANU PF and political violence were mentioned in the same sentence, the party was being exonerated from such acts and went as far as being defended by Mugabe himself when he stated that the only time in which ZANU PF supporters became violent was when they were provoked by MDC “thugs”. This was not regarded as violence however, but as retaliation in the face of intolerable provocation.

ZBC stations also aired inflammatory speeches and language inciting hatred, disaffection and intolerance by ZANU PF supporters and government officials without any attempt at placing them in the context of unacceptable conduct in a democratic country. Instead, the broadcaster helped to spread and amplified these messages. For example, in the ZTV current affairs programme *Dzimbahwe*, aired on June 9th, one of the panelists, Vimbai Chivaura, was allowed to get away with calling white people witches. Similarly, Chinondiyachii Mararike referred to white people as devils in the current affairs programme, *Musoro Wenyaya*, aired on Radio Zimbabwe on June 16th. During the launch of the ZANU PF June election campaign, which was aired live on all ZBC stations on May 25, Mugabe compared a female American diplomat to a prostitute. In all the above cases ZBC acted in an irresponsible and biased way when it allowed people to get away with offensive, insulting and unsubstantiated claims.

MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai was also included in the “*Losers Club*”, an advertisement that mocked his loss in 2002, and Tony Blair’s “loss” in 2007, Gordon Brown’s losses in local British council and parliamentary by-elections, and George Bush, whose term of office ends in November 2008. This advert showed the face of Tsvangirai morphing from that of these Western leaders apparently aimed at giving credence to the illusion that the MDC leader is a puppet of the West. The advertisement was aired on ZTV and had more or less predicted Mugabe’s win in the

June election as it stated that “*Morgan*” was “*going out in 2008*”. The use of the national broadcaster to air derogatory remarks about these individuals on behalf of ZANU PF further reveals the overwhelming control the party has over the national broadcaster.

Recommendations

From the above, it is evident that ZANU PF and the government enjoyed unfair advantages in the electoral processes in as far as access to the public media is concerned. MMPZ’s monitors submit recommendations here to ensure that in future ZBC performs its duties according to its public mandate:

1. There is need first to foster a culture of government tolerance of diverse political views in Zimbabwe society.
2. There is need to immediately implement the amendments to media and broadcasting laws that were enacted before the elections. These amendments put in place relevant institutions, such as the Zimbabwe Media Commission and the Broadcasting Authority that should implement the provisions of the new laws.
3. Once these regulatory bodies are in place they should begin the work of canvassing the public and other stakeholders on the way forward to achieve a complete reform of all media laws (including, as a start, the repeal of the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act and the Broadcasting Services Act) and advise the new Parliament accordingly.
 - a. The proposed reforms should ensure that the **public broadcaster** adheres to its mandate to provide fair and accurate news and impartial reporting to the Zimbabwean population. This means ZBC must be transformed from a state broadcaster supporting ZANU PF into a real national public broadcaster acting in the public interest at all times. In order for the public broadcaster to provide a full service to the people of Zimbabwe its autonomy should be guaranteed through various legal and structural safeguards that take care of the oversight board and funding issues. Measures should be put in place to ensure that editorial policies at the broadcaster are not directed by vested interests and outside influences.
 - b. These reforms should include specific constitutional provisions guaranteeing freedom of the media to operate without undue restriction.
 - c. The media reforms should ensure that a regulatory environment is established that encourages **independent broadcasting** stations to be established and licensed, rather than to control and restrict their development.
 - d. Specifically, any electoral authority charged with oversight of the conduct of the media during an election period should have the independence and political will to ensure the media complies with internationally accepted standards of ethical journalistic practice. Clearly ZEC does not have the capacity or the political independence to enforce existing laws ensuring full, fair, equitable and accurate coverage of all political contestants during an election period.

- e. It is recommended that civil society ensure that reforms to any electoral laws governing media conduct broaden the complaints procedure to include all members of the public.
4. Refresher courses on ethical journalistic conduct, including proper sourcing, impartiality in reporting, fairness and objectivity, would help to improve the credibility of the public broadcaster.

Conclusion

It is understood that these recommendations may not be implemented for as long as ZANU PF controls the political and broadcasting landscape, especially after Mugabe's "win" in the June presidential election. However, it is MMPZ's hope that all stakeholders, (that is, all sectors of civil society and the main political parties), as well as the country's electoral authorities, will consider these issues carefully and urgently if ZBC's autonomy is to be established to provide fair, accurate and informed news and current affairs services to the people of Zimbabwe, according to its public service mandate. Most of all, it is to be hoped that any new political dispensation will ensure that ZBC will never again be used as a vehicle for the dissemination and propagation of inflammatory and offensive language that promotes hatred and intolerance of legitimate political views and those expressing them. Sufficient controls must be enshrined in any constitutional reforms to ensure that Zimbabwean society cannot again be subjected to such appalling abuse of a national public broadcaster by any group, whatever their political or commercial influence.

The Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe is an independent trust promoting freedom of expression and responsible journalism in Zimbabwe. The organization can be contacted by e-mail at: monitors@mmpz.org.zw or by phone on 263-4-741816. Fax: 263-4-778115.