

Forcing the Media Back on Message

Author: [Jabu Shoko](#)

State broadcaster in shake-up as authorities galvanise their own forces while hounding the opposition. As Zimbabwe braces for what many fear will be a bloody run-off election next month, ZANU-PF's powerful central committee has shifted into top gear to make sure President Robert Mugabe reverses the electoral defeat he suffered on March 29.

In addition to widespread intimidation spearheaded by militias in areas where voters backed Morgan Tsvangirai and the Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, the authorities are tightening up control over the 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 President Mugabe and ZANU-PF ahead of the first round of elections, held on March 29.

Insider sources say the ZBC got the blame for carrying MDC political adverts that were better than the ones produced by ZANU-PF.

Muradzikwa's replacement was named as Happison Mucchetere, a senior broadcast journalist at the station and a staunch ZANU-PF loyalist.

Within days of taking over at ZBC, Mucchetere rejigged its programming, replacing popular soap operas at prime viewing time with documentaries from the archives, mostly glorifying Mugabe's role in the 1970s war of liberation, but some of them demonising Tsvangirai and his alleged western backers.

ZANU-PF has beefed up its own PR and media arm ahead of the second-round presidential election, scheduled for June 27. A revamped sub-committee on information and publicity will be led by Justice Minister Patrick Chinamasa, a hardline Mugabe ally.

According to ZBC insiders, the committee has effectively taken over the running of the state media including the broadcaster, and has a brief to run a sustained propaganda campaign in support of Mugabe.

Other members of the media committee include Webster Shamu, Mugabe's minister of policy implementation, Chris Mutsvangwa, a former chief executive of ZBC, and George Charamba, the permanent secretary for information and publicity, who writes a vitriolic weekly column in the government mouthpiece, *The Herald*.

Journalists say Charamba recently read the riot act to the editors of all the government-run newspapers, telling them in no uncertain terms they should not publish stories which "put Tsvangirai and the MDC in a good light".

Useni Sibanda, a political analyst who works as a coordinator for the Christian Alliance, said the government had moved to close off the small amount of media space afforded to Tsvangirai and the MDC prior to the March 29 polls. He said the sacking of Muradzikwa showed that ZANU-PF would not tolerate any view other than its own.

As well as its new media body, ZANU-PF has also established special committees to improve the availability of food and public transport – seen as key election issues.

These committees are clearly intended to push through quick-fix economic measures in the hope that this will encourage wavering voters to support Mugabe.

ZANU-PF's food committee is already distributing maize meal, the staple diet, and is setting up "People's Shops" where scarce basic commodities are being sold at controlled prices.

"We have realised that people were hungry when they went to the polls," party spokesman Nathan Shamuyarira told The Herald, according to AFP news agency.

The distribution of basic foodstuffs follows last week's scrapping of import duty on groceries, and the May 2 decision to float the Zimbabwean dollar which succeeded in persuading many people to change their foreign currency at the banks at the attractive new rate, rather than on the black market. This ensured an influx of much-needed foreign currency into the banks, where the authorities can access it to fund their pre-election strategy.

Finally, the party has instructed the monopoly Grain Marketing Board to regularly review the price it pays farmers for maize. With effect from this week, farmers are now being paid cash for consignments of up to five tonnes, with transport laid on for no cost.

Meanwhile, the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, RBZ, has reportedly been ordered to print money to underwrite the regime's new-found largesse and finance procurements of fuel, maize and farm machinery, as well as wages for the security services and paramilitaries who are carrying out a campaign of intimidation on the ground.

A new unrestrained emission of money is unlikely to help the Zimbabwean dollar, which has plunged from 30,000 to the US dollar, at which it was artificially held from September 2007 to May 2, to reach 255 million to one on May 16, the last day for which the RBZ website published rates. (See [Pre-Election Sweeteners for Zimbabwe Voters](#), ZCR No. 146, 16-May-08.)

Mugabe made clear his intention to galvanise his party in a speech to its central committee on May 16.

In the March 29 joint elections, which the MDC won more seats in parliament than ZANU-PF and Mugabe performed worse than Tsvangirai, although election officials ruled that a run-off was necessary because neither candidate got over 50 per cent of the vote. It was, Mugabe told central committee members, “a dismal result”.

“As [party] leaders, we all share the blame, from the national level to that of the branch chairman. We played truant; we did not lead, we misled; we did not encourage, rather we discouraged; we did not unite, we divided; we did not inspire, we dispirited; we did not mobilise, we demobilised,” he said, arguing that ZANU-PF went into the elections a “bickering and divided party” and failed to mobilise a “sleeping vote” that rightfully belonged to it.

“We have a crucial run-off ahead of us. We must use it to repair the damage and shortcomings which we suffered in the harmonised polls,” he said.

Mugabe’s call appears to have been heeded. Sources in ZANU-PF have told IWPR that key personnel both in the party and in government are being replaced in a bid to deliver an election victory.

“Money is not a problem,” said a senior ZANU-PF insider, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The formula of tighter control over ZANU-PF and government agencies like the media and economic sweeteners for the population augment the authorities’ strategy of intimidating its opponents, especially in constituencies once seen as ZANU-PF strongholds but captured by the MDC in the parliamentary polls.

Analysts say the violence has created no-go areas for the opposition in much of rural Mashonaland, Manicaland and Masvingo.

MDC spokesman Nelson Chamisa says the death toll of opposition supporters and sympathisers is rising day by day, reaching 42 as of May 20. He has also alleged that injured opposition supporters have been denied medical treatment at government hospitals, at the same time as thousands of others are displaced by the violence, thus ensuring that they cannot vote.

“We have cases where people perceived to be opposition supporters have their identity documents confiscated or burnt,” added Chamisa.

Eldred Masunungure, a professor of political science at the University of Zimbabwe, said the range of strategies deployed by ZANU-PF showed how determined it was to get Mugabe re-elected.

Masunungure said that if the outcome of the June 27 election was to be accepted as legitimate, it was essential for the Southern African Development Community, SADC, the African Union, AU, and other international observers to be allowed to supervise and monitor the polls,

“But every fair-minded person realises that the current volatile political climate is not conducive for free and fair elections,” he added. “ZANU and Mugabe are determined to win at all costs. They are leaving nothing to chance to bag this election.”

Masunungure believes the mood of optimism that preceded the first round has now changed, and argued, “The psychological make-up emanating from the violence is that prospective voters are not likely to vote. They are already being guided by fear of retribution.”

Sibanda agreed, noting, “There is so much violence that it is impossible to talk of free and fair elections. ZANU-PF is using all manner of tricks to win the polls.”

Chinamasa has ruled out inviting western observers or anyone else perceived to be sympathetic to the opposition. He has also said the election observers invited to the first round will have to be re-accredited.

There are concerns that non-governmental organisations like the Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network, ZESN, will not be allowed to do their work this time around. ZESN organised a vote tabulation in parallel with the official count.

Jabu Shoko is a pseudonym for a journalist in Zimbabwe.

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