

Bad to Worse in Zimbabwe

Robert Mugabe's government has jailed reporters without basis, intimidated sources, and obstructed distribution of independent news. By Tom Rhodes



POSTED JUNE 23, 2008

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa

A politically vulnerable President Robert Mugabe and his administration have unleashed the harshest news media crackdown in their notoriously repressive tenure. Startled by March 29 election results that favored the opposition, Mugabe's government has arbitrarily detained at least 15 journalists and media workers, intimidated sources, obstructed the delivery of independent news, and tightened its grasp on state media.

"This is the worst time for journalists in Zimbabwe's history," Geoff Hill, an exiled Zimbabwean reporter and author, told the Committee to Protect Journalists. Several other veteran journalists, both local and foreign, offered the same characterization during interviews conducted here and in areas bordering Zimbabwe.

The press crackdown comes as police, soldiers, and militants with the ruling ZANU-PF party have orchestrated a campaign of violence aimed at crushing the opposition and ensuring that Mugabe, 84, will remain in power as he has since 1980. On Sunday, opposition candidate Morgan Tsvangirai of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) withdrew from a runoff scheduled for Friday, saying he could not ask supporters to cast a ballot when "that vote could cost them their lives."



New York Times correspondent Bearak was jailed for the "despicable" offense of practicing journalism. It was not, however, a crime.

A spike in journalist arrests immediately after the March 29 election—among them the detention of Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Barry Bearak—drew worldwide attention. But CPJ's investigation has found that throughout the run-off election period, Mugabe's

government has engaged in an ongoing pattern of press harassment. Police have arrested journalists without basis and charged them under nonexistent laws. State radio has been filled with pro-Mugabe propaganda. Foreign newspapers have been subjected to onerous import charges, their staffers to outright attack.

Despite the crackdown, numerous local and foreign journalists are taking risks to get the Zimbabwe story out to the world.

Independent news outlets are scarce in Zimbabwe, the product of many years of



Reuters/Howard Burditt

GlobeCast's Maseko and Gaibbe leave court after their acquittal on accreditation charges.

government repression. Zimbabwe today has no independent daily newspapers, no private radio news coverage, and just two prominent independent weeklies. Seven news Web sites and one radio station have been launched outside the country by exiled Zimbabwean journalists, although access to them is limited inside Zimbabwe's

borders. Two television stations and a small handful of newspapers from South Africa also reach into the country.

About a half dozen international news organizations have correspondents permanently stationed in Harare, although the number grows several-fold during election periods. Many news organizations are forced to skirt restrictive entry requirements so they can report inside the country. For the March 29 vote, major outlets such as CNN, BBC, Sky News and South Africa's e.tv were officially barred from covering the election inside the country.

Unlike some African countries where foreign journalists can work relatively freely, Zimbabwe has targeted journalists working for international media. Just one week after the election results were announced, five foreign media workers were detained across the country. Bearak, a *New York Times* correspondent, was arrested during this period and charged with "committing journalism."

“One of my captors, Detective Inspector Dani Rangwani, described the offense to me as something despicable,” Bearak recounted in an interview with CPJ.

It was not, however, a crime. Zimbabwe’s parliament this year revised the country’s notorious Access to Information and Privacy Policy Act, or AIPPA, allowing journalists to work without state accreditation. That did not stop authorities from using the now-obsolete section of the law to arbitrarily arrest at least 10 journalists. “Now when the police arrest journalists they are either using trumped-up charges or laws that no longer exist,” Bearak said.

All types of media workers have been targeted, CPJ research shows. In May, three truck drivers were arrested for allegedly hauling Sky News equipment, and they are now facing six-month jail terms. In March, two technicians working for the South African media company GlobeCast were arrested while setting up cameras and other equipment for an interview with Information Minister Sikhanyiso Ndlovu. One of them, cameraman Siphosiso Maseko, spent most of two weeks in Zimbabwean prisons, including one meant for hardened criminals, before being acquitted on obsolete accreditation charges. “The main prison was particularly dire—it’s full of sick people,” Maseko said. A veteran newsman, he was still shocked at landing in jail “for setting up a microphone.”



Mugabe addresses a June rally in Harare.

The GlobeCast case was replete with irregularities, CPJ’s investigation found. One magistrate, finding no basis for the arrests of Maseko and colleague

Abdulla Ismail Gaibbe, ordered their release only to see a high-ranking police inspector simply re-arrest the pair within minutes of their leaving the Harare courtroom. “The law is only adhered to and applied when it serves the perpetuation of the state,” said Beatrice Mtetwa, a human rights lawyer who has defended a number of journalists.

Trumped-up and retaliatory charges were used in several cases, CPJ found. Frank Chikwore, a Zimbabwean journalist, was arrested on charges of “public violence” during an April 15 protest organized by the MDC. The charge was related to the torching of a bus during the event—but local journalists said Chikwore arrived at the scene at

least five hours after the bus had been set on fire. Although he was finally released on bail, Chikowore was denied medical attention for abdominal pains for days.

Chikowore's lawyer, Harrison Nkomo, was himself arrested for "insulting the president" in private remarks he allegedly made to the state prosecutor. Criticism of Mugabe is on the books as a criminal offense, and it has been enforced with greater frequency during this run-off period. An article critical of Mugabe by MDC faction leader Arthur Mutambara in the independent weekly *The Standard* led to the arrest of Mutumbara and the paper's editor, Davison Maruziva.

Ironically, the run-up to the March 29 elections had been relatively calm for the press. In talks with the Southern Africa Development Community, a regional trade and security organization, Mugabe's administration agreed to amend AIPPA, which had been considered one of the most restrictive press accreditation laws in the world. The negotiations, designed to promote fair elections, also produced an agreement that election results would be posted outside polling stations.

Opposition party leaders have called the initial election period the freest and fairest since the MDC's 1999 inception. Confident of victory, the ruling ZANU-PF allowed state media to broadcast opposition campaign material. State broadcasters announced results in vernacular languages to reach a wider audience.

Those results showed the MDC had won an unprecedented majority in parliament, and that Tsvangirai appeared to have won at least a slim victory in the presidential race. The people voted for change, U.S. Ambassador James McGee said in an interview with exile-run SW Radio, and the ruling elite were not prepared for it. A clique of senior generals in the Joint Operations Command has pushed back with a vengeance, directing widespread violence in rural areas where the MDC made unexpected electoral gains, according to news reports and CPJ interviews. The state-sponsored intimidation list has expanded daily to include civic leaders, teachers, human rights lawyers, church leaders, and even diplomats.

Mugabe has long been willing to endure political isolation from the West, but this time he has come in for regional criticism as well. Although South African President Thabo Mbeki has been guarded in his comments, African National Congress President Jacob Zuma and veteran South African cabinet minister Pallo Jordan were vocal in their criticism. This month, 40 prominent African political and civic leaders, including Mozambican President Joaquim Chissano, a once-staunch ally of Mugabe, have written an open letter calling for free and fair elections.

Reporting the story from rural areas, where state-sponsored torture has become commonplace, has been exceptionally difficult, CPJ's investigation found. The brutal tactics of pro-government militants have intimidated many sources into silence, reporters

told CPJ. Journalists not only risk their own safety in these areas, they said, they fear endangering those they interview.

“We can’t go to rural areas to do violence stories as we were able in early April,” said Peta Thornycroft, a Zimbabwean reporter for the London-based *Daily Telegraph*. “We would bring danger to people who are already in danger. Several contacts have sent messages to us not to come.” Even the informal network of information that once existed between rural areas and towns is largely broken now due to deteriorating phone lines and increasingly infrequent bus routes, Thornycroft said.

Opposition sources also became scarce as they feared arrest or attack. Tsvangirai was detained at least five times in less than two weeks, and the MDC claimed that 86 supporters were killed in state-sponsored violence.

Even if the MDC could have talked freely, the opposition stopped getting airtime on state broadcast media. In May, the government dismissed Henry Muradzikwa, chief executive officer of the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, for allegedly defying orders to suppress favorable opposition coverage, according to local reports. At least seven senior broadcasters were also suspended for failing to cast Mugabe’s campaign in a sufficiently positive light, according to the exile-run news Web site *ZimOnline*. Newly appointed ZBC chief Happison Muchechetera, a staunch ZANU-PF loyalist, began packaging news bulletins with campaign messages from the ruling party, according to the South Africa-based Media Monitoring Project, a nongovernmental organization assessing Zimbabwe election coverage.

About the same time, Mugabe spokesman George Charamba instructed all state media outlets to block MDC campaign advertisements and pro-opposition editorials. The Media Monitoring Project cited a dramatic surge in pro-ZANU-PF music, advertisements, and programming—including 66 ZANU-PF advertisements in the first week of June. Unsurprisingly, the government media has not provided balanced or comprehensive coverage of the widespread political violence or of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission’s run-off preparations, the Media Monitoring Project said.



Reuters/Phillimon Bulawayo

Supporters of opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai gather in Harare.



Wilf Mbanga/The Zimbabwean

A truck carrying copies of the independent weekly *The Zimbabwean* was hijacked and set ablaze.

As they have tightened their grasp on state media, the ruling elite have cracked down on distribution of independent news. According to *The Standard*, the government decided in early June to deploy soldiers to obstruct private newspaper dealers in the Masvingo district of southern Zimbabwe and in two towns in the midlands, Gweru and Kwekwe. The paper also reported cases of ZANU-PF militias assaulting people holding copies of *The Standard*'s sister paper, *Zimbabwe Independent*, in the eastern Harare suburbs of Mabvuku and Tafara. Government militias in Matabeleland, in southern Zimbabwe, ordered residents to remove satellite receivers from their homes so they could not receive "misleading reports" from South African and Botswana broadcasters, the Media Institute of Southern Africa reported.

To obstruct foreign newspapers entering Zimbabwe, the government imposed import duties and surcharges of up to 60 percent in June, according to news reports and CPJ interviews. For *The*

Zimbabwean, an independent weekly printed in South Africa, the charges are totalling 140,000 South African rand (US\$17,500) per issue, said the paper's U.K.-based editor, Wilf Mbanga. The charges come at the same time the government has imposed price limits on single-copy sales.

Sales of *The Zimbabwean* are reaching record levels nonetheless, with more than 200,000 copies being shipped into Zimbabwe. "We are now selling far more than ever before," Mbanga said, "which proves that despite the economic hardships, people are desperate for accurate, reliable information." The paper's success has come at a price: Suspected

security agents near the southeastern town of Masvingo hijacked a newspaper's delivery truck, beat the drivers, and then set fire to the truck with 60,000 copies inside.

Foreign radio and television are popular throughout the country, partly due to the poor quality of Zimbabwe's only domestic broadcaster, the state-run ZBC. But signals from SW Radio and Voice of America's Studio 7 have been periodically jammed by the government during this election period, local journalists told CPJ. SW Radio founder Gerry Jackson, an exiled Zimbabwean residing in the United Kingdom, now sends daily news bulletins to 22,000 people through text messages as a way to avoid government censorship.

Other creative techniques have been used to disseminate news. "Citizen journalism has caught on in Zimbabwe," Hill told CPJ, and some citizens are taking risks to get the story out to the world.

Local and foreign journalists are using volunteers to help relay information from the volatile rural areas where pro-government militants are cracking down on news media and opposition supporters. South Africa's e.tv, for example, has used reliable volunteers from the border town of Beitbridge to help gather and relay information. These volunteers, who can collect information less conspicuously, are "the unnamed heroes and heroines" of this ongoing story, Thornycroft said.

Journalists based in South Africa are making quick forays of their own across the border. In some cases, they've worked in tandem: One reporter conducts an initial set of interviews and hands off to a colleague for follow-up reporting. In all cases, fast and surreptitious methods are necessary: Journalists no longer stay in one area for long. Twenty-minute interviews are reduced to 10 minutes. Unmarked vehicles carry equipment to strategic hideouts to avoid detection.

"Even with this big suppression, networks still manage to smuggle cameras in and conduct hit-and-run interviews," said GlobeCast's Maseko, who has worked with several major television networks. "The news is still getting leaked out."

Tom Rhodes is CPJ's Africa program coordinator.