

Zimbabwean elections: rumour and speculation

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During elections, the media have a very important role to play. Reporting on Zimbabwe was undoubtedly particularly challenging. However, South African media performed well. Although they can be accused of bias, it seems they performed well in promoting human rights and democracy. This update will give a summary of how the South African media reported on the Zimbabwean elections in 2008. It will explore the main themes of the coverage.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, in a World Press Freedom Day statement in 1997, stated: "*No democratic society can exist without a free, independent and pluralistic press.*" This is true both for the country who is holding elections and other countries, as they are often informed on this democratic process through the media. But the media's obligations, in the country where the elections are being held and the coverage in other countries, differ. The media of the country itself should report on practical issues, for instance voter registration. It is also important to give all the parties their amount of time and space in the news, without bias. According to the code of the Press Council of South Africa the press 'shall be obliged to report news truthfully, accurately and fairly'¹, since this is one of the most important ethical guidelines for the press, especially during elections.

The job of foreign media is to report on what is going on in other countries' elections and whether the process is fair and give updates on the events prior to and after the elections. However, there is role for South African media reporting on Zimbabwean elections to fulfill many of the roles normally done by local media as many Zimbabweans live and work in South Africa.

To analyse the coverage of the Zimbabwean elections, newspapers were monitored, as well as the evening primetime television news (see textbox) were monitored from 17 March 2008 up until 6 April 2008. The Zimbabwe elections were held on 29 March 2008 and included four votes for each voter; the presidential elections, as well as the elections for parliamentary seats, the senatorial seats and the local government.

Included media:

- *Beeld*
- *City Press*
- *Daily Sun*
- *Mail & Guardian*
- *Saturday Star*
- *Sowetan*
- *Sunday Times*
- *The Citizen*
- *The Star*
- *The Times*
- *Weekender*
- *E.tv*
- *SABC 3*

Media, access and fair elections

¹ See the website of the Press Ombudsman www.presscouncil.org.za



A lack of media freedom is a key indicator of free and fair elections. Denying media access and allegations of violence and intimidation against journalists are very real reasons to be concerned about the validity of election results, in any context. Such hostility to media may also result in media's hostility to the country's leaders. It also makes collecting information difficult for media whom would ideally like to question and not just accept the official statements. In this way, the Zanu-PF has possibly made themselves difficult to source, aside from official statements.

Covering the Zimbabwean elections has undoubtedly had a number of challenges, and the findings show that overall, the media did a good job with little information. However, in sourcing and accessing so few of the ruling party politicians and supporters, the South African media may be criticised as biased.

Before the polls

The Zimbabwean elections were prominently covered before the elections. The most prominent news was not the campaign information of the different parties that were competing in the elections, as you would expect from news coverage on democratic elections. Instead, most of the news questioned whether the Zimbabwean elections were going to be free and fair or whether the ruling party Zanu-PF would rig election results. Other main topics before the elections were the effects of the elections on ordinary citizens in Zimbabwe and those Zimbabweans in South Africa, as well as what the future would hold for Zimbabwe after the elections. These topics will be discussed below.

Free and fair elections

For elections to be free and fair they do not only depend on the Election Day itself. It starts long before that, since there should be fair media attention for all parties involved months before the Election Day itself. This argument is apparent in the opinion-pages of the *Beeld* in the article: "Vry eleksie begin lank voor die tyd" ("Free elections begin long before the Election Day" *Beeld*, 26/03/2008, p. 20). The various ways that elections were not likely to be fair were detailed in the various ways described above.

Of all the articles and news items prior to the elections, more than half were about speculations whether the elections were going to be free and fair. There was not a single article or news item that predicted that the elections were very likely to be free and fair. Different stories pointed to various concerns, such as the lack of media freedom and objective observers, the ability to campaign freely for the opposition, vote buying and rigging.

Differential access was allowed to foreign journalists, for instance e.tv reporters were denied entry. Various stories mentioned this. Observers were also screened. And many newspapers claimed that only those observers that were likely to stand



behind Mugabe's Zanu-PF were able to get a visa to enter the country, to give their verdict on whether the elections were free and fair.

Another irregularity in the campaigning for elections was the detention of a South African pilot, who was coming to Zimbabwe to fly Tsvangirai to five rallies to campaign for the elections. Allegedly, there were no real allegations against the pilot, but he has been kept in jail for about a week, causing Tsvangirai to cancel planned rallies. Most articles on this story seemed to indicate that the MDC was not able to campaign free and fairly for their party in the days prior to the elections.

Some papers have also reported on voters being bribed into voting for the Zanu-PF. A good example of this is written by the *Mail & Guardian* in the article "If you show that you support MDC, you will starve" (*Mail & Guardian*, 20-27/03/2008, p. 2 *Zim Election Special*). It states that only those known as Zanu-PF supporters can for example access grain. And there are several more news items that reported that votes were being bought by giving away farm machinery, land or money. Other articles explained the fears of the opposition party MDC that voters could be intimidated by the police. The MDC has claimed that the new law where the police can help illiterate people to vote was just a way for the Zanu-PF to rig the votes and intimidate the voters to vote for the Zanu-PF.

Most of the articles and news items however gave special attention to speculation on actual vote-rigging. Newspapers alleged that the voters' roll was inaccurate, for example "Ghost voters haunt Zim" (*The Citizen*, 18/03/2008, p. 16). According to the opposition there were also too many ballot papers printed, which could be used to rig the elections. An example of a news item where this is referred to was "Opposition worried about millions of excess ballot papers" (*The Star*, 24/03/2008, p. 6).

The body of evidence presented in these mediums is substantial and these election various issues undermine the credibility of the elections even before they were held.

Campaign Information

The bulk of election coverage was about whether Mugabe was going to stay in power after 28 years and whether a change in power would also change the economic fortune of the country, instead of party manifestos. Hardly any real campaign information could be found in the media prior to the elections. In *The Citizen* we can read that presidential candidate Simba Makoni has a four-point plan to rescue the shattered economy of Zimbabwe ("Zim gets 'rule of law' pledge", 27/03/2008, p. 19). We can read further that MDC leader Tsvangirai stands for change in all sorts of articles and news items, but how he is going to achieve this change is not given much attention in the media. Perhaps it is because these elections are purely "about bread and butter" issues (survival of Zimbabweans) as stated by SABC 3 news (*SABC 3*, 23/03/2008, 19.00h, second news item).



Ordinary citizens in Zimbabwe and South Africa

Several media took the elections as an opportunity to report about the various problems Zimbabwe face. The 100 000% inflation of the currency, which is troubling the Zimbabwean economy was often mentioned. Several articles report on the problems experienced by Zimbabwean residents. A refreshing article was printed in the *Mail & Guardian* called "When laughter is the only medicine" (*Mail & Guardian*, 20-27/03/2008, p. 11). The article elaborates on Zimbabwean jokes and reports on the poverty of the country, but it also reports how Zimbabweans are trying to cope with their problems through humor, making the story a little bit more uplifting and encouraging than other coverage.

Other news articles reported on the Zimbabweans in South Africa. There was some speculation whether the Zimbabweans would invest their money and time to go back to Zimbabwe to vote. The *Daily Sun* was the only medium that claimed that Zimbabweans were queuing up to go home in the article "Zims hit the road home" (*Daily Sun*, 27/03/2008, p. 16). Other media sources such as *The Citizen* in their report "Exiles won't go back to vote in Zim" (*The Citizen*, 20/03/2008, p. 17) speculated that many Zimbabwean exiles in South Africa did not intend to go back to vote. This reasoning was based on the assumptions that Zimbabweans either did not want to go back to vote because it would cost too much money, or because they were afraid not to be let back into South Africa after voting. *The Star* claimed in their article "A waste of time going back to vote" (*The Star*, 28/03/2008, p. 11) that Zimbabweans in South Africa did not bother to go home, because they thought Mugabe would rig the elections anyway.

Speculation on future of Zimbabwe

Some of the media have also reported on what will happen to Zimbabwe after the elections. A few newspapers speculated that Mugabe will win the elections, even with the more fierce opposition than previous elections. An example of that is the *Daily Sun* in "Mugabe will win – they say" (*Daily Sun*, 6/04/2008, p. 12). Other newspapers speculate further as for example the *Mail & Guardian*. The newspaper has written an extensive article on the possible outcome of the elections in "And the winner is..." (*Mail & Guardian*, 28/03/2008 - 03/04/2008, p. 4). They give four possible scenarios, including a win for Mugabe, an election run-off between Tsvangirai and Mugabe, a win for Tsvangirai and a disputed result ending in Kenyan like violence.

But the media could do no more than speculate, since the elections were still ahead and it seemed all four scenarios sketched by the *Mail & Guardian* were possible. This brings us to the news after the elections were being held on 29 March 2008 in Zimbabwe.



After the polls

The results after the elections were long-awaited, which led to little news for the media to report on, and much speculation. After the polls there was much discussion in the newspapers and on the television news, on whether the elections were free and fair, with much speculation on why the results were being delayed. General speculation on the outcome of the elections, whether there would be a run-off, whether there will be an outbreak of violence, or whether the economy of Zimbabwe can be revived received even more attention in the media. The coverage on free and fair elections and general speculation will be discussed below, together with how the media reported on ordinary Zimbabweans in South Africa and Zimbabwe after the polls.

Free and fair elections

After the elections were held, it took a long time before the results of the elections were released. Titles indicating that the vote counting was happening slowly such as "Zim: It's vote for vote" (*Daily Sun*, 01/04/2008, p. 2), were not uncommon. In the first week after the elections, the parliamentary seats were slowly announced. After which the results of the senatorial seats were announced, as well as the results of the local government elections. The results of the presidential elections were not declared within the monitoring period for this update. With the results trickling through, there was still some speculation about vote-rigging. There was a lot of suspicion on why the presidential results took such a long time to be announced and the opposition party MDC feared it was because the Zanu-PF was trying to buy time to fight the results. In the article "Confusion reigns in Zim" (*City Press*, 06/04/2008, p. 1) it seems that the MDC went to the High Court to force the results to be released, but the High Court has postponed the bid.

In the various media, reports were made on aggression against, and arrests of journalists. e.tv, in particular, commented frequently on the limited freedom of press in Zimbabwe. e.tv itself was not allowed into the country to report on the elections. Also the *Saturday Star* had written a large report called "When truth is the enemy" (*Saturday Star*, 05/04/2008, p.13). The article is written by a journalist in Zimbabwe and reports on how journalists, who do not have the valid accreditation papers, are arrested. The article also states that rumors are all journalists have to go by, since the truth is hard to find in Zimbabwe.

Despite all the rumors and speculation in the media about Mugabe rigging the results, many observer groups allegedly claimed the elections were free and fair. For instance the *SABC 3* reported on the statement of the SADC, "SADC, the biggest observer group, called the elections fair, credible and expressing the will of the people. Some members, however, have distanced themselves from the preliminary statement" (*SABC 3*, 31/03/2008, 19.00h, first item). Some observer groups which made the headlines that did not declare the elections free and fair were for instance



the Young Communist League of SA (YCLSA) in the article "Young reds: Poll not fair" (*The Citizen*, 01/04/2008, p. 3).

General speculation

Most of the news items and newspaper articles, however, were about the elections thus far and predictions of what may lie ahead. Such speculations were possibly fed by the lack of information coming from Zimbabwe. All sorts of scenarios were put forward, among them, a possible run-off, an agreement between the parties to allow Mugabe to retire, and the effect of the predicted election results on the economy of Zimbabwe.

Run-off speculation was common. Reports were made on the conference by the Zanu-PF stating that Mugabe is staying in the race for a run-off in for instance "Bob's back and will fight tooth and nail" (*Sowetan*, 04/04/2008, p. 4). The television news also reported that there was speculation on when this run-off is going to be held. According to Zimbabwean law this must take place 21 days after the results have been announced. However, there were rumors that Mugabe wanted to extend this period to 90 days, so that he would have more time to regroup. These rumors have however been denied by the Zanu-PF, according to *SABC 3* (*SABC 3*, 03/04/2008, 19.00h, first item).

Other speculations were that Tsvangirai, the leader of the largest fraction of the MDC was making a deal with the Zanu-PF to let Mugabe gracefully step down. But this was already contradicted in an article by *The Star* "No deal, says Tsvangirai" (*The Star*, 02/04/2008, p. 1). Other media speculated on the outbreak of violence, especially since no results for the presidential elections were coming from Zimbabwe, see for example *The Weekender* in "Zim braces for violence as Mugabe goes for broke" (*The Weekender*, 05-06/04/2008, p. 1).

More speculation on the situation of Zimbabwe was about the economy of Zimbabwe. Some articles analysed the economy of Zimbabwe and looked for answers on how to rescue the economy, after Mugabe would have stepped down. *The Weekender*, for example, wrote on this issue in "Reviving Zimbabwe's economy may be easier than we think" (*The Weekender*, 05-06/04/2008, p. 6), stating that Zimbabwe's economy most certainly can be rescued.

Ordinary citizens in Zimbabwe and South Africa

Another issue in the media coverage during the aftermath of the elections in Zimbabwe is how ordinary Zimbabweans experienced the elections. It was striking that hardly any supporters of the ruling party Zanu-PF had been shown in the media. One example of this is an article in *Beeld* "Ons is moeg, het genoeg gehad" ("We are tired, we've had enough", *Beeld*, 03/04/2008, p. 17), where all Zimbabwean citizens are MDC supporters. Likewise, *The Star* published a vox pop which sourced 10



people, only one of which expressed an opinion neutral to Mugabe. Various media restrictions may play a role in the lack of Zanu-PF supporters sourced, since journalists may fear harsh treatment from Zanu-PF, considering their seemingly hostile relationships with media.

The media also reported on Zimbabweans in South Africa. They mainly reported on refugees and residents who want to go back home to Zimbabwe, but not until Mugabe is definitely leaving his presidential seat. The *Daily Sun* covered the situation in South Africa for Zimbabweans. The *Daily Sun* claims there is a lot of xenophobia against Zimbabweans in South Africa and that they do not manage to make a living for themselves, because they are mistreated by South Africans. This has been reported in the article "We are shamefully treated here... and nobody does anything about it!" (*Daily Sun*, 04/04/2008, p. 9).

Conclusion

The South African media in their coverage of the Zimbabwean elections have, prior to the elections, focused on whether the elections were going to be free and fair. There was a lot of speculation on whether the Zanu-PF would try to rig the elections. After the elections the focus shifted to speculation on the results of the elections, for example when and if the results will eventually be announced and whether and when there was going to be a run-off between Mugabe (Zanu-PF) and Tsvangirai (MDC).

Overall it seemed that the South African media was critical of the ruling party Zanu-PF. This comes forward, for instance, in the lack of ordinary citizens favouring the opposition, this may give the impression that Zanu-PF supporters could not be found. However, considering the media environment in Zimbabwe, this is not surprising. South African media seems to be justified in being critical of the government of Robert Mugabe, considering the suffering of people and human rights abuses. In this case, the South African media seem to be promoting democracy and human rights.

