
Political Journalism the Zimbabwean Way: Experiences from the 2000 Election Campaign

Ragnar Waldahl

Department of Media and Communication
University of Oslo

Keywords: political journalism, Zimbabwean elections, Mugabe, election campaigns, African democracy, media politics

Abstract

The 2000 parliamentary election was the first Zimbabwean election in which the media situation gave the opposition against ZANU PF president Robert Mugabe a fair possibility to inform the voters about their politics. Radio and TV organised in ZBC was, to be sure, still controlled by ZANU PF, but toward the end of the 1990s a few newspapers opposed to the regime had been established. This paper will, based on my study of the 2000 election campaign (Waldahl 2004), discuss some of the political consequences of this new media situation. More specific I will address four questions: In which way did the new media situation influence the election campaign agenda? What did the media tell the voters about the two main opponents' politics for the coming years? How did the media present the violent aspects of the election campaign? What picture did the media give of ZANU PF and MDC, and of their leading politicians? The paper will then conclude with a few general comments about the consequences of a competitive media situation for the conduct of a free and fair election.

Introduction

The situation ahead of Zimbabwe's fifth parliamentary election in 2000 was in two important ways different from the former elections held in the country since the independence from Ian Smith's Rhodesia in 1980. First, for the first time a serious opponent challenged ZANU PF and President Robert Mugabe: Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), led by Morgan Tsvangirai, and established as late as in September 1999. As a nationally unified party, MDC had a sufficiently broad social and ethnic base to present a serious challenge to ZANU PF, and the party quickly attracted widespread support. Mugabe's defeat in the mid-February referendum on the new draft constitution clearly demonstrated that the election result in the coming parliamentary election should not be taken for granted (Saunders 2001).

Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture © 2005 (University of Westminster, London), Special Issue, November 2005: 18-32. ISSN 1744-6708 (Print); 1744-6716 (Online)

Secondly, in the late 1990s ZANU PF had lost their former full control of the media (Rønning & Kupe 2000; Saunders 2000; Rønning 2003). Although ZANU PF still controlled both radio and TV organised in Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) and the titles within Zimpapers¹, the editorial policy of the weeklies *The Zimbabwe Independent* and *The Standard*, both launched in 1996-97, and *The Daily News* launched in 1999, were all strongly opposed to the established regime of ZANU PF.²

This new situation did not, however, lead to a competition on equal terms between ZANU PF and the MDC, neither on the political scene nor on the media scene. Concerning the political aspects of the election campaign ZANU PF had some clear advantages. The party was well known to the voters, it had a glorious history from the independence war, and it had complete control of the state apparatus. The MDC had as a new party, no historical past, the voters had not yet gained the same knowledge of the party leadership, and the party did not receive any support from the state bureaucracy. Concerning the media both radio and TV served as a propaganda channel for ZANU PF, more or less ignoring MDC (Zaffiro 2002). The support to the two political rivals from the newspapers was more equal, at least in Harare where *The Daily News* was more or less a match for the state-controlled daily *The Herald*. The pro-opposition weeklies had, however, nothing like as many readers as the state-controlled *The Sunday Mail*.

An election in which two parties were campaigning against each other, both with media supporting their politics, created a much more open political situation in Zimbabwe than before. The question in this paper is what consequences this openness had for the election campaign and for the struggle for power between the ruling regime and their new challenger. Or more precisely: In which way did the new media situation influence the election campaign agenda? What kind of information did the voters get from the media about the coming election? How did the media depict the two rivalling political parties, and their leading politicians?

The analysis builds on my book *Politics and Persuasion, Media coverage of Zimbabwe's 2000 election* (Waldahl 2004), and spans the period from the referendum on the new draft constitution in mid-February to one week after the election on 24 and 25 June. Within this period, I have analysed News@eight, the main TV news programme from ZBC, as well as the main newspapers in Zimbabwe.³ The study is based on a qualitative analysis of all relevant items in ZBC's News@eight, and of election-related articles in the newspapers. On that basis, I have defined important

characteristics of the media's coverage of the campaign, and compared their treatments of major political issues. Such a strategy does not give a precise picture of quantitative aspects, but does illuminate special features of the political contents of the media, and place the news items in a wider context.

The election campaign agenda

Political influence is to a large extent dependent on the ability of politicians to put their pet causes on the political agenda, focusing voter attention on areas where they stand to make political gains (Dearing & Rogers 1996; McCombs 2004). In modern society this can only be done with the assistance of the media. Matters given priority by the media appear more important than matters to which they pay little attention, and politicians rarely win a public hearing for their favourite causes if they do not arouse media interest. The focus the media give particular social problems is therefore important for the criteria on which the voters base their assessments of political life and its actors (Iyengar & Kinder 1987; Willnat 1997). This means that problems that attract wide media attention will be those of which voters are most aware when they make their political choices, and which most likely will figure prominently in their assessments of parties and politicians. In an election where the political debate is marked by questions of foreign policy, voters will assess parties and politicians principally according to their supposed ability to maintain the country's foreign policy interests, whereas their economic qualifications will count for most if the election is marked by an economic crisis.

In all political systems some parties will have a special ownership to certain issues, and a party holding a dominant position towards an important issue at the political agenda will have an obvious advantage compared to their rival parties (Petrocik 1996). In terms of this ownership theory, ZANU PF based their election strategy on two old issues which had been the cornerstones of the success of the party from the independence war and onwards. These two issues - intended to secure the ruling party's renewed confidence among the electorate - were the question of who was to own the land, and the struggle against unwarranted intervention in the country's internal affairs by the former colonial power, Great Britain. President Mugabe and the other party leaders proclaimed this message forcefully, and the pro-government media followed up loyally by emphasising those two issues throughout the campaign. Neither ZBC nor the newspapers within Zimpapers paid much attention to the many serious challenges facing Zimbabwe in the new millennium: an inflation rate at 60 per cent, more than half of the work force unemployed, some 60 per cent of the people living below the poverty line and a serious HIV/AIDS problem decreasing the life expectancy for new-born infants to less than 40 years.

Mugabe's tactics were successful. Neither the MDC nor the pro-opposition media managed to establish an alternative agenda on which to base attacks against ZANU PF's weak spots, and they did not note that Mugabe was looking back rather than forward in his selection of campaign issues. The pro-opposition newspapers stressed however from time to time that Mugabe had had twenty years in which to redistribute the land without achieving significant results, and that Great Britain could hardly be said to be a real threat to the country's independence. However, none of the two arguments was put forward strongly and systematically, and the pro-opposition press did not seriously confront ZANU PF on its two core campaign issues.

Thus, although the ZANU PF strategy looks like a gift to an opposition party willing and able to confront the serious problems facing Zimbabwe, the MDC did not exploit this possibility. From the point of view of the country's circumstances, the time was certainly ripe for political change. ZANU PF had succeeded in the struggle to free the country from white minority government, but it was now apparent that the party had neither the will nor the ability to adopt a forward-looking policy for the benefit of the people. A party showing their intention to take hold of these problems should have a good chance of doing well in the election. The MDC did not take the challenge, and the pro-oppositional newspapers did not give the party any help by directing the voter's attention towards such questions. There was no media debate on the reasons for high unemployment and inflation or on what it would take to stimulate the country's economy. Little was heard about measures that might slow down the spread of HIV/AIDS or what could be done for those already suffering its consequences. True enough, commentary articles in the pro-opposition papers occasionally addressed these issues, but in the struggle for public opinion they virtually vanished. Nor did the pro-opposition media devote much attention to Zimbabwe's military engagement in the Congo, which should have been a good cause for them to take up, in view of its impact on the country's economy.

This does not, however, mean that the election campaign agenda was completely dominated by ZANU PF's agenda. The pro-oppositional media also contributed to the agenda, but their focus was primarily on the incidence of politically motivated violence and on the question of whether the election was properly conducted. The first of these two questions was to a certain degree a theme also in the pro-government media, but in quite another way (MMPZ 2000). The second theme was almost completely absent in these media, and without the media that were beyond state control, the question of whether irregularities had taken place in the conduct of the election would not have been raised. And if it not had been, the issue of the legitimacy of the election would not have acquired the significance that it did. The opposition and their media allies were thus not without some influence on the election campaign agenda. Their spin on the political violence and their

emphasis on the conduct of the election widened the campaign perspective and drew attention to aspects of it that, were it not for them, would have passed by in silence. This helped to show the voters that the election was about more than the practical solutions to concrete problems; it was also about the respect of the parties for popular opinion and their willingness to compete for their votes by honest means. The voters were thus given a broader set of criteria on which to base their choice between the parties.

The campaign strategies put forward by the two main opponents and their media allies led to an election campaign marked by two different agendas. One related to substantial political issues, another to the conduct of the election campaign. On the one hand could the pro-governmental media, unchallenged by an alternative oppositional agenda, campaign for the implementation of ZANU PF's land reform and for a defence against British imperialism. On the other hand, did the pro-opposition newspapers make significant contributions to the agenda through the attention they gave to the formal aspects of the election campaign and to the methods used by the government? These are questions which neither the ZBC nor newspapers within Zimpapers cared much about. The result was a campaign where the two parties did not in any real sense confront each other, and where the main politicians from the two parties did not debate each other neither in the media nor in public. It also meant that the question of whether irregularities had taken place in the conduct of the election would not have been raised without the media that were beyond state control. And in that case, the issue of the legitimacy of the election would not have acquired the significance that it did.

Informing the voters

Modern media are society's major source of political knowledge. It is not possible for voters to form considered opinions on political issues without relevant and credible information from the media, and according to liberal theory, media should act as an information agency facilitating the functioning of democracy (Curran 2002, 225). In order to carry out this duty, the media must recognise their social responsibilities and put the voters first. In a democratic society, there is an obligation on the media to help the voters to take well-founded decisions on political issues. The media's information work has two main aspects. The first aspect concerns the media's obligation to provide facts on the procedures for implementing the election, and to inform the voters about their rights and duties in that connection. This includes the information needed to enable voters to cast valid votes, and is especially important in societies where the general level of political knowledge is low. On the other hand, the media have to provide information concerning the political alternatives on offer and draw attention to the politicians who are fighting for them. This is a complex task. The media must draw

attention to the questions that have a bearing on people's living conditions, explain the views held by the political parties on these questions, and show what effects various solutions may have. They must also describe society's most important cleavages and relate the political parties to them.

For voters who want to exercise their civic rights and take part in the elections, there are many details to keep track of concerning the election proceedings and their formal rights as citizens. In the political climate prevailing prior to the 2000 election, there was one more question of special relevance to the Zimbabwean electorate. Could one be certain that the ballot really was secret, or was there a risk of someone discovering how one voted? Both this contextually based question and the more ordinary but nevertheless important questions are what people need to know the answers to before casting their votes. They are, however, questions, which the Zimbabwean media did little to answer.

Two problems arise when considering how the media fulfilled their duties in this respect. One is that some of the information given was inaccurate, making it difficult for voters to know what precisely to make of it. This was both true in terms of the election date, concerning which the media carried unclear and partly contradictory information right up to the middle of May, and in terms of when voter registration was to terminate, which the media failed to clarify unanimously or unambiguously. Confusion of this nature, however, could only be partly blamed on the media, since the authorities themselves were unclear and indecisive on these points. Where issues of such importance are concerned, however, the media should not have rested as content as they demonstrably did, but should instead have spotlighted the problems, and challenged the authorities. The second problem was that information given by the media on many of these questions was either inadequate or non-existent, and appeared only sporadically. Voters with concrete questions rarely found their answers in the media.

What all this adds up to is that the media provided the voters with far too little information on the election arrangements and on the steps voters had to take to perform their civic duty at the election. Such voter education is particularly important in a country like Zimbabwe, where sectors of the population know too little about these matters. The obligation to provide voters with such information should be felt equally by all media. The state-controlled media should have considered it their duty to serve as mediators for the authorities, to prevent lack of knowledge from limiting voters' opportunities to take part in the election. The media that were hoping for a political change in the country should for their part have considered it important to ensure that insufficient knowledge did not prevent a change. Neither of them performed that job in a satisfactory way.

The other information-related aspect concerns the media's effort to give the voters a foundation for carefully considered choices between the competing candidates, and in that way to acquaint the voters with the political parties, and with their policies. In election campaigns prominent politicians will appear both in the general news and in campaign reporting in particular. In the regular news, edited according to general journalistic criteria, politicians in leading positions always have an advantage over those in less prominent roles, especially in countries where news mediation adheres to a strongly elitist tradition. Zimbabwe is such a country, and it is not surprising that Mugabe in particular, but also other ZANU PF politicians, figured much more prominently in the news than the leading opposition politicians. Mugabe's exposure was, as one should imagine, especially marked in the ZBC and the newspaper within Zimpapers, but *The Daily News* and the pro-opposition weeklies also paid considerable attention to Mugabe. Nevertheless, neither he nor the other leading ZANU PF politicians were as dominant there as in the pro-government media, mainly because they carried more material on the MDC, resulting in a better balance between government and opposition politicians. There is, however, no doubt that Mugabe had much more media exposure than his main competitor Tsvangirai, and that he outshone him in apparent importance.

The imbalances were at least as great, and generally along the same dividing lines, in the way the media presented the election campaign and the parties' preparations for the election. In this respect, too, the ZBC stood out as the warmest media adherent to ZANU PF. It is beyond doubt that, in the eyes of the ZBC, only one party deserved attention before the 2000 election. The pro-government newspaper also showed distinctly pro-ZANU PF and anti-MDC profiles, and although the bias was not as obvious as in the ZBC, their political profiles defined them as solid supporters of Mugabe and his party. The pro-opposition newspapers were differently placed. Both *The Daily News* and the privately-owned weeklies devoted much greater attention than the pro-government media to the activities of the MDC and its leading politicians, but it was impossible for these media to neglect the country's ruling party to the same extent as the pro-government media neglected the opposition. If they had, they would not have fulfilled their role as news media, and reduced public support would have been a likely result. Nevertheless, the pro-opposition newspapers consequently showed much less of a bias in favour of the MDC than the pro-government media did in favour of ZANU PF.

The existence of newspapers beyond the control of Zimpapers prior to the 2000 election meant a less one-sided, though far from equal, media situation for ZANU PF and the other parties. The opposition was visible in the media as it had not been before, and they managed to place their worry about the legal aspects of the

accomplishment of the election on the campaign agenda. Voters looking for information on what the challengers to ZANU PF stood for were, therefore, this time able to find it, even if the difference between the media was great. Whereas the pro-opposition papers publicised both the ruling party and the opposition, and presented ZANU PF and the MDC as two more or less equivalent alternatives, the ruling party was given much more space in the pro-government media, where it was presented as the only real alternative in the election.

Mediated political competition

In the 2000 election ZANU PF was, for the first time since independence, confronted with a political rival they had to take seriously. An important question in this new situation was what attitude the two main opponents would take to each other. Would they, in keeping with democratic principles, recognise each other's legitimate rights to compete for the voters' favour, and respect each other's political positions, or would the personal qualifications of the politicians, and their motives and ambitions steal most of the attention? The answer is simple; the leading media on either side in the election campaign had little praise for their counterpart's undisputed leader, Robert Mugabe and Morgan Tsvangirai. The media's characteristics were predominantly linked to their legitimacy, their skill and their honesty.

When the voters weigh up politicians that are standing for election, they must take into account which values they are fighting for and which interests are behind them. From that point of view, the pro-government media painted an unambiguous and consistent picture of the MDC and its leaders. The MDC was not a national party seeking to improve conditions for the Zimbabwean people, but an instrument in the hands of the country's white minority, who were still dreaming of a return to Ian Smith's Rhodesia, and of the British Labour Government, which wanted to re-colonise the country. The main purpose of this concentration on an alleged alliance between the MDC, the white farmers and the British was certainly to reduce the MDC's legitimacy among the voters and to question the opposition's patriotism. Could voters possibly support a party that was seeking renewed political and economic subjection to the British? ZANU PF's answer, loudly conveyed by 'their' media, was a definite 'no'. In the view of the pro-government media, and of ZANU PF, Zimbabwe had won its independence through a patriotic fight involving great sacrifice, and experience in that battle was still a prerequisite for anyone seeking a leading position in society. There was in the eyes of ZANU PF a crucial distinction between 'us', who had contributed to the country's independence, and 'them', who had not. Political legitimacy in Zimbabwean politics was still indissolubly attached to the liberation struggle, and by that standard the MDC leadership did not measure up.

The pro-opposition media were not in a position to cast similar doubts on ZANU PF's patriotic background: the effort of its leaders in the liberation struggle was an indisputable fact. Instead, they asked what use the party leadership had made of the unlimited power they had had since independence. Whose interests had they been serving in those twenty years? For these newspapers, the answer was plain and simple: chiefly their own, by securing their positions in society. According to the opposition's allies in the media, the losers, those who were bound to suffer for the leaders' avarice, were the people, whose living conditions had clearly worsened during the 1990s. This must not continue, argued these media, and in their view the MDC would do something about it. From their point of view, the election meant a choice between the sitting government that was chiefly concerned with advancing the interests of a small powerful elite, and opposition intent on working for the benefit of the entire population. The gap was, in other words, a wide one.

According to the pro-government media, the opposition lacked not only political legitimacy, but also the skill required of the political leadership. This criticism was above all directed at Tsvangirai's personal qualifications and political experience. According to the pro-government media, Tsvangirai was not a sufficiently serious politician to measure up against ZANU PF. He did not carry the political weight needed to lead a party, not to mention the entire nation, he vacillated, he repeatedly went back on statements made in public, and even his own principal supporters were beginning to question his political skill. The message to the voters was perfectly clear: the leader of the MDC lacked the qualities expected of a top-level politician. Tsvangirai was moreover not alone, the pro-government media continued, in failing to meet the necessary standards; the party was also having serious problems in finding qualified election candidates. This view was to a high degree based on the MDC's candidate selection system which contrary to ZANU PF did not have an open nomination process. And when MDC's list finally did come out, *The Herald* had little praise for the nominees; most of whom they claimed were either unsuccessful politicians who had tried their hands in other parties before, or former student activists with a record of violent demonstrations.

Whereas the opposition leaders and candidates lacked political experience at the national level, making it difficult for them to refute the charge that they were lacking in political skill, the majority of the ruling party's candidates had long political careers behind them. For the pro-opposition media, this was both an advantage and a disadvantage. On the one hand, they could not accuse their opponents of lacking experience. On the other, they had plenty of opportunity to carry out critical examinations of what they had achieved as politicians. They availed themselves less of such opportunities than one might have expected, but some assessments were made, especially relating to ZANU PF's handling of the land issue. Several times in the course of the election campaign, *The Daily News* and

The Zimbabwe Independent noted the paradox that it was not until now, twenty years after liberation that Mugabe was grappling seriously with the land issue. Under a skilful government, land distribution would have looked very different.

The pro-government and pro-opposition media attacked their opponents' political skills from different perspectives. The pro-government media looked ahead, spotlighted the politicians who were challenging the ruling party, and concluded that they did not have the personal qualifications needed to lead the country. The pro-opposition media were more inclined to look back, and to consider the country's situation in important areas, before establishing that the ruling politicians had not done a good enough job. On the whole, however, the pro-opposition media's criticism of ZANU PF's politicians was more moderate in tone than the pro-government's criticism of opposition politicians.

Honesty is a third important characteristic for persons seeking political careers. Politicians whom the voters trust, who they perceive to be honest, and whom they do not suspect of having hidden agendas, always have an advantage over politicians whom the voters do not trust. In the struggle for political power, it is important both to build up one's own credibility, and to challenge that of one's opponents. Before the 2000 election, the media contributed more to the latter than to the former. As they saw it, the lack of honesty among politicians related primarily to two points: the contempt of the governing party for democratic rules and the opposition's hidden motives.

It was a recurring theme in the pro-opposition media that the ruling party would not hesitate to use dishonest means to win the election, a claim they supported with examples from previous elections. According to these media, voters should expect irregularities in connection with voter registration. Voters should also assume that constituency boundaries were drawn in such a way as to reduce opposition chances of winning seats. And last but not least, the most important reason for Mugabe's dislike of international observers was that their presence would reduce the opportunities for manipulating ballots and ballot boxes.

The pro-government media for their part voiced loud accusations that the opposition parties were concealing their true political motives. They were not seeking power in order to work for the benefit of Zimbabwe's black population, but to introduce neo-colonial rule in the interests of the country's white farmers and the British. Their message to the voters was clear: don't be taken in by the MDC's fair words, vote ZANU PF and avoid having the clock turned back to the pre-liberation situation. They also made the most of any opportunities to depict the MDC as a party that was scared of losing, and wanted to avoid a trial of strength with the Zimbabwean people, represented by ZANU PF. This point received special emphasis when the MDC for a short period hinted at the

possibility of boycotting the election. By this means the pro-government media sought to show that the MDC was a party with no faith in its own chances if the people, rather than the party's foreign allies, were left to decide.

The media presentations show that relations between the main competitors in the election campaign were far from cordial, and that both the ruling party and its challengers had great difficulty in accepting each other's legitimacy, motives, and honesty. Political competition was a new experience for both parties, and it clearly emerged that it takes time to develop a democratic culture. To judge by the media coverage, however, there were clear differences between the approaches to the situation chosen by ZANU PF and the MDC. The criticism of the pro-oppositional newspaper was moderate in tone, and related to the ruling party's methods, not to its existence as a political alternative. The pro-government media were more heated in their comments on the opposition, and proclaimed very clearly that only ZANU PF as the trustees of the liberation heritage were worthy to rule the country. Only politicians with a background in the liberation struggle had a legitimate place in Zimbabwean politics, and any enemy of ZANU PF was an enemy of a free Zimbabwe.

Mediated democracy

In countries where freedom of the press is not restricted, the media can adopt three main positions in their relationship to political parties and politicians (Bjørklund 1991). The first is to serve as loyal channels for particular parties and politicians, acting as reliable partners and enabling them to exercise a high degree of control over their political messages. Parties in such a position can feel sure that their political message will reach the voters and that their positions will be defended in the struggle for their favour. The second position is for the media to function as an independent arena, making broadcasting time and column space available to political actors of different shades of opinion. Neutral media of this kind place greater demands on the communicative skills of the politicians, in a political terrain in which none have protection against unfavourable comment and all are without permanent allies. The third position arises when the media themselves function as political actors and plot their own political courses. Independent media of this kind introduce another type of actor into political life, and the politicians are obliged to relate to a wider range of political premises.

In the period leading up to the 2000 election, both the ZBC and the newspapers within Zimpapers served as loyal outlets for Mugabe and ZANU PF. This role as a political channel was manifested in a number of ways. While all the state-controlled media gave great prominence to Mugabe's activities, as well as to ZANU PF's nomination process and other activities before the election, they contained very little on the MDC. Political events were constantly presented from a ZANU PF

point of view, and in ways that brought out the party's advantages over its election rival. The MDC were given the precisely opposite treatment: on the rare occasions when they were mentioned, it was with few exceptions with a negative emphasis on their ability to solve the country's problems. In this way ZANU PF was free to carry on its political activities in the knowledge that the country's largest media would ensure that its policies were presented to the voters in a favourable light, and would refrain from calling attention to matters which the party preferred to keep out of the limelight.

All the pro-opposition newspapers adopted a strong negative attitude to the governing party and developed evident sympathy for the MDC. However, instead of serving as a channel for the MDC they behaved as independent actors, albeit with a definite political preference. They all made their political sympathies known by criticising the party they opposed rather than by promoting the one they favoured. They devoted much more space to criticising the governing party than to boosting the MDC, and this focus on ZANU PF left the MDC in the shadow. As a result, much of the support for the opposition was indirect. Although the pro-oppositional newspapers were eager to see ZANU PF replaced as the ruling party they did not give the MDC direct and unequivocally constructive support. Voters learned little about the substance of the MDC's policies or about the party's electioneering, and these newspapers did not market the MDC to anything like the same extent as the pro-governmental media did for ZANU PF.

It was in fact a conspicuous feature of the election campaign that the opposition parties did not make the most of the chances they had to challenge the vulnerability of the ruling party. As reflected in the media, the opposition's campaign showed two distinct characteristics. One was that it was defensive. In all essentials Mugabe and ZANU PF defined the terms and the contents of the campaign. Neither the MDC nor the pro-opposition newspapers managed to focus the debate on areas where they might have questioned ZANU PF's economic and social policies of recent years. Instead, issues that the Government wished to emphasise, and which distracted attention from some of the most urgent problems, dominated the agenda. A second feature of the opposition's election campaign is that it was negative. Both the MDC and the other opposition parties concentrated much more on what in their opinion was wrong with the government's policies than on what solutions they themselves had to offer to the same questions. This amounted to a failure by the opposition to acquaint the voters with its own policies. Running down other politicians is admittedly a well-tried strategy, but recent research has indicated that favourable media presentation of one's own party produces better results than criticism of one's opponents (Norris et al. 1999).

Future perspectives

Free media are a prerequisite for an open political discourse in society, and all former experience shows that access to the media is a decisive political resource in modern society. Parties and politicians who are not allowed to communicate through the media are under a considerable handicap compared to those who have as much media access as they want and on their own terms. By the end of the 1990s, ZANU PF had lost an important advantage over its political rivals in this respect. That this had a major impact in the run-up to the parliamentary election in 2000 is beyond doubt. As we have seen, the pro-opposition newspapers provided an important corrective to the pro-government media's one-sided support for ZANU PF.

Since then the conditions for freedom of expression have gradually worsened in Zimbabwe and the prospects for the future are bad.⁴ During 2001 and the first half of 2002 president Mugabe tightened his grip on the country's media, both through new media laws and through the establishment of a *Media and Information Commission*, the task of which is to register and give accreditation to all media organizations and journalists. The restrictions on the activities of pro-opposition journalists imposed by the new laws have constituted a major setback for the freedom of the press and of expression in Zimbabwe. The opposition's possibilities to make known its views were further reduced in September 2003 when *The Daily News* and its newly-established Sunday edition, *The Daily News on Sunday*, were closed down on the allegation of not having properly applied to get registered. The opposition has thus lost its most valuable mouthpiece, and to a large extent Mugabe's efforts to silence all media critical of ZANU PF have succeeded.

Thus, in the run-up to the 2005 parliamentary election president Mugabe had once again obtained a virtual information monopoly. The weekly media survey presented by the Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe shows clearly the biased pro-ZANU PF points of view that the state-controlled media convey to their public. The 2005 election thus took place without a free and critical press and the opposition was almost invisible and without an outlet for making its policy known to the people. The election agenda was one-sided with a sole focus on issues favourable to the ZANU PF regime. This time no one was able to act as a watchdog, calling attention to unsolved problems, exposing reprehensible action on the part of the authorities, and ensuring that significant matters are not concealed from public view.

Notes

¹ Zimpapers or Zimbabwe Newspaper Ltd is controlled by the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust. For more details see Nyahunzvi (2001) or Waldahl (2004, 32).

structure and their histories, as well as of Zimbabwe's media landscape, see Waldahl (2004).

³ The research does not comprise radio, which may seem paradoxical in a country where radio reaches a much larger proportion of the population than newspapers and TV. Radio broadcasts are, however, like TV programs, the preserve of the ZB¹C, and radio closely resembles TV, both in the tenor and in the main message of its political material. The principal impression of the media's election campaign in 2000 would not have been significantly altered if radio had been included in the study.

⁴ For a short review of some recent developments in Zimbabwean media till the end of 2003, see Waldahl (2004, 137-143)

References

- Björklund, T. (1991) 'Election Campaigns in Postwar Norway (1954-1989): From Party-Controlled to Media-Driven Campaigns', *Scandinavian Political Studies* 14(3): 279-302.
- Curran, J. (2002) *Media and Power*, London: Routledge.
- Dearing, J. and E. Rogers (1996) *Agenda-Setting*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Iyengar, S. and D. Kinder (1987) *News That Matter*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- McCombs, M. (2004) *Setting the Agenda*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- MMPZ (2000) *Election 2000: The Media War*, Harare: Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe.
- Norris, P., J. Curtice, D. Sanders, M. Scammell & H. Semetko (1999) *On Message. Communicating the Campaign*, London: Sage.
- Nyahunzvi, T. (2001) 'The Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust: An experiment that failed', *Media Development* 48(2): 31-36.
- Petrocik, J. R (1996) 'Issue Ownership in Presidential Elections, with a 1980 Case Study', *American Journal of Political Science* 40(3): 825-850.
- Rønning, H. (2003) 'The Media in Zimbabwe: The Struggle between State and Civil Society', in S. Darnolf and L. Laakso (eds.) *Twenty Years of Independence in Zimbabwe*, New York: Palgrave MacMillian, pp. 196-221.
- Rønning, H. & T. Kupe (2000) 'The Dual Legacy of Democracy and Authoritarianism', in J. Curran and M. Park (eds.) *De-Westernizing Media Studies*, London: Routledge, pp. 157-177.
- Saunders, R. (1999) *Dancing Out of Tune*, Harare.
- _____. (2000) *Never the Same Again*. Harare.
- Waldahl, R. (2004) *Politics and Persuasion: Media Coverage of Zimbabwe's 2000 Election*, Harare: Weaver Press.

- Willnat, L. (1997) 'Agenda Setting and Priming: Conceptual Links and Differences', in M. McCombs, D. Shaw & D. Weaver (eds): *Communication and Democracy*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, pp. 51-66.
- Zaffiro, J. (2002) *Media & Democracy in Zimbabwe, 1931-2002*, Colorado Springs: International Academic Publishers.