

## **Hate speech, nation building and peace journalism-the role of media**

Zimbabwe has recently gone through an election period marred with serious political tensions and politically motivated violence. The period between March and June 27 witnessed the perpetuation of hate speech by the ruling party through its mouthpiece the Herald, the Chronicle, the Sunday mail and Z T.V. MMPZ's updates which were issued during this period chronicled some of the hate speech that dominated political reports in state media. Such irresponsible and ungainly behaviour by both the state media and the politicians ignited a margin of terror against an innocent people, which resulted in the loss of lives, the maiming and displacing of people.

A number of studies have chronicled these incidences with one report estimating that over 16 00 cases of politically motivated murder, torture, rape, assault and other abuses were committed in the country in the first half of this year alone with individuals or groups affiliated to ZANU-P.F cited as the prime perpetrators.

While many cases went unreported, the received statistics read together with details of a the chilling nature of the terror tactics employed and the injuries heaped on innocent victims, still make 2008 election campaign phase one of the most bloody. That the contender for the Presidential seat, Morgan Tsvangirai, had to withdraw from contesting the run-off election citing a "terror campaign to subvert the will of the people" goes to illustrate the gravity of the problem.

It is important to consider the role that the media played in actively promoting the occurrence of this deplorable phenomenon that characterized the campaign process. Biased coverage during the election is never conducive to well-informed collective decision-making. Our monitoring work on 2008 harmonised election reveal how media bias was evident since there was no equitable coverage in political reports/stories. The ruling party has deliberately suffocated independent media and have harnessed the remaining state-controlled media as weapons to set the agenda and generally channel disinformation to the public. As a result the power to provide dominant articulation of reality in significant political processes that are taking place has been overlooked. Since most of what people come to know in the country is filtered through state media, this leaves them not only misinformed but also vulnerable to potentially harmful disinformation.

A useful look at the intensity of political bias and propaganda in the country's media must move a step further to consider the growing use of hate speech, malicious language. In these elections not only did opposition candidates conduct their campaigns with scant access to relevant public domains but they also became the object of hostile editorialising whenever they did get to be covered in the state media.

In Zimbabwe hate speech has been a cause of much social disharmony and that needs to be stopped by exposing it for what it is. Hate speech is bigoted language that attacks or disparages a social group or member of such group. It is trite that vicious hate propaganda, or any other form of propaganda for that matter, has a vast ability to influence and control the thinking of ordinary people. This is particularly true when one looks at a totalitarian or closed society such as Zimbabwe where open democratic space has, over the years, rapidly shrunk into non-existence thanks to the divisive political stratagems meticulously designed by the tyrannical Mugabe regime. It is also trite that when political leaders deliberately and continuously use the language of hate as part of their political weaponry, they intentionally or unintentionally manipulate the socio-cultural environment that enables crimes of incitement to become accepted or approved social norms. The abnormal becomes normal. Constructive political debate is replaced by petty infantile name-calling and such other crude forms of character assassination. Politically

motivated crimes, for example, become reluctantly or even subconsciously accepted as just side-shows that come and go with elections. Thus, the consequences of hate language in a polarised and charged political environment that exists in Zimbabwe will ultimately manifest themselves in the form of assaults, abductions, torture, murder and other acts of unbridled aggression. This is exactly what happened in the after math of the harmonised elections of March 2008.

Hate speech in state media has been used to excite hostility and social tension by bringing into contempt any persons associated with the opposition or any known critic of the government. This virulent form of intimidation against government opponents' combines malicious and untrue allegations with assassinating the character of those who hold different views so as to silence them and arouse anger, alarm and resentment against them. ZANU-P.F authorities, through state media, have been spewing venom claiming to unify society while singling out the opposition as responsible for all sorts of covert conduct deemed as tending towards insurrection against the established order that was brought about by the liberation struggle. While name-calling and melodramatic language is characterised of elections in any country, the systematic manner in which divisive language that belittles anyone who is not ZANU-PF has been used to fracture the Zimbabwean society has become an issue of public concern.

It should be appreciated that hate crimes are corollary to hate speech. Bigotry does not simply breed hate but sometimes also encourages bias motivated crimes. Hate speech propagates hateful motives and thoughts come to be expressed through actions. Worse still, the impunity has encouraged the government-controlled media to make their own inflammatory comments and are never called to account, nor are the victims of their statements given the chance of reply.

The perpetrators of such language can be categorised in many groups, i will look at two of these. The first group consist of a diversity of both regular and occasional columnists, commentators and pundits. The other group consist of professional news journalists and fulltime media writers who became willing tools of politicians by taking it upon themselves to advocate for a political position in editorials and news commentary. The tone of many of their articles, editorials, together with many letters to the editor written by unknown persons purporting to be speaking on behalf of the government and the ruling party, was mocking and biting and meant to injure dignity, feelings and self-respect of those identified to be "enemies of the state".

While we can not exactly tell how the inciting language used directly translated into political violence on the ground there is without doubt a direct link between the frequent instances of very insulting language directed at the opposition and the preparation of public opinion for the violence that occurred in this period.

Whilst it is necessary for a democracy to take affirmative responsibility for protecting the atmosphere of mutual respect amongst citizens one policy dilemma is whether moves to suppress hate propaganda will be compatible with the guarantee freedom of expression. Some have questioned whether a democratic society with its philosophical attachment to freedom should strive to protect citizens by undue interference and censure words.

The question is whether it is legitimate or practical to effectively control and punish public expressions of hateful ideas when democratic betterment consists in striving to expose the truth, and when such expressions maybe part of coming up to the best of truth. The argument goes that there is a fine edge between the fair regulation of hate speech or hate conduct and the unconstitutional suppression of speech or ideas.

Given our experiences in Zimbabwe where the state directly violates the constitution and violates freedom of expression the answer to that question will be an emphatic yes for regulation of

unacceptable language propagating intolerance of one group to the point where their rights are no longer tolerated and violence against them is justified.

Apart from proscription or prohibition it is possible over long term to introduce in the newsrooms themselves increased appreciation of diversity and some positive measures to combat intolerance. Given time the code of ethics developed by the voluntary media council of Zimbabwe should be able to regulate occurrences of hate speech in the media much better than the statutory laws or the criminal code. Together with a clear condemnation on the part of the bodies of state, public institutions and the society in general this would not only reduce the necessity of prosecuting such phenomena, as is presently prevalent, but also diminish the long-term damage of hate-speech on society.

I will end by emphasising the point that media has a critical role to play in nation building and promoting peace. It is therefore imperative for media development organisations to focus on building a culture of social responsibility and accountability amongst media practitioners. And also to continue putting pressure on governments to put in place legislation that promotes and protects impartial and non-partisan journalism.