

PRESS REPRESENTATIONS OF THE NATIONAL HEALING PROCESS IN ZIMBABWE POST 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Nyasha Mapuweyi

Lecturer Department of Media and Society Studies, Midlands State University, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

The journey to the realization of unity in Zimbabwe following the bruising and disputed 2008 presidential election has been marked by many challenges that include political, social, cultural, commercial, religious and historical. But the Zimbabwean dream for unity is very much alive. This dream saw the creation of a national healing committee to spearhead efforts towards unity after the creation of the government of national unity in 2009. This move brought hope for integration of people from different political party backgrounds in a calm and promising Zimbabwe. However, the past four years of the existence of the government of national unity has revealed a consistent paling of the unity hope as press representations and discourses reflect events of a shattered unity dream. This paper seeks to explain how, why and to what extent press representations on the national healing process in three national daily newspapers, The Herald, Daily news and News Day, affected its implementation. The main research method used in this study is content analysis. Based on the theories of gate-keeping, agenda setting, representation, and referring to media and political economy theories, this paper argues that press representations in Zimbabwe had a direct impact on the success and/or failure of the initiative. The analysis suggests that the overall underlying tone of newspaper articles on the national healing process were dismissive, negative and contributed very little towards fostering unity and tolerance in the Zimbabwean political life.

Key Words: *Zimbabwean press, national healing, unity, cohesion*

Introduction

This paper looks at the role played by The Herald (a public newspaper), The Daily News (a private newspaper), and The News Day (a private newspaper), all daily newspapers in their coverage of the national healing and reconciliation efforts embarked by the Government of National Unity (GNU) on its inception in 2009. The GNU came about as a result of the disputed and bruising March 2008 and the June 2008 presidential elections. In the March election, there

was no winner after Morgan Richard Tsvangirai of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) garnered 49,1 percent of the vote ahead of incumbent president Robert Gabriel Mugabe who garnered 43,6 percent. The constitution required the winner to garner at least 50 percent plus one vote in order to be declared winner. The three months between march and June for the presidential election proved disastrous due to the level of political violence that included murder, intimidation and harassment. Mugabe won the run-off by 85 percent of the vote but no-one celebrated. He had lost the legitimacy to govern. He formed a government of national unity with Tsvangirai and Arthur Mutambara after signing a Global Political Agreement (GPA), which, among other things mandated the new government to establish the Organ for National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration (ONHRI). The media, according to the GPA, was mandated to promote national healing efforts as a stepping stone toward rebuilding of unity and cohesion. It is the premise of this study to probe the representations of national healing by the public and the private media as represented by The Herald, the Daily News and the News Day daily newspapers.

Contextual background

National healing, according to The Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum (2009), is a process designed to help a society deal with the effects of past conflicts and instability and building peace for the future. National healing and reconciliation therefore, in the context of this paper, refers to an attempt at democratizing a state riddled with past injustices in order to bring a metamorphosis towards equity.

Under the Global Political Agreement (GPA) of 15 September 2008, the Organ for National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration (ONHRI) was established as an authority given the task to advise the Government of national Unity (GNU) on the best possible approaches to achieve national healing and reconciliation in the country. Using powers bestowed to him by the GNU as president, with the full support of his GNU partners, Mugabe appointed three elderly statesmen to as ministers of the ONHRI in Zimbabwe. The three, chosen according to their seniority in their respective parties, included Vice President John Landa Nkomo (ZANU-PF), Gibson Sibanda (MDC-N founder member) and Sekai Holland (MDC-Y founder member). The three ministers began work immediately with consultations from traditional leaders, the churches and the civil society (Zinhumwe 2012), gathering information on the best steps to be followed in the country's quest to bring about national healing.

But why national healing and reconciliation?

According to a Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) statement of 2009, Zimbabwe had gone through an election period that was marred by serious political tension and politically motivated violence. This statement was supported by another from the Zimbabwe Peace Project headed by Jestina Mukoko, who said that the level of political violence and human rights

violations had gone up in 2008 in between March and June election periods with a total of more than 4 000 cases of human rights violations documented.

The two reports indicated that the pattern of politically motivated violence increased in cases of assault, murder, malicious damage to property, kidnapping, intimidation and harassment. All the cases were politically motivated and instigated. They documented some of the most obvious cases by provinces as follows. Manicaland – 1924 cases reported and documented, Masvingo had 662 cases, Mashonaland Central had 539 cases, Mashonaland East had 535 cases, Mashonaland West had 340 cases, Harare metropolitan province had 328 cases, Midlands had 251 cases, Bulawayo metropolitan province had 54 cases, Matabeleland South had 35 cases and Matabeleland North that had 19 cases of politically motivated reported and document cases to. The total number of documented cases was 4 359 cases country wide in just three months between the harmonised elections in 27 March 2008 and the presidential run-off on June 27.

According to Hagne and Harrop (2004), political violence consist of those physical injurious acts, directed at persons or property, intended to further or oppose government decisions and public policies. They assert that political terror occurs when such acts are aimed at striking fear into a wider population. Thus, by its nature, politically motivated violence is neither random nor spontaneous, but it is tactically carried out as a deliberate political signal towards set political goals. The 2008 politically motivated difficulties should however not be taken in isolation.

History of discord/disharmony in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe has a long history of conflicts and unrest beginning with the northward movement of the Nguni, Shangaani and the Ndebele people from South Africa into Zimbabwe in what is now known as the Mfecane (Mhanda 2011). The powerful Ndebeles led by a war lord called Mzilikazi, drove the Shona tribes by force from the southern areas of Zimbabwe where he settled with his people. The Ndebeles would make regular raids into the Shona areas at will with very little resistance. The Shonas were utterly defeated but they did not forget.

The advent of colonialism saw fierce fighting between European settlers and the combined indigenous black people in what is now known as the First Chimurenga. The indigenous forces were utterly defeated but obviously they did not forget because almost a century later, the indigenous combined forces in what is now known as the Second Chimurnga, characterised by guerrilla warfare and support of European forces to both sides. The result was a stalemate, leading to negotiations and the now famous Lancaster House constitutions which ushered independence in 1980. Both sides did not forget.

Robert Gabriel Mugabe's Shona dominated Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic-Front (ZANU-PF) party won the first independent election but opted to form a coalition government with the smaller Ndebele dominated Patriotic-Front Zimbabwe African People's Union (PF-ZAPU) party led by Joshua Nkomo and the hard-line Rhodesian front (RF) party led by the defeated Ian Smith. The coalition was obviously shaky and collapsed after only two years.

The subsequent conflict that followed the 1982 split led to what is now known as the Gukurahundi massacres in which, according to the Catholic Commission of Justice and Peace (2001) led to an estimated 20 000 deaths in the Matabeleland and midlands provinces. The disturbances ended with a unity accord between ZANU-PF and PF-ZAPU in 1987 but the people of the affected provinces did not forget.

Then the 1990s brought with it the ill-advised Economic Structural Adjustment Programmes (ESAP) which resulted in economic hardship to the ordinary people and mass retrenchments of the few that were employed by the few operating organisations in Zimbabwe. Life became unbearable and agitation against the government became rife. The President then decided to make two national decisions inside one month, now known as Black November, in which in 1997, he decided to award the agitating war veterans a lump sum of Z\$50 000 gratuity from national coffers. He again decided to send Zimbabwean soldiers into a costly Democratic Republic of the Congo war which gobbled about Z\$1 billion in the process. The two decisions left the national coffers empty and the power of the Zimbabwe dollar began its famed downward spiral.

The MDC came into being in such fertile situation for dissent and shocked ZANU-PF by winning 57 seats out of the contested 120 house of assembly seats way before celebrating its first anniversary. They had previously dealt a devastating blow to ZANU-PF when its NO VOTE campaign during the 2000 draft constitution carried the day. ZANU-PF was shocked but they did not fold arms. They responded with devastating force, first unleashing the dreaded war veterans to the white community in the commercial farming areas in what is now loosely referred to as the Third Chimurenga.

According to Barry (2004) the land redistribution exercise was state funded and war veterans were in the fore front of a forceful land invasion. As the white community appeared to be supporting the opposition MDC, they became the prime target in which violence, murder, rape and intimidation characterised the chaotic process. According to Amnesty international (2004) the figures for the affected during this period included, 70 000 displaced, 107 killed, 397 abducted, 5 308 tortured and 83 MDC rallies violently banned and disrupted. The 2005 government operation code named operation Murambatsvina was, according to a report by Anna Kajumulo Tibaijuka, a gross violation of human rights in which more than 60 000 of impoverished city dwellers were forcibly removed from their makeshift homes and businesses during a bitter June winter.

The 2008 presidential run-off election, according to the Zimbabwe African Research Bulletin, political, Social and Cultural Series of 2011, saw the political militia, war veterans and state security agents unleashed an orgy of violence and terror across the country, especially in the rural areas, many of which became no go areas for opposition politics.

It is within the scope of this background that this paper set out to look at newspaper representations of the national healing and reconciliation process by the government of national unity in Zimbabwe.

Public and Private media in Zimbabwe

The Herald is owned by the Zimbabwe Newspapers company, a public company in which government has 51 percent shares. It is also listed on the Zimbabwe stock exchange. Interference by the government has severely restricted the possibility of objective and/or critical reporting of government practices. The herald is seen as a government mouthpiece and Zimbabweans treat take news stories from it sceptically.

The private media landscape is led by the Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe whose flagship is the Daily News and the Alpha media Holdings whose flagship is the News Day. They are closely related to the two MDC parties with the Daily News known for sympathising with Morgan Tsvangirai's MDC-T and the News Day known for sympathising with Welshman Ncube's MDC-N party. The two paper's discourses augur well with the majority of the civil society in Zimbabwe. They are all united in the ant-ZANU-PF rhetoric. It is in this context that this paper analysed the national healing representations by the three daily newspapers.

Research objectives

The major objective of this paper is to critically find out the role played by the press in explaining the shenanigans or the goings on behind the coverage of the national healing process in Zimbabwe after the adoption of the Global political Agreement in September 2008 and the subsequent establishment of the Government of National Unity in February 2009. The paper seeks to assess the portrayal, imaging, priming and toning of newspaper articles with the aim to explaining how the press covered the Organ for National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration activities. This paper therefore sets out to make specific evaluation of the quality of the newspaper coverage in both private and public media on the national healing issue.

Research methodology

Although content analysis dominated the research methodology, a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods in data collection and analysis were also applied. A non-probability sample of private and public newspapers was also employed in which the News Day, The Daily News, and The Herald newspapers were the major contributors of stories under study. According to Dominick J, (2006), this was most appropriate because the research was not meant to generalize the study but rather to investigate the variable relationships. It was also appropriate because researchers used available samples for convenience. Available data was in form of newspaper columns and articles published in the selected three newspapers. After the data was collected, the articles were analysed using content analysis method. According to Kerlinger 1986, (in Dominick 2006), content analysis is a method of studying and analysing communication in a

systematic, objective and quantitative manner for purposes of measuring variables. In the case of this study, newspaper articles that were studied for their theme, message and tone with regard to national healing during the government of national unity period between 2009 and 2012. This paper therefore attempted to study the messages in the articles and editorials with the sole intention of explaining how the national healing process was shaping up.

Findings

The national healing discussion in Zimbabwe proved to be a thorny issue and the findings indicate that Zimbabweans as well as newspapers in the country are divided over the issue based on the articles published in the newspapers studied in this paper. The findings however, show a sense of both optimism and pessimism for the country and the world at large. Most articles reflected the challenges and opportunities that are associated with the national healing process. Focus of analysis was on the headlines, words and story angles that contained the national healing and reconciliation debate, the names that dominated the debate and the analysts being used by the newspapers. The overall opinions in the newspaper articles as well as the specific emphasis of the stories were studied. Interpretations on the implications of these articles on the national healing process were also probed.

The study found out that the political parties were concerned about the silence on the national healing and reconciliation process, to the extent that some political parties were very disappointed about the silence, especially those in the opposition politics and the civil society. It was also clear that both opposition political parties and newspaper owners had resigned from forcing the government into doing more about the national healing process and left most of the job to the then impending national election in 2013. Most newspapers however tended to reflect the opinion of either their owners or their funders, hence placing the selfish interests of political players masquerading as newspaper owners ahead of national issues such as the national healing and reconciliation process. These findings are summarized below according to their thematic underpinnings.

Contestations of Discourses

The linguistic component of the language used by both the private and the public media was closely assessed in this study and it became clear that the private press was more critical of anything that involved ZANU-PF and as such, they doubted the seriousness of the ONHRI process from the outset. The private press was sceptical of the role of President Mugabe, calling him a fox, as was the situation when he advised Zimbabweans to desist from violence.

In a story headlined “No to violence- Mugabe” published by The Herald on 19 April 2012 where he was quoted as having said “Chatisingade zvibhakera. Izvo tinoti pasi nazvo.” (What we do not want is fist fighting. We say down with fist fighting.) The Daily News responded almost immediately with a challenge to the president saying “... the peace message that he seems to be

preaching these days should be followed with action. Are we to believe that ZANU-PF youths are above the law?" (Daily News 22 April 2012).

This followed a previous situation in which in February 2000, President Mugabe was magnanimous in the constitutional referendum defeat, but barely two weeks later, his ZANU-PF party unleashed the hardened war veterans on white owned commercial farmers to punish them for opposing his "YES" vote campaign. And who would blame the private press for being sceptical 12 years down the line.

The private press published a number of gruesome pictures of 2008 violence victims at a time when the national healing organ was in full swing. They wanted to remind the reader of what had happened. The Herald on the other hand also published gruesome pictures of the 1970 liberation war as a reminder to black Zimbabweans of the cruelty done by the white government of Ian Smith before independence. No one wanted to concede.

The thrust of the private press discourse on national healing was that government should admit wrongs done to victims of violence and admit that people were killed as the starting point to national healing and reconciliation. This was at variance with the public media discourse on national healing and reconciliation in which they preferred to leave the post-independence conflict past unless the conflict belong to the pre-independence era. For example, the Herald covered the exhumation of the remains of the liberation war victims at Chibondo farm in Bindura but the private media was not amused, they saw no story. On the other hand, the private media had a field day on the discovery of a mass grave of Gukurahundi victims in the Lupane area. The MDC minister, Moses Mzila Ndlovu, who discovered the mass graves, was actually arrested. The public media were not amused. No story.

Ideological differences

From the establishment of ONHRI in 2009, the public media set out to authenticate political decisions by ZANU-PF which were however based on socialist principles. The private media on the other hand rode on the wave of change by exposing actions of violence against humanity and property in true capitalist principles. As such the national healing issue became the centre of an ideological warfare fought fiercely between the private and the public media for their respective handlers. Hegemonic wars of dominance became the order of the day in the Zimbabwean media with the public media hailing and endorsing every government decision and policy announcement while the private media focussed on abuse of power and violence by the government.

The public media was harnessed by ZANU-PF to disseminate and propagate official government doctrine without challenge, and this gave rise to biased accounts of the national healing process. The private press was harnessed by the civil society and their foreign handlers that they gave a biased account of the national healing process. National healing and reconciliation events were therefore reported in the interest of the party that the newspaper prefers. In the end, newspaper

stories reflected and revealed the dominant ideologies by reproducing values and beliefs of the dominant classes.

Past conflicts a closed chapter – Public Media

The public media believed that the way forward with national healing and reconciliation was by letting bygones be bygones. The private media accused the ZANU-PF party of trying to sweep under the carpet the wrongs it perpetrated to the people, but the public media believed naming and shaming does more wrong than gone. On 12 July 2012, The Herald published a story headlined, “we need not open old wounds – Mnangagwa” in a clear attempt to bury the past without clarifying what and how it happened. Thus the Herald, following the influence of its ZANU-PF handlers, believed that past human rights abuses and conflicts such as Gukurahundi and the 2008 violence should be treated as a closed chapter following the inauguration of the GNU in 2009. The Herald of 12 May 2012 had earlier on published a story headline “Nkomo Calls for dialogue,” in which the vice president was quoted as having said: “the way to bring closure to Gukurahundi is by engagement to discuss such issues. But quite often those who talk about it were never victims or were born yesterday, too young to comprehend what happened and why. President Mugabe came to Bulawayo when we were over that period with the late Vice president Joshua Nkomo and we all went to Brethren-in-Christ Church here here in town (Bulawayo) and he said it was a moment of madness. They agreed with Undala uNkomo that it should be a closed chapter.” (The Herald 12 May 2012).

Transitional Justice first – Private Media

Differences in language expression among the three newspapers also carried ideological differences. Construction of linguistic and syntactic expressions was clearly manifested. The editorial policies of The Daily News and The News Day indicate that they support the underdogs and the ordinary people. The private press showed that the two MDCs’ supporters were victims whilst ZANU-PF supporters were deemed to be the perpetrators of violence. In one of the stories published by The Daily News of 6 September 2011, a woman identified as a victim of political violence was asked about what she would need to be healed and she demanded the resurrection of her murdered husband. The major discourse of the private press story showed that, there can never be reconciliation without national acknowledgment of the dirty past.

The private press demands the truth. They also advocates for justice and action as they were quick to open wounds of Gukurahundi atrocities and the 2008 presidential run-off election violence. The Daily News of 26 May 2012 ran a story headlined “Arrest perpetrators of Gukurahundi massacres.” And The News Day also ran a story headlined “Wounds that will never heal” in reference to the 2008 presidential run off violence.

The civil society were also not left behind in this stance as shown by the 2011 Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum document which stated that, “Victims were ready to forgive the perpetrators of violence BUT they want that to be done in an atmosphere where truth about what happened is

told. Some (victims) also want the offenders to be prosecuted while very few expressed feelings of revenge. Others also want to be compensated.

Moses Mzila-Ndlovu, who replaced Gibson Sibanda on the organ following the death of the MDC founder, summed up the civil society and private media sentiments saying, “ZANU-PF was making a mistake by trying to sweep the Gukurahundi issue under the carpet because many people are still angry about the massacres and want the issue discussed in public and they also want compensation.”

Private and public press – Two sides of a coin

The private press proved to be champions of intolerance and abusive language toward ZANU-PF while the public press proved to be champions of inflammatory language in disparaging the two MDC parties. Hate language became the hallmark for both sides as they all portrayed violence as being perpetrated by the political party they do not support.

Invisible ONHRI

The three publications under study rarely mentioned the existence of the ONHRI in their reports. The organ itself is also silent on its activities, failing to assist or conscientise the media on what it is doing. To date nothing has been published about the activities of ONHRI during its 4 year existence. There was however a clear lack of confidence in the fewer occasions that the organ was mentioned by name. The herald actually mentioned the organ once in the whole of the year 2012 in which on 1 June 2012 it ran a story headline, “We were never party to the panel of elders – ZANU-PF.” Very little was done by the press to create awareness and the importance of the ONHRI.

Most of the organ’s activities were deemed not newsworthy but ONHRI documents suggest that the organ embarked on a number of Diaspora engagement programs that saw them visit countries such as Belgium, Australia, the United States of America and South Africa to engage stakeholders. They also conducted study missions to Rwanda and Kenya to learn their experience. In Zimbabwe, they established offices in all the 10 provinces of the country. But these activities were not covered mainly because they did not have a public relation desk. The organ also compiled a Zimbabwe Political Parties Code of Conduct for elections and in August 2011 they held a workshop with editors from different outlets trying to persuade the newspapers to help them reach the general public but the editors were emphatic in their response by categorically stating that they did not want to be told what to write. The editors were also clear in stating that their editorial thrust make it difficult to find anything newsworthy from ONHRI activities. In response ONHRI wanted to sponsor a National Healing Journalist of the Year award, which has so far remained a dream.

Discussion of findings

The press can be instruments of conflict resolution and national healing if they present a reliable account of events on the ground, but as seen in the findings of this paper, true to Mhanda's 2011 view on the media, the press can destroy dreams as well as building societies. The press in the Zimbabwean effort toward national healing and reconciliation, acted as a double edged sword in which they proved to be a frightful weapon of violence by propagating messages of intolerance and disinformation by manipulating public opinion..

The social responsibility theory of the press states that, according to McQuail (2005), a responsible press should be able to provide a full, trustful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning. This was however not the case with both the private the public press in Zimbabwe in their coverage of the national healing process. This paper also found out that political economy played a major role in the coverage of the national healing process by the Zimbabwean press.

Curran and Gurevitch (2000), in explaining the role of political economy in news coverage, stated that, "Rupert (Murdock) expects his papers to stand broadly for what he believes," and in the same vein the Zimbabwean newspaper owners also expect the publications to stand for their political and national healing beliefs. Herman and Chomsky (1988) clarifies the operations of the media in their propaganda model by saying that, "the powerful are able to fix the premise of discourse, to decide what the general populace is allowed to see, hear and think about and to manage public opinion" through the media. Thus, just as was the case with the coverage of the national healing process in Zimbabwe, ownership and control of the press by the powerful lead to circulation of texts which serve the interests of those owners.

As agenda setters, the private and the public press in Zimbabwe were able to indicate the area of focus for public attention with regards to the national healing process. The press attached a certain level of importance to different national healing events with the idea of luring public attention and discussion and consequently laying the foundation for public opinion.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Organ for National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration should do more to be visible so as to improve acceptability before the Zimbabwean populace. The ONHRI should improve its interaction with the media by holding conferences and workshop with politicians, the general public and the media itself. The organ should also do more to equip the journalists with the skills of reporting on national healing issues by conducting training workshops for them.

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