



**A week of protests - From Beitbridge to the
shutdown**

How was the conflict reported?

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1. Background

The events in the seven days beginning 1 July 2016, starting with the protests in the border town of Beitbridge have been momentous in the history of Zimbabwe. The reportage of these events show that there is no one story on Zimbabwe, but several stories, told from various perspectives, and the citizen is found in the middle, battling to decipher the truth. These narratives presented by the traditional media houses, social and alternative (mainly online) media as well as official statements make truth a tenuous concept, as facts are sometimes lost in a sometimes-tinted view of the world. Questions that arise include, after all the stories have been told, does the world have a clear idea of the current crisis in Zimbabwe, its root causes, possible impact, key players and what the possible resolution will look like? Do we have a clear idea of what the Zimbabwean story is? What is the role of the media in all this?

Professional journalism is called upon to be truthful, fair, accurate and balanced, playing a critical role in informing the public and promoting public accountability, two critical preconditions for democracy. For the media in any country to adequately fulfil its role to promote access to information for the public, and deepen public participation in governance, the moral imperative to provide a fair, accurate, balanced and complete story is critical. These expectations are not placed on social and alternative media, however as the events of the week (1 – 7 July) unfolded, non-traditional alternative sources of news and information (social and online) its role more than any other time to present that story which would have remained untold in their absence was critical.

In its analysis of the presentation of the “story of protest”, Media Monitors looked at how the different media presented a story that allows people to make sense of what was and continues to happen. While the current situation has its roots in protracted challenges in the economic and political spheres, events in the last week reflected heightening tensions. On the 1st of July many people were confronted with images of a burning building mostly on whatsapp which speculated that this was happening in Beitbridge. However, these speculations were later confirmed by mainstream media reports on events. Media reports of the period 1 – 8 July 2016 show the trajectory of events as follows:

Friday 1 July – Protests break out in the border town of Beitbridge

Saturday/ Sunday

Monday 4 July – Protests break out in Harare suburbs of Epworth, Ruwa and Mufakose

Zimbabweans in Britain heckled Minister Patrick Chinamasa as he left Chatham House in London

Tuesday 5 July Civil servants go on strike over unpaid salaries

Wednesday 6 July National shutdown; Protests in different parts of the country; Some violence experienced in Bulawayo and Harare, temporary shutdown of Whatsapp

Thursday 7 July Business as usual

2. The Beitbridge protest

What happened in Beitbridge on Friday the 1st of July? Reports show that protests broke out in the border town of Beitbridge. They indicated that protesters were angry at the implementation of Statutory Instrument 64 of 2016 which controls the import and export of certain goods. The protests turned violent and a warehouse belonging to the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA) was set alight.

Framing the protests

2.1 The events

According to ZBC TV news on the 1st of July, the Beitbridge protests were caused by protesters on the South African side of the border. The ZBC said protests on the South African side stopped Zimbabweans from entering South Africa. *The Herald* reported on (2/7) that "Musina has been hardest hit by the new import regulations under SI 64" and that some Indian and Ethiopian "businessmen" in Musina closed their shops for over six hours to "demonstrate and block that country's component of the border." The tone on reporting on events on ZBC changed on the 2nd of July when the station started reporting on the protesters as "lawless" elements.

On Saturday the 2nd of July, the *NewsDay* and the *Daily News* reported that Beitbridge border had been shut down. The *NewsDay* in its report “Beitbridge on Fire” stated “This was the first time that the border established over a century ago had to be shut down”. The *Daily News* also reported, “Demo shuts down border...angry protesters go on the rampage” Ironically page two of the *Daily News* carries this story alongside a statement by ZIMRA “advising members of the public that Beitbridge border post has not been closed”. *The Herald’s* report “Violent scenes rock Beitbridge” stated, “The South African component of the border was closed between 6 and 12 in the morning but later opened”

While all newspaper reports indicate that the border post was indeed closed momentarily, official comment as seen in the *Daily News* seems to indicate otherwise, stating that travellers were facing “difficulties” but the border was never closed. While official statements are meant to establish the truth, in this instance they seemed to be adding to the confusion. Only the *Daily News’* source, Limpopo (South African) police spokesperson Romel Otto, the only official source quoted in the stories, gave an indication that the border was indeed closed. He is quoted as having said, “There were indeed protests...involving 200 people... shop owners and traders. It lasted for 6 hours... However the border is now operating”. Instead of the denial by ZIMRA, it would have been useful to hear an official account of this momentous event.

Reporting on the issue, especially when placed alongside the official statement presents a conflicting narrative of events, the media stating that something quite momentous did happen, according to the *Newsday* the “first time” in over a century and the State insisting it is “much-ado-about- nothing”.

2.2. Who were the protesters?

The descriptive language used in news reports helps create meaning around the issue in the eyes of the reader, and creates negative or positive feelings around people involved. Nowhere was this much clearer than in the presentation of the protestors in Beitbridge. After reading the reports, the questions become, were these angry citizens, unruly hoodlums, South African business people... or was there the mysterious “third force”?

In describing the protesters, the *Daily News* indicated that these were “angry protesters”, “angry Zimbabweans”, cross border traders and described them in some instances as shop owners and traders. The *NewsDay* said protesters were “angry citizens”.

The Herald on the other hand said that “A mob” had torched the ZIMRA warehouse, and that “hoodlums” blocked the roads. This “mob” is faceless and hoodlums not proper law abiding citizens were behind the protests. ZBC News blamed the protests on South African business people and in its bulletin on the 2nd of July showed Minister of State Security who is also Beitbridge East Member of Parliament Kembo Mohadi saying South African business people were to blame for the protests and were responsible for bussing people to the protests. Further reports by the ZBC claimed the existence of a “third force”. Kembo Mohadi is again quoted saying, the “criminals” (*The Sunday News*, 3 July 2016) “the way they carried out operations is unlike Zimbabweans. Our people are known for holding peaceful demonstrations, rather than vandalizing or burning tyres.”

What emerges at this point are two competing narratives of these protests. If these were legitimate citizens as presented mostly by the private press, protesting the ban on imports, they would have legitimate interests that need to be protected and genuine complaints that should be addressed. On the other hand describing these nameless faceless people as “a mob”, backed by criminal elements that are not Zimbabweans, explains the State’s response, forcefully suppressing these protests without negotiation. This however does not solve the root problem behind the protests.

2.3 Why did they protest?

Was this a citizens’ protest or was this a politically motivated event? The role of the media in providing a context in which to make sense of the news is critical. While Beitbridge marked a turning point in the Zimbabwean conflict, that Zimbabwe has been in a prolonged state of conflict is undeniable. Is there a clear presentation of the root causes of conflict that allows the media to play a key role in the resolution of this conflict? The immediate spark that led to the Beitbridge protest was the implementation of the now almost infamous SI 64.2016 and all media houses agreed on this point. However, while this ban has been presented as such by most media, government sources still insist this is not a ban but these are “restrictive measures”.

Home Affairs Deputy Minister Obedingwa Mguni for example is quoted in *The Sunday Mail* saying the government did not ban imports but put in place these restrictive measures.

While the SI is seen as the spark that led to the protests in Beitbridge, two different narratives arise. According to *The Sunday Mail* of 3 July 2016, most people at the border on that Friday were business people. What this presumes is that these business people did not have any complaints and that if they did, because Zimbabweans are “peaceful” they could not have possibly been part of these demonstrations. *The Sunday Mail* therefore quoted State Security minister Kembo Mohadi and Killer Zivhu, Zimbabwe Cross Border Traders Association President saying that cross border traders had no reason to complain. The story, “Third Force behind border violence” linked the protests to various groups, from “a sinister third force”; to “known political activists” who had “tried to incite violence” in Harare over cash shortages and the relocation of vendors from Harare’s CBD; to “criminal elements” who wanted to loot goods from warehouses, shops and cars; to “opposition political parties”; to people with t-shirts “emblazoned with the hash tag *Tajamuka*”.... This protest was presented therefore by *The Sunday Mail*, not as a citizens’ protest but a professionally planned protest by cynical elements. Given the long history of the government’s regime change narrative and its stance on opposition politics in Zimbabwe, the official position on why these protests happened is almost predictable. The narrative continued with *The Sunday Mail*’s (10/7) lead story “US, France behind violence” which blamed the US and France for sponsoring these protests.

On the other hand, private media have presented these protests as a result of a disgruntled citizenry protesting against economic hardships. *The Standard* (3/5/2016) quoted an analyst, Rick Mukonza who said, “the greatest threat this government is facing is from its own citizens and not external forces.” The same story highlights challenges faced by Zimbabwe that include mismanagement, corruption, unemployment, non-payment of civil servants’ salaries among others. The private media mostly brought out citizen complaints “...**The residents were demonstrating against socio-economic hardships and government’s heavy-handedness in crushing peaceful protests...**” Though the private media did not dwell so much on the violence that occurred it portrayed the protesters as people and not rowdy misfits. (*NewsDay & Daily News* 4 and 6 July 2016).

3. The Monday protests

On Monday the 4th of July, protests broke out in some parts of Harare such as Epworth, Ruwa and Mufakose. The protests were blamed on touts as well as “mushikashika” operators by the Secretary General of Greater Association of Commuter Omnibus operators, Mr Ngoni Katsvairo.

The dual narrative in the mainstream media on framing the Monday protests; the background to the protest, who the protesters are and other issues continued in the media. *The Herald* (5/7) presented the Monday protests as an illegal demonstration by “rowdy” touts who need to be reined in by the police. *The Herald* story pointed out that “Touting is illegal as it is akin to extortion”. This ensured that the framing of the rest of the Monday protest was based on the “illegal” nature of touting. The protesters were therefore described as rowdy, “hoodlums” “violent hooligans”, and looters linked to the British and Americans and the opposition MDC – T. These hooligans burnt tyres on the roads, blocked roads with rocks and looted a Bakers Inn truck. The police are described as brave saviours of the innocent citizens who include school children and they “**had to**” use teargas and water cannons to “disburse the violent hooligans who were toyi-toying along the roads and harassing commuters”. *The Herald* in this instance framed this demonstration as a protest by touts and rank marshals, who are illegal and were involved in illegal acts. Even when *The Herald* indicated that they were protesting against heavy police presence on the roads, the frame of interpreting these events had already been developed.

On the other end, private dailies (*NewsDay* and *Daily News*) present the riots as a response by angry citizens resisting increased economic pressure. The *Daily News* (5/7) said protesters were “angry omnibus crews” and “fed-up Zimbabweans”. The *NewsDay* said these protests were carried out by “residents demonstrating against socio-economic hardships”; and that while commuter omnibus drivers and touts protesting against police roadblocks sparked these, “restive residents” also joined in. The language used to describe this protest, as with the Beitbridge protest indicated that protesters are citizens with a legitimate complaint against some part of the state system. While the papers noted the violent nature of the protests they also acknowledged that concerns raised on heavy police presence on the roads and economic hardships are legitimate concerns by citizens.

4. The Shutdown

On Wednesday the 6th of July, a shutdown was called by Pastor Evan Mawarire, leader of the #ThisFlag campaign. The shutdown entailed the closure of businesses for the day and a stay away by workers. Newspapers were divided in their presentation of events with an official narrative presented by *The Herald*, Chronicle and the ZBC. *The Herald* of Wednesday the 6th of July said, “Business as usual, gvt tells workers...” and “...police ready to deal with rogues.” While the government was ready to insist that all was business as usual, there was also the threat of the State’s might falling upon those “rogues” who may have wanted to be part of this stay away.

4.1 Who was behind it?

The call to stay away was first made by Pastor Evan Mawarire. Pastor Evan Mawarire made waves with a video posted on YouTube on the 19th of April 2016 titled "This Flag - A Lament of Zimbabwe". Barely 3 months later, Pastor Mawarire posted a video on the 4th of July calling on "Zimbabweans to shut down Zimbabwe". Before the video on the 19th of April and the subsequent #ThisFlag little was known of Pastor Mawarire. *The Herald* however said this call was made by “malcontents seeking to destabilize the country”, “agents of illegal regime change” and civil society organisations. Again this protest was framed as illegal, a planned event by a small group of people who are anti government, regime change agents sponsored by Western countries. The call made by Pastor Mawarire was of a stay-away, however *The Herald* collapsed this with other calls made by people on social media (who went unnamed) who apparently threatened violence against those that did report for work. With these statements, the narrative of the #ThisFlag campaign and other social groups of this nature, as a regime change agenda was made.

The stay-away coincided with a job action by civil servants who had not been paid their June salaries. *The Herald* presents a contradictory statement about the job action by teachers. The APEX Council (the civil servants labour organisations’ umbrella body) is widely reported to have called for a strike from the 5th of July 2016 after failed salary payment negotiations, and this is acknowledged by *The Herald* when it quotes “teachers and nurses” who said they would only go back to work when their salaries are paid. The confusion comes when the paper quotes two

government ministers (Joseph Made and Supa Mandiwanzira) who indicate that there are people who want to “take advantage” of the civil servants and that they should come to work anyway and ignore calls for the job action by people who want to take advantage of them. Who these people are is not clear, as it seems civil servants at their own instigation decided to hold this strike. The link that is therefore made by the ministers’ statement on the strike and the stay away on the 6th of July is tenuous at best. In the same story, the APEX Council distanced itself from any political and social groups.

That *The Herald* did not mention the people behind the shutdown, choosing instead to label them “malcontents” and “agents of regime change” again explains the violent response by the police with Senior Assistant Commissioner Charity Charamba in a related story threatening to deal with any “rogues”. While the presence of violence is not to be dismissed, legitimate interests and concerns by citizens are not to be dismissed.

In a story, “Tension as Zim shutdown begins”, the *NewsDay* reported that civil servants and other workers were expected to stay away from work. The *NewsDay* separated the civil servants action and the #ThisFlag campaign shutdown including the forces behind each. It quotes the Zimbabwe Teachers Association (ZIMTA)’s circular calling for the job action citing “unilateral shifting of pay dates” and a failure to reach agreement after negotiations with the government. The “national shutdown” on the other hand which did coincide with the civil service strike was called, according to the *Newsday* by “groups of activists” such as the #ThisFlag group, #Tajamuka/Sijikile, the Cross-Border Traders’ Association as well as opposition parties. As with the Beitbridge protests, the *NewsDay* presents pressure groups as citizens with legitimate interests and concerns who have a legitimate right to protest over the prevailing situation.

While *The Herald* and the *NewsDay* treated the civil servants action and the Shut down as linked events, through their inclusion in the same story, albeit in completely different ways, the third daily newspaper the *Daily News* presents these as separate events although with the same weight as they both appeared on the front page of the publication. The *Daily News* story “Teachers, nurses go on strike” was the only one on the 6th of July which looked in-depth at the

effects of the job action on citizens, particularly students who were without teachers and patients at public hospitals who were not attended to.

4.2 The ruling party's response

The *Daily News* presented on the 6th of July a different dimension to the protests, one which considers the impact of the protests and the reaction of the ruling elite to the protests, as these protests were directed at them. In its lead story, "ZANU PF panics over Zim chaos... as today's mass protests gather momentum", The *Daily News* quotes sources who say that ZANU PF, the ruling party was set to hold an emergency politburo meeting to discuss the protests. The meeting it seems was set to map a response to the protests, and the importance of these meetings in setting the national agenda was not missed. Speculation by Former MDC-T adviser Alex Magaisa was that the party would "react viciously to anything that threatens its survival".

And the actual public response by the ruling party? *The Herald* on Thursday the 7th of July reported on the results of the ZANU PF Politburo meeting, which were:

1. The party endorsed enactment of SI 64 of 2016 and its implementation - (Implementation of the SI imposing import and export restrictions was the main cause of the Beitbridge protests)
2. The ruling party is convinced that the Beitbridge protests were sponsored by "some MDC elements and other opposition parties" and "persons from across the Bridge" (South Africa?), the Harare ones led by "leaders of vendors associations, some shadowy groups calling themselves by various names" but these too are sponsored "by Western embassies and some failed political parties and politicians"
3. Any protests would be dealt with "severely and they will have no one else to blame"

In short, the idea of any widespread citizen protest is dismissed by the ruling party. These protests have been placed squarely within the "regime change" narrative, political happenings that are bent on removing a legitimate government. Whatever concerns were raised by the protestors were dismissed, and instead are pushing the narrative which places responsibility on external forces, who need to be dealt with.

4.3 What happened on the 6th?

The 6th of July was the Shutdown, however, several other events took place on this day. The reportage on these different events was as interesting, as it was divergent, specifically in terms of the outcome of these events, was there a successful "shutdown" or not?

NewsDay claims, "Nation heeds stay away call" and *The Herald* on the other hand says, "Strike heeded, shutdown ignored", now which was it? While *The Herald* of the 6th says government called for "Business as usual", the *Daily News* asks, "Beginning of the end?" The private media in this instance said that the Zimbabwe came to a standstill as citizens stayed away from their places of work. *NewsDay* noted that informal traders markets in Harare's Mbare, Glen View and Machipisa complexes were quiet, hospital workers did not go to work, and bus operators in Mutare withdrew their buses. *Daily News* said the nationwide strike was "stunningly successful". *The Herald* said Zimbabweans "largely ignored calls for a stayaway".... and said the organisers "cunningly" held the stay away at the same time with the civil servants strike "to claim false success". Therefore the claim was that the call to strike was heeded but the shutdown was not.

In addition to the stay away, some areas around the country experienced other protests. These areas included Harare's Mufakose Budiriro suburbs, Glen Norah and Warren Park; Bulawayo, Masvingo and Chipinge. Reports of arrests of protesters were made around the country. In Plumtree, 7 taxi operators were arrested for trying to stage a demonstration against police roadblocks on Wednesday the 6th. (*Chronicle*, 9/7). 16 people were arrested in Victoria Falls on Wednesday the 6th for being a public nuisance and conducting an unlawful gathering (*Chronicle* 8/7). 105 protesters are reported to have been arrested in the protests on Monday the 4th of July in Harare (*NewsDay* 7/7) and 85 people were arrested in Bulawayo on Wednesday the 6th. (*The Standard* 10/7). The total count of arrests made is yet to be clarified by the media.

4.4 SADC and the protests

The SADC region has been heavily involved in the Zimbabwe conflict and was instrumental in mediating the 2008 discussions that resulted in the Global Political Agreement (GPA). The role of SADC in Zimbabwe was bound to find some space in the media following the protests. The

private media carried stories that looked at the role of the regional body. The *Daily News* (7/7) declared that "Zim back on the SADC agenda". The story looked at the South African response to the Beitbridge protests where it noted concerns by South Africa that the import ban would affect that country. In addition, MDC T leader Morgan Tsvangirai is quoted calling on SADC to place Zimbabwe on the agenda, and called for fresh elections to be supervised by SADC, the AU and the UN. The *NewsDay* also carried stories encouraging SADC to intervene in the crisis. The paper quotes the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV) in its call "to ensure protesters rights are not abused". The paper notes that this statement came following calls by South African opposition party, the Democratic Alliance urging the country's president Jacob Zuma to "act on the crisis in Zimbabwe"

5. The Official narrative

The week beginning the 1st of July saw a large number of statements by government bodies that reflected their response to the protests. The statements by the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP), Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ), and the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ) aimed at controlling the public protests and in two cases setting limitations on speech and expression by the public.

5.1 The Zimbabwe Republic Police

On the 4th of July, the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) issued a statement that "warned" people against public violence. The statement, signed by Senior Assistant Commissioner, Charity Charamba warned against "misconduct" and "social unrest" and said such conduct would be severely dealt with. In addition, it stated that the police were heavily deployed to deal with the situation. While it did not give names, the statement said the police had the names of "criminal elements" behind the social unrest. (ZBC TV News at 2000hrs). The statement by the police was clear in terms of how the police would deal with the protests. Since the statement was released, pictures and videos showing police beating up protesters have been circulating on the internet.

5.2 Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ)

The Authority released a statement on the 6th of July, the day of the Shutdown where it noted that itself and Telecommunications service providers were concerned by

"the gross irresponsible use of social media and telecommunication services made through our infrastructure and communication platforms over the past few days.

We would like all Zimbabweans to know that we are completely against this behaviour and therefore advise that anyone generating, passing on or sharing such abusive and subversive materials which are tantamount to criminal behaviour, will be disconnected and the law will take its course.

All sim cards in Zimbabwe are registered in the name of the user. Perpetrators can easily be identified.

We are therefore warning all members of the public that from the date of this notice, any person caught in possession of, generating, sharing or passing on abusive, threatening, subversive or offensive telecommunication messages, including whatsapp or any other social media messages that may be deemed to cause despondency, incite violence, threatens citizens and causes unrest will be arrested" and dealt with accordingly in the national interest." (ZBC Bulletin at 1300hrs on 6 July 2016)

What the authority and telecommunications service providers meant by "gross irresponsible use" particularly of whatsapp which was mentioned in the statement was not defined, neither was "generating, passing on or sharing such abusive and subversive materials".

5.3 The Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ)

BAZ circulated a letter to all Zimbabwe's broadcasters (Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation - ZBC, AB Communications (Pvt) Ltd t/a Zi FM, Zimpapers Ltd t/a Star FM Diamond FM, Ray of Hope Pvt Ltd t/a Ya FM) dated 4 July 2016, under the heading "Programme Content and Presentation". In the letter, the BAZ CEO, O. Muganyura said,

"In view of the current disturbances taking place in some parts of the country and the broadcaster's general mandate to inform the citizens on current affairs... Please take note in your portrayal or reportage of news and current affairs programming of section 26 of the

Broadcasting Services (Licensing and Content) Regulations of 2004 which among the provisions requires you do not broadcast programmes that incite, encourage or glamorise violence of brutality. We also advise that you be technically equipped to handle live programmes and avoid broadcasting obscene and undesirable comments from participants, callers and audiences in accordance with 18(a)."

Conclusion

By the end of the week, it was clear that the crisis in Zimbabwe had shifted from previous years, with more citizens taking part in protests. While the narrative from government and media it controls remained focused on the protests within the "regime change" discourse sponsored by the West, private media revealed that the protests have a new face, citizens of Zimbabwe are more involved and groups beyond mainstream opposition political parties are at the forefront. Social media has been defined as a new battle front and the State has declared war on it citing "national interest" and "state security" concerns. Broadcasting media, as shown by the BAZ letter remains a domain under government control, and where need be, the authorities "guide" reporting under vague guidelines on content. The mainstream media in the one week of protests presented an interesting take on events, although they were yet to provide a holistic analysis of them. Reports were mostly made from singular perspectives that pitted the State against the citizens. While the media will report from a specific viewpoint, it remains critical that they do so in a fair, balanced, accurate and complete manner, if they are to adequately tell the Zimbabwean story in a way that allows citizens to make sense of the lived reality.

Ends//