

## Social Media in Zimbabwe: A Toxic Tool or a Future Bridge to Peace?

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### **Abstract**

The rise of social media in Zimbabwe has brought with it a greater variety of platforms which offer people a means to express themselves. However, the democratisation of information and the increase in digital spaces have also come with greater state restriction and polarisation among Zimbabweans. This policy brief intends to discuss the state's attempts to act as the proctor of social media in order to explore the relations between users of online platforms in terms of political leanings and gender. To this end, it will also discuss the damaging effects of online targeting and how it can exacerbate already existing political divisions between people. The paper will also discuss how the state uses legal instruments to surveil and regulate online activity as a way of maintaining its iron grip on the people.

### **Introduction**

Since the establishment of the modern nation-state of Zimbabwe, the state has exercised various restrictions on media through licensing laws and censorship, but with the rise of social media as a transmitter of news, digital platforms have far outstripped the traditional formats; the newspaper, radio and television are no longer the sole source of information. At least six million people are estimated to have access to the internet in Zimbabwe. Facebook and WhatsApp dominate the market share followed by Twitter and YouTube. With their phenomenal growth, social media platforms in Zimbabwe, have become an outlet for some citizens to vent frustration at the state and to mobilise for civil action against an economic or political issue.

However, social media also has its dark side.

Due to the restrictive laws governing the media and the use of the internet, Zimbabwe is ranked as partly free by the Freedom House On The Net report. In 2018 and out of 100 countries, Zimbabwe was placed 53<sup>rd</sup>.

With more users making use of the instant nature of social media and the cover of anonymity it gives, it has also become a tool to target unpopular public figures.

As a country, Zimbabwe is sharply divided along political lines, split between supporters of the ruling Zanu-PF party and supporters of opposition parties, key among them the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). This polarisation traces its roots back to Zimbabwe's founding Prime Minister, Robert Mugabe, who had a desire to create a one-party state. As leader of the nationalist liberation movement Mugabe pushed the idea of singularity.

"We have had the philosophy of a one-party state for a very long time. It's an African philosophy," he said.

Throughout the decades of his rule, voices of opposition were crushed and, despite the rise of multi-party democracy in the late 1990s, the one-party ideology remained strong. The peak of Zimbabwe's political crisis came in the 2000s with the formation of the MDC which, made up of trade unionists and lawyers, challenged the Mugabe regime but was violently crushed by state security units and also the ruling party's youth league. The state-sponsored violence of the 2000s and prior ethnic massacres of the 1980s, which resulted in the military's killing of at least 20,000 civilians in south-western Zimbabwe, created resentment and division between those who were 'with' the liberators, Zanu-PF, and the 'sell-outs' who supported any opposition party.

The deep-seated trauma of past political violence and economic collapse of the 2000s has deeply divided people. The continued allegations of vote-rigging and disputes over election outcomes has deepened divisions. And despite President Emmerson Mnangagwa's promise of a 'new dispensation' after the de facto coup against Robert Mugabe in November 2017, Mnangagwa's increasingly authoritarian and militarised approach to governance in a tough economic environment has also entrenched people's political standings and this is played out in online debates over issues or in character assassinations of public figures.

As shall be discussed below, female politicians and civil servants have been the main victims of online vitriol and slander. Although the state has also moved to draft strict laws regulating usage, they seem to be more focused on safeguarding the state rather than protecting individuals from the braying, digital mobs.

## **Political Environment**

In March 2013, Zimbabwe held a referendum in support of a new Constitution that gave greater freedoms to its people; however, many of the country's laws have not been aligned with the Constitution, the country's most supreme law. Section 61 in particular, which guarantees the right to freedom of expression, has many laws which contradict it. S61 says citizens have the, "freedom to seek, receive and communicate ideas and other information."

Under then-President Robert Mugabe, the dominant government view was that social media was a tool of dissent intended to topple the regime. In 2017, the Ministry of Cyber-security, Mitigation and Threat Detection was created to monitor online communications. When the Ministry was established, then-President Mugabe described it thus:

“We have set up the Cyber Security Ministry to build our own cyber systems to defend ourselves from cybercrime. We are aware that there are some people who use the internet to fight us and implement what they say is regime change.”

Although the ministry was later disbanded by Mugabe’s successor, one highly-publicised arrest was made during its short existence. In October 2017, Martha O’Donovan, an American citizen working in Harare, was arrested, charged with subversion of the state and insulting the former president. O’Donovan was held in a maximum-security prison, accused of posting an insulting tweet that described Mugabe as a “goblin” and urged regime change. She was charged under Section 33 (2) of the existing Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act [*Chapter 9:23*].

For months the case was put on remand as state prosecutors failed to prepare their argument. It was eventually withdrawn from the High Court and the charges against O’Donovan were dropped in January 2018. However, this matter shows the state’s ability to use a combination of laws to criminalise online activity and incite hatred from supporters of the Mugabe regime. A month later, following internal divisions within Mugabe’s ruling party, the veteran ruler was overthrown in a military-backed coup. Once the new leadership of President Emmerson Mnangagwa took over, the ministry was deemed unnecessary; however, despite the disbanding of the ministry, online surveillance of individuals continues.

The Cybercrimes and Cybersecurity Bill is currently being debated in parliament. Politicians say it is designed to curb online criminal activity, and also to target social media users spreading fake news and to “tarnish” people, according to Energy Mutodi, the Deputy Minister of Information, Publicity and Broadcasting Services.

The Interception of Communications Act 2007 is also a key piece of legislation that permits communications surveillance. The Universal Periodic Review (2016) has strongly criticised the law because it fails to adhere to international human rights standards on privacy and investigation. For example, intelligence agencies are permitted to conduct inquiries which sometimes go beyond the law and criminalise certain types of speech such as insulting a high-ranking member of government.

### **Pushing the Limits of Freedom**

On 14 December 2018 at the annual gathering of Zanu-PF, Zimbabwe’s ruling party, President Mnangagwa called on the party youth to be vigilant and engage dissenters on social media. “*Rakashanai pama social media*” he said urging the Youth League to battle it out online and defend the party. When Mnangagwa made the statement, Zimbabwe’s social media landscape was already highly polarised, with users split between Zanu-PF supporters, known as *varakashi* or warriors, and supporters of main opposition leader, Nelson Chamisa,

known as 'Nerrorists'. This term is a combination of Nero, a common nickname for Nelson, and terrorist because the opposition are seen by critics as terrorisers.

During the 2018 elections, online supporters would lobby in support of their respective party and also send out distasteful messages from one group trying to discredit the other. Rumours that Chamisa, of the rebranded Movement for Democratic Change Alliance (MDC), was aligned to former First Lady Grace Mugabe went viral on Zimbabwean social media platforms. Although Chamisa distanced himself from the claims, state-owned media continued to publish the story, using social media sources, to suggest the former First Family was still desperate to find ways to get back into power.

*Nerrorists*, Chamisa's supporters, have also been badly portrayed in the opinion columns of the local state daily, The Herald:

"*Nerrorists* are all over social media and on the ground – the kind of people who would burn alive other human beings because they do not agree with the Gospel According (sic) to Nero. [Nelson]." (11/04/2018 Zindoga)

Shortly after elections were held on 30 July 2018, the delay in announcing the results caused anxiety and suspicion of tampering with the outcome of presidential polls. In a volatile atmosphere of vote rigging allegations, false results being published online and tweets claiming victory by opposition figures, thousands of MDC supporters took to the streets in protest on 1 August. The fiery demonstrations led to a brutal crackdown by the military which resulted in seven deaths and scores of bullet injuries. Shortly after protests had been crushed, President Mnangagwa took to the internet and 'blamed' the opposition for causing chaos and inciting a heavy-handed response. *Nerrorists* hit back and criticised Mnangagwa for his lack of sympathy while the *Varakashi* shared Mnangagwa's viewpoint and blamed the MDC for the violence.

An independent commission of inquiry into the post-election violence led by former South African President, Kgalema Motlanthe, found that "[f]ake, fabricated and biased news on social media contributed to the violence." The report also condemned the use of live fire, whips and baton sticks by the military, portraying this as an "unjustified and disproportionate" response. The Motlanthe Commission recommended a review of laws governing cyberspace to curb abuse against others.

Though the 1 August protests ended in the arrest of scores of opposition activists and supporters, they did not stop public discontent.

## **The Internet Shutdown**

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of January 2019, citizens around Zimbabwe took to the streets to protest against a 150 percent fuel price hike. The nationwide action was called for by Evan Mawarire, a Baptist pastor who leads #ThisFlag activist movement and Peter Mutasa, the head of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU). #ThisFlag, a citizen-led movement founded in 2016 through a series of YouTube videos by Mawarire, staged the first mass work stay-away in nearly a decade to protest the economic decline and increasing repression under

President Mugabe. Mawarire's call to action was seen as a treasonous act and the state charged him with attempting to subvert a constitutionally elected government. Fearful for his life, Mawarire fled to South Africa then sought temporary exile in the US.

Under a new leader, Mnangagwa, the economy was in freefall and the military increasingly heavy-handed in its handling of civilian protests, so Mawarire in partnership with the trade unions called to the masses to stay away from work. Indeed, the people stayed away from their jobs and protested in their neighbourhoods on the 14<sup>th</sup> of January. However, on the second day of the demonstrations, which had taken on a more violent tone, the government ordered internet service providers to shut down the internet. Using the Interception of Communications Act (2007), the Minister of State in the President's Office for National Security ordered the shutting down of the whole internet system on safety grounds. However, the legality of the order was challenged in court and it was declared illegal because the President had not authorised the Minister to act as required by law.

Although the court's interpretation is seen as a minor victory by activists, there are two issues of concern; firstly, according to the law, the power to act is vested in the president; only the Head of State can make the call. It is concerning that up to a dozen laws regulating freedom of expression and responding to protest depend on a decision by the executive. Secondly, in spite of the communications blockade, the protests continued for several days. People continued to barricade their neighbourhoods in protest and local shopping centres were looted and damaged by protesters. The riots only died down days later when security forces launched day and night-time raids on protesting areas. Soldiers and police are accused of using live ammunition which resulted in the deaths of at least 17 people, and 17 women also claim they were raped by uniformed forces during the nocturnal raids.

Amid strong condemnation from the international community, the courts ordered the internet be switched back on. However, the consequences of the January protest have been far reaching. The internet shutdown which extended to internet phone calls, electronic banking transactions and emails, had an adverse effect on many businesses causing financial losses. Many could not operate during the tense protest; infrastructure was destroyed and stock was stolen from many shops while ordinary non-protesting citizens could not access banking or mobile money services.

Hundreds of people, including minors, were charged with participating in shop looting. The activists who had called for the shutdown, Pastor Mawarire, and labour leader, Mutasa, have been charged with attempted subversion of a constitutionally elected government. It is an ongoing case and if convicted they could serve a maximum of twenty years in prison. Under the regime of President Robert Mugabe, Mawarire, as leader of #ThisFlag was charged with treason for calling for a national stay-away in July 2016.

### **Fake News, Banned Protests and Abductions**

In August, Chamisa's MDC movement called for a series of mass protests against Mnangagwa's legitimacy and the bad state of the economy. The first protest was scheduled for the 16<sup>th</sup> of August in Harare, but the day before the protest, fake news of cancellation of the protest was rife on social media, while police with loudspeakers did the rounds in the

capital discouraging people from joining in. At the Supreme Court on the morning of the proposed march, the opposition challenged the police order prohibiting the demonstration, but they lost. Riot police violently cleared hundreds of protesters who had gathered for the march. In Bulawayo, the second city, the same prohibitory order was issued at the courts, under heavy police presence, and the same followed in other cities where demonstrations were planned.

During this time a number of reports of torture and abductions of opposition members, activists and journalists began to surface online. Throughout August 2019, there have been at least a dozen reports via Twitter, Whatsapp and Facebook of ongoing raids. Several international human rights actors have condemned the brutal action by the Mnangagwa regime which Amnesty International described as a “witch-hunt against anyone who dared challenge his government”. The government has dismissed the allegations of state torture as some cases of fake news and drunken behavior. Energy Mutodi, the Deputy Minister of Information, Publicity and Broadcasting Services, described the assault of Sekai Marashe, a provincial youth assembly chairperson for the MDC, as the result of reckless behaviour.

“No matter how democratic our government can be, we can never guarantee that drunkards and prostitutes stop fighting,” he tweeted to images of an assaulted Marashe.

Samantha Kureya, a comedienne popularly known as Gonyeti, was taken from her home by three masked and armed men, beaten and stripped naked. This alleged abduction and vicious assault was dismissed as not the work of state agents by several government officials including Mutodi and Nick Mangwana, the Permanent Secretary for Information, Publicity and Broadcasting Services.

“Gonyeti Gonyei did a comedy on police accommodation & it’s apparent she has done another one on abductions. We will not be fooled,” Mutodi tweeted.

“Recent activities in Zim (sic) have all the hallmarks of “black ops” hence need to be analysed dispassionately. Who stands to gain from a damage to ED’s local & international prestige? Why would masked people abduct then order victim not to criticize govt? Nicely setting things up?,” tweeted Mangwana.

## **The Abuse of Women Online**

In a study released by Amnesty International in 2018 analysing millions of abusive messages directed at women in over 150 countries, Twitter was described as “a toxic place”. In the absence of substantive research on online abuse towards women in Zimbabwe, those in public positions seem to bear the brunt of offensive sexist comments. It tends to be directed at people based on their political affiliation but as platforms have become more popular, insults towards people based on their gender and ethnicity have become more widespread.

Several women who were running for public office in the 2018 elections complained of online bullying. Although it is not uncommon for women to participate in politics, discrimination and public chastisement of women who run against popular figures is common. Thokozani Khupe leads a smaller breakaway faction of the opposition party, the Movement

for Democratic Change (MDC-T). The split in the opposition caused a rift between supporters of Khupe and Chamisa which led to violent clashes and a court challenge over who had rights to use the party's open palm logo. Supporters of Chamisa trashed her for challenging him. Although Chamisa has regularly condemned the abuse directed at Khupe, it has not stopped. She is still seen as a traitor. As the only female candidate running for the presidency in the July 2018 poll, she was maligned and heckled online for challenging "men" and being a woman who has no place in politics.

Linda Masarira who ran for a parliamentary seat on an opposition ticket is often a target of online abuse. Once an outspoken critic of the Mugabe regime, Masarira is now accused of being a *murakashi*, a supporter of President Mnangagwa, because of her scathing criticism of the MDC-A. Chamisa's Nerrorists have taken her to task for her comments, but in some cases, responses have turned into crude insults touching on her personal life, with Masarira being slandered for how she looks, her marital affairs and her children. Masarira has lodged complaints with Facebook and Twitter but the responses have not been positive, she says.

"Most of the abuse on Facebook and Twitter is written in vernacular, the Facebook team said they are going to look into it and ensure that they employ Shona and other vernacular languages translators to deal with abuse in vernacular. The issue of fake news is still an issue which is proving to be one of the biggest challenges of social media worldwide."

"Twitter response time is too long and they have too many demands to pull an article of fake identity down," she said.

Online abuse against women has not only been one-sided; even Zanu-PF supporters, the *varakashi*, have passed derogatory comments against female politicians such as Joanna Mamombe, an MDC-A parliamentarian, and Fadzayi Mahere, a previously independent candidate who recently joined the MDC-A. Both women have been the target of online abuse and Mamombe was charged with treason for calling for protests against the Mnangagwa regime.

## **Recommendations: Searching for Ways to Build Peace Online**

The social media laws that are currently being drafted by the government seek to regulate what is said online, but they are not designed to stop the hateful, harmful or false narratives that spread at the click of a button.

### **1. Create a National Policy Supporting Online Peacebuilding**

Instead of a state-centred, regulatory approach, a more inclusive alternative could be the creation of a national policy towards online peacebuilding. The role of independent, non-partisan influential actors such as churches could provide leadership toward a greater presence of online peacebuilding programmes.

The peacebuilding initiatives by state, church and civil society actors have largely been focussed on providing platforms for face-to-face dialogue. Workshops, townhall gatherings, conferences and long-running community programmes have been the standard method to



encourage social cohesion. However, focusing on the physically present excludes digital actors where tensions between individuals scattered all over the world still prevail. The National Peace and Reconciliation Commission was created by the constitution in 2013, but it came to life only in 2018. The NPRC has a mandate to ensure healing of past traumas and seek justice for the aggrieved. While the NPRC deals with important issues, its mandate needs to develop an approach to peacebuilding through new digital media.

## **2. Support Peace Mapping in Zimbabwe**

Ushahidi is a peace mapping platform useful for preventing electoral violence. Ushahidi used crowd-sourcing to map violence and direct peace teams to help defuse violence during Kenya's [2007 elections](#), which resulted in at least 1,400 deaths. Ushahidi then evolved into a peace mapping initiative, [Sisi Ni Amani](#). The application maps peacebuilding initiatives among communities and if there are signs of instability within a community, it is easier to identify them. These digital tools could be brought to Zimbabwe. Current mapping projects such as the Zimbabwe Peace Project are focussed only on rights violations and incidences of violence. The monthly mapping report is useful in identifying sites of violence, but it does not show where violence was instigated on the basis of a social media post, nor does it indicate where peace initiatives, both online and offline are taking place in communities.

## **3. Develop an Online Peacebuilding Lab**

Faced with declining socio-economic conditions and ongoing concerns such as climate change that could deepen tensions within a polarised nation, building online spaces for collaboration between people across their divides is key to national cohesion and empowering people in new ways, rather than restricting, so they can participate in solving the problems and crises of the future. In 2018 a [peacebuilding social lab](#), supported by Humanity United was developed as a trial run in the lead-up to the July elections. It was a novel idea aimed at local digital innovators and change-makers developing more inclusive approaches to peacebuilding. According to Humanity United, the lab provided a safe space for people to talk about their experiences and discuss home-grown solutions to online peacebuilding. Initiatives such as these should be long term, to encourage people to think before they post online. "The lab represents a space to build trust among Zimbabweans to arrive at a shared understanding about the hotly contested and deeply polarized nature of their country's conflict. The idea is to create new communities, values, ideas, and activities that take aim at the root causes of conflict and amplify domestically driven solutions to support peace.", reads a [blog post](#) by Humanity United. Efforts like this could be expanded to ensure that Zimbabweans see an alternative for how to talk with people with whom they disagree, and to promote the idea that every person is a key stakeholder in preventing the spread of online hate before it degenerates to social violence.

## **4. Engage Youth in Developing Constructive Digital Media**

Social media programming developed specifically for youth is particularly important in Zimbabwe. More than two-thirds of the country's 14.65 million population is under the age of 35 and this means the youth are a key pillar in building democracy and peace in the future. As the world becomes more technologically advanced it is important to engage the youth,



those who are most likely to maintain online personalities. Training and workshops can help youth learn basic social media literacy, so they can help to dispel disinformation and to defuse polarising content. Youth can be involved in developing positive social media content. More advanced training and workshops could help youth learn critical skills in using social media platforms to build social cohesion, to promote positive messages supporting peace, and to foster skills in using social media for improving democratic dialogue. Youth can be involved in developing social media skits to share on platforms like YouTube or Facebook that could show the alternatives to and the consequences of online hate.

## **5. Foster Demographic Awareness**

In a politically charged society, online media is sometimes a floodgate for all kinds of sexist vitriol, ethnic hatred and age-biased disrespect. The buffer and distance provided by a computer screen or mobile phone makes it easier for people to troll others online, particularly female public figures in Zimbabwe. Digital peacebuilding in Zimbabwe requiring awareness campaigns to help users be more sensitive towards people's gender, ethnicity and age is extremely crucial.

Each of these policy recommendations can help Zimbabwe work towards a national policy that can foster peace and social cohesion online.

## The Author

**Tendai Marima** is a Zimbabwean freelance journalist covering sub-Saharan Africa for international media. Her interest in journalism developed through watching how social media provided a platform for Egyptian and Bahraini activists and how the different governments used the control of the internet as one way of clamping down on the spread of information during the citizen uprisings of 2011. Academically, Tendai has a background in African literature and she has done post-doctoral research on the representations of feminism(s) in Africa. She holds qualifications from the University of Cape Town and Goldsmiths (University of London), but instead of being an academic, journalism represents to her an opportunity to witness and document the construction and deconstruction of narratives in real time.

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