

Chapter 65

Social Media, New ICTs and the Challenges Facing the Zimbabwe Democratic Process

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ABSTRACT

Social media in its various forms drew international attention to Zimbabwe during the most intense period of the Zimbabwe crisis up to 2008. It is arguable that social media activism was contributory to the current dispensation of Government of National Unity between ZANU PF and the former opposition Movement for Democratic Change. Social media induced revolution and mass rejection of the status quo of the magnitude seen in the Arab Spring might be difficult to replicate in Zimbabwe. A similar revolution with different magnitude but critical results unfolds in Zimbabwe, especially since the disputed 2008 presidential elections and the mayhem that followed. The use of new communication technologies helped publicize extra-legal activities and human rights abuses often blamed on ZANU PF affiliated militia groups and the security forces. International attention has led to diplomatic intervention.

INTRODUCTION

There is a major argument that use of social media, especially the posting of stories and footage of brutalities on-line, drew international attention to Zimbabwe and hence in a way was contributory to the current dispensation of Government

of National Unity between Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front) (ZANU PF) and the former opposition Movement for Democratic Change. Social media activism remains important even though social media induced revolution and mass rejection of the status quo of the magnitude seen in the Arab Spring might be difficult to replicate in Zimbabwe. Conservative nationalists in the security sector and paramilitary groups ensure

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-4707-7.ch065

that mass demonstrations against ZANU PF are quashed. Our chapter argues a similar revolution with different magnitude but critical results is unfolding in Zimbabwe, especially since the disputed 2008 presidential elections and the mayhem that followed. The use of new technologies helped publicize extra-legal activities and human rights abuses often blamed on ZANU PF affiliated militia groups, and the security forces. Websites such as www.zimbabwesituation.com, www.kubatana.net, www.sokwanele.com, www.munyor.com and www.newzimbabwe.com complemented the critical privately owned newspapers. These alternative sites of information to the state-controlled media are often criticized by ZANU PF ideologues as “Western funded agents of regime change.”

E-newspapers and blogs reproduced damning empirical stories and pictures that were often picked and reproduced by the political opposition and local and international human rights groups to condemn President Robert Mugabe and ZANU PF at important international gatherings convened by regional and international bodies such as the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), African Union (AU), and the United Nations (UN). Names of abusive security operatives were published on-line during the bloody period between the March 29, 2008 election and the June 27 presidential run-off, which MDC’s Morgan Tsvangirai withdrew from, citing violence and harassment of his supporters. After the disputed June 27 election, the collapse of the Zimbabwean economy, health sector (especially the cholera outbreak that somewhat became the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back) and the diabolic state of Zimbabwe’s prisons were given publicity in e-newspapers and social media sites free from state censorship (Journeymanpictures, 2008). This indirectly resulted in the old ZANU PF nationalist regime hesitating to install a unilateral government, and begrudgingly accepting the SADC and AU endorsed Global Political Agreement (GPA) with the opposition. Exposure arguably restrained

the regime and operative excesses. Communication through Zimbabwean social media sites might not have resulted in popular anti-regime demonstrations but their influence in Zimbabwe-focused international opinion formulation is significant.

Recent African scholarship on ICT critique ‘new’ technologies and journalism practice in Africa. New ICTs are alternatively viewed as presenting African journalists with new opportunities for improved practice (Berger, 1996; Mabweazara, 2010), or as a threat to normative practices. Scholarship on Zimbabwe has focused on how ICTs have assisted in the production of alternative discursive spaces or how the Diaspora use such spaces to influence voters’ opinion back home (Moyo,; 2009; 2010; Mutsvairo, 2010). How social media influence diplomatic opinion formation on the Zimbabwe situation is hardly studied and in this chapter we offer a critical analysis of the relationship between the two.

We purposively critique the contents of selected blogs, on-line newspapers that provide space for audience interactivity and popular Short Message Services (sms) dispatches by social media activists. We also studied hostile utterances and writings on new media and the regime change agenda by ZANU PF ideologues and diplomats which appear in *The Sunday Mail*. As part of our methodology, we conducted interviews with important critical civil society personalities on how their reports are constructed, the influence of social media and ICTs in the production of such reports, and how effective the reports have been in attracting international attention to Zimbabwe. We also critiqued British diplomat Philip Barclay’s *Zimbabwe: Years of Hope and Despair* (2010) to ascertain for sources of information used in constructing perceptions on Zimbabwe and whether civil society activities and social media do fare in his exposé. This work and other sources involving diplomats were complementary in a situation where the diplomats were unwilling to contribute to our research.

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