Chapter 3
Media as Political Actors in Times of Political Crisis

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ABSTRACT

Political crises can (re)configure relations between the media, political institutions, actors, and processes, sometimes in unpredictable ways. By focusing on how two leading Zimbabwean daily newspapers, The Herald and NewsDay framed the controversial entrance of President Robert Mugabe’s wife Grace Mugabe into active politics, the chapter assesses media - politics relations during a political crisis. The chapter uses argumentation and rhetoric analysis to analyse the stories published by the two publications in October 2014, as this was Grace Mugabe’s most politically active period. It argues that during a political crisis, the media become political players that wittingly/unwittingly persuade citizens using argumentation and rhetoric to support certain political positions with real consequences in the political sphere.

1. INTRODUCTION

Times of political uncertainty have a proclivity for changing a country’s political, economic and social trajectories for better or worse with the former a preferable outcome. Wittingly or unwittingly, the media often are a major player in these processes. Although decades of research on the power of the media in society have been largely inconclusive it is still necessary to analyse the interface between the media and political actors during times of political crisis and uncertainty because as others have extensively argued, political processes in democratic societies are significantly dependent on a healthy, free, plural and diverse media (Christians et al., 2009). Furthermore, it has also been argued that media discourses play an active role in constructing the social world (Fairclough, 1995b).

This chapter assesses how two Zimbabwean newspapers, The Herald and NewsDay framed the entrance of Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe’s wife, Grace, into active politics. It does so from...
the premise that in spite of their dependence on politicians and other social players for information, the media can also, to some degree, be political players themselves. The issues they talk about and how they talk about these issues are not innocent but motivated choices. It is this motivation which makes their role active. They use various discursive techniques to argue out certain positions with clear objectives in mind. While the perceived effect of such argumentation is usually intended, in some cases, this is not always the case. This chapter seeks to show how the Zimbabwean media’s coverage of Grace Mugabe’s rise to political prominence shaped Zanu PF’s succession politics and by extension Zimbabwe’s political landscape. The attempt is to show that although the media’s construction of issues and events is, in and of itself, social action with potential real life consequences, crisis situations can dramatically change the dynamics of media agency in society.

Grace Mugabe made her political mark in June 2014 after members of the Zanu PF Women’s League nominated her to lead the wing at a time when talks of succession to the 90 year old Robert Mugabe were rife within and outside the party. Some elements within Zanu PF and the media framed her ascendency to political visibility as an opportunity to deal with the party’s divisive factional politics, a role which she took up zealously with culture changing consequences within the party. Justice Minister Emmerson Mnangagwa and then Vice President Joice Mujuru who led bitterly opposed factions within Zanu PF were in contention for the Vice Presidency and largely seen as potential heirs to the presidency (Kwaramba, 2014). Given the highly charged factional skirmishes in Zanu PF and the responsibility bestowed on her, Grace Mugabe embarked on a tour of the country’s 10 provinces in what she termed “meet the people” rallies. This heightened speculation among Zimbabweans that this was part of President Mugabe’s grand plan to establish a dynasty that will see his wife succeed him while others regarded it as a product of a fierce succession dispute, which had spiralled out of control with one of the two factions using the President’s wife to secure their grip on the party and country (Harding, 2014; Misihairabwi-Mushonga, 2014).

It is against this background that the paper examines how the country’s leading publications in terms of circulation and readership, and representing different ownership poles, The Herald and NewsDay, framed Mrs Mugabe’s political activities to determine the interplay of the media and political actors during times of political uncertainty. The Herald is state controlled and the NewsDay is owned by Alpha Media Holdings (AMH), a privately owned media conglomerate. Thus, the study’s objective is to assess how these newspapers’ coverage and interpretation of the unfolding events worked as an argumentative force that relatively shaped Zanu PF’s internal political architecture and by association the country’s socio-political landscape.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. Understanding Factionalism in Zanu PF

Zimbabwe has not only been under the rule of Zanu PF since independence in 1980, but the towering figure of Robert Mugabe has hitherto dominated its political landscape and nearly all spheres of life in the country. But despite this gripping dominance, Zanu PF is not by any stretch of the imagination a monolithic organisation, “as it has been deeply divided by factional struggles”, which enabled Robert Mugabe to “play his rivalries in Machiavellian fashion” (Compagnon, 2011, pp.18-19). Thus, the entrance of Grace Mugabe into politics can be best understood within the fringes of Zanu PF’s factional