Chapter Eight

Framing Election 2002

8.0. Introduction

This chapter examines patterns of media framing of a closely contested Presidential election in the context of a polarised and crisis-ridden society. Like the 2000 elections, the 2002 poll was to a large extent played out in the media, which shaped but at the same time was influenced by the bifurcated discourse about the nature of the crisis prevailing in the country ahead of the electoral contest.

As in Chapter Seven, the analysis of the newspapers under study falls into three categories or clusters of ‘patriotic’ journalism, ‘oppositional’ journalism and ‘independent nationalist’ journalism. These clusters designate the public press, the mainstream private press and the Zimbabwe Mirror, respectively. The three categories reflect the thrust of the coverage of the elections by the newspapers under study.

Relevant news and editorials published between the first week of January and the second week of March 2002 are analysed to determine their framing of the electoral contest before and after the poll. As in the previous chapter, analysis of news stories is largely confined to front page pieces. Not all of the stories and editorials analysed are cited or quoted directly in the chapter. Samples are drawn from the stories and editorials that best illustrate the themes raised in the coverage.

An interesting observation made in this chapter is that to a large extent most newspapers under study applied the same frames in their coverage of both the 2000 and 2002 elections. The exception was the Zimbabwe Mirror, which departed from its ‘independent nationalist’ critical position of 2000 and drifted towards the ‘patriotic’ journalism of the public press in 2002. This chapter notes that in all the papers under study, hard news stories simply complemented or reinforced, rather than challenge or add significant nuances to, the editorial framing of the elections.
Finally, the chapter notes that the personalisation of the two major protagonists in the election was a key feature of the coverage, while smaller contestants and their candidates were almost completely ignored by the media. This kind of framing was to greater degree an outcome of broader relations between the different sections of the press, the authoritarian state and fractions of capital and civil society at the time.

8.1 Background to the 2002 Election

Like the 2000 parliamentary elections, the March 9-11, 2002 presidential poll was fiercely contested. The major contenders were incumbent President Mugabe and the MDC’s Morgan Tsvangirai. The MDC lost the election by slightly over 400,000 votes. Apart from Zanu PF and the MDC, three other candidates also contested and lost the election. These included Wilson Kumbula of Zanu (Ndonga), Shakespeare Maya of the National Alliance for Good Governance (NAGG), and Paul Siwela of Zapu (not related to PF Zapu, which merged with Zanu PF in 1987). However, there was a split in regional and international observer opinion regarding the endorsement of the elections. The majority of observers, including Commonwealth and SADC Parliamentary teams, dismissed the elections as neither free nor fair. The African Union observer mission, and other national teams, including the South African team, endorsed the poll outcome as a legitimate expression of the Zimbabwean electorate. As in the 2000 elections, the run-up to the presidential elections was marred by violence and allegations of rigging, which received regular media attention.

According to MMPZ, the 2002 elections took place in a political context that “was extremely hostile to free and impartial reporting” (MMPZ, 2002: 12). The MMPZ cites, among others the launch of POSA, discussed in Chapter Six as an impediment to free reporting, the petrol-bombing of the Daily News’s Bulawayo offices in the run-up to the poll, as well as “a total lack of information from the electoral authorities—notably the Registrar General’s office—to the public on a whole section of crucial issues” (MMPZ, 2002: 13).

As argued in Chapter Six, the 2002 election took place in the ‘third’ transition where discourses of the national crisis became sharply contested. On the one hand, the Zanu

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1 According to the Electoral Supervisory Commission (ESC), President Mugabe garnered 1,685,212 votes, and Mr Morgan Tsvangirai got 1,258,401 votes.
PF government constructed both the crisis and the election around issues of national sovereignty, anti-imperialism and the redistribution of land to the landless. The land reform programme in particular was sold as a historic panacea to the economic crisis, and required only a liberation party like Zanu PF to prosecute it to its logical conclusion. The MDC was presented as a puppet party of Western imperialism opposed to land reform and the preservation of the country’s sovereignty. The ruling party, with unfettered command of a vast state-owned media infrastructure, framed the electoral contest as a definitive moment where the country’s sovereignty, progress and identity could either be won or lost. Official, mediated narratives also revisited the realm of anti-colonial memory to remind the electorate of the sacrifices made by the ‘vanguard’ party and sought to mobilise them to vote for a candidate who would safeguard the ‘gains’ of independence (See Bond & Manyanya, 2003).

On the other hand, the MDC countered the official line “by presenting Zanu PF as an incompetent, corrupt and quasi-terrorist organisation of old men” (Sylvester, 2003: 29). As in the 2000 elections, the MDC entered the electoral ring with promises of good governance, competent management of the economy, and a normalisation of international relations. The party also contested the Zanu PF version of the politically sensitive land reform programme, arguing that an MDC government would establish “an autonomous, professional Land Commission to acquire land legally and allocate it on a non-partisan basis within a sound policy framework.”

Media coverage of this election was generally split between the two contrasting versions of crisis and the way out of it for the country. Where the public press reproduced the state’s ‘official’ version of the crisis, the private press—with the exception of the *Zimbabwe Mirror*—framed the crisis as a product of Zanu PF’s incompetence. Ahead of the election, this section of the press in its editorials implored its readers to vote for the opposition MDC, while in its news pages foregrounded the shortcomings of the ruling party, in particular on issues of pre-election violence and vote-rigging. Below is a discussion of the coverage of the election by the selected newspapers.

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8.2 ‘Patriotic’ Journalism: The Public Press and the 2002 Election

For Herald and Sunday Mail, the 2002 election was framed as a decisive contest whose outcome would define the future of the country, especially the country’s sovereignty. As in the previous elections, the papers applied binary frames of patriot/traitor, friend/enemy to the contest, with a lion’s share of the coverage devoted to the major contenders, Zanu PF and the MDC.

The two papers constructed the election around issues of legitimacy (of the incumbent President and his policies), pre-election violence as well as alleged Western conspiracy to topple the incumbent government. The controversial land reform programme also received coverage as a key factor in the election, although not as much as in the 2000 polls.

8.2.1 Violence and the ‘Other’

The public press gave profound salience to political violence ahead of the 2002 election. The general reportage covered events as well as allegations and conspiracy theories depicting the opposition ‘other’ as the harbinger of violence. The papers consistently painted the opposition in general, and the MDC in particular as the architects of violent activities ahead of the elections. Conspicuous in the majority of the stories were named police spokespeople and unnamed sources claiming to have inside information on the workings of the MDC.

In a lead story entitled: “MDC sets to unleash new wave of terror”, Herald alleged that the opposition party had “established a hit squad known as the Red Army” with bases in Chitungwiza, a small town 30km from Harare (02/02/2002). Quoting “unnamed sources”, the story alleged that the party had recruited rogue former state intelligence servicemen to head the “army”, which was to be deployed across the country to cause mayhem in order to discredit the election in the eyes of the international community. The theory upon which the story was constructed was that the opposition party was aware of its impending defeat at the polls, and was therefore looking for ways of disrupting the plebiscite and have Zanu PF blamed for the violence.
In a related story, Herald carried the headline: “Tsvangirai meets ex-Selous Scouts commander” (06/2/2002). Selous Scouts were a feared special counter-insurgency wing of the Rhodesian forces during the liberation struggle in the 1970s. According to the story, the MDC leader had held several “clandestine meetings with former Rhodesian army chiefs” to seek their guidance in light of public announcements by Zimbabwe’s defence chiefs that the armed forces would not salute a leader with no liberation war credentials.\footnote{On 10 January 2002, Zimbabwe’s army general Vitalis Zvinavashe, flanked by the country’s other security chiefs, announced at a press conference in Harare that the security forces would not accept, support and salute any president who did not fight the war of independence and whose agenda would “threaten the very existence of our sovereignty, our country and our people”. The announcement was largely interpreted to refer to Tsvangirai, who did not participate in the war. (Ref: Misa Alert, 10/01/2002).} Quoting unnamed sources, the story made further reference to allegations that the MDC was training armies in Zimbabwe’s neighbours for purposes of destabilising the country in the event of Tsvangirai losing the election.

The narratives of violence being perpetrated by the ‘other’ were often packaged in dramatic and highly alarmist headlines in the public press. In its February 5th 2002 issue, Herald led with a startling headline: “MDC plans war”. The story, based on an unnamed “MDC senior official,” alleged the opposition party was seeking military assistance from the United Kingdom to establish training bases in Mozambique. The paper did not even get comments from Britain, named MDC spokespersons or state security agencies. Nor were authorities from Mozambique quoted in the story.

Another alarmist story, published by Sunday Mail, had the headline: “Museveni, MDC actively plan military action over Zim” (13/1/2002). The story alleged that Uganda President Yoweri Museveni was planning military strike on Zimbabwe with the assistance of the MDC. The story alleged Museveni had chaired several meetings held in Uganda and attended by the MDC leadership, which had requested Ugandan intervention to topple the Zanu PF government. The story cited unnamed sources.

Occasionally, the public press quoted police spokespeople in stories where the MDC was identified as the architect of pre-election violence. In stories, “MDC plans pre-election countrywide terror campaign” (4/2/2002) and, “Zanu PF supporters murdered in Zaka” (20/1/2002), Sunday Mail quoted named police spokespeople confirming that the opposition party was both planning a terror campaign and was responsible for the murder of ruling party supporters. The demonisation of the MDC was not just...
confined to its alleged activities in Zimbabwe. On 20th January 2002, Sunday Mail published a lead story alleging that the MDC had been involved in a heist involving R1.15 million at the Johannesburg International Airport in South Africa. The story alleged that four MDC members were involved, and quoted a South African “police superintendent V. Viljoen” confirming the links. The paper alleged that the MDC desperately needed cash because the party had been caught unawares by President Mugabe’s announcement that the election would be held in March and not later in the year.

8.2.2 The Construction of Legitimacy

The public press paid significant attention to the issue of the legitimacy of both the incumbent state President and the ruling party. This took the form of stories that quoted regional leaders and organisations expressing support or ‘solidarity’ with Zimbabwe or Mugabe on one issue or the other. Such expressions of support were often highlighted by the public press ahead of the election as evidence of Mugabe’s popularity, if not indispensability, and at the same time a slap in the face for his detractors in Western Europe and the United States.

In a story under the headline: “Call to protest EU moves over Zim”, Herald (2/2/2002) reported that a SADC ministerial taskforce on Zimbabwe had recommended that then SADC chairman, Bakili Muluzi, should make an official protest against the EU moves to impose sanctions against Zimbabwe. The thrust of the story was that there was nothing politically amiss in Zimbabwe to warrant targeted or ‘smart’ sanctions, which the EU argued were in protest against state-sanctioned lawlessness and the death of democracy in the country. In another lead piece entitled: “Comesa denounces EU over sanctions” (6/2/2002), Herald reported that the East African regional body had expressed reservations over the promised EU sanctions on grounds that they would negatively affect the majority of Zimbabweans. The regional body was also reported to have expressed its full support of the government of President Mugabe.

South African president Thabo Mbeki made headlines in Herald at least twice expressing his support for Mugabe (“Elections will be free and fair: Mbeki” (12/2/2002); “Mbeki resists pressure to dump Zim”, (9/2/2002). The underlying text
of the two stories was that, contrary to the international (mainly Western) outcry over alleged human rights abuses in Zimbabwe, the country and President Mugabe still enjoyed regional support, especially from the regional political and economic powerhouse, South Africa. Further, by giving salience to stories of regional solidarity, the public press reinforced the perception that the whole issue of the ‘Zimbabwe crisis’ was a racist creation of the West which was not shared by Africa. This was also illustrated by the Herald story, “Nigerian minister openly slams the BBC” (4/2/2002). According to the story, Nigerian foreign affairs minister, Sule Lamido, had “attacked the BBC for distorting the facts about Zimbabwe” during an interview with the same station. The story, as with many others on regional and African solidarity, had as its background the allegations of a Western anti-Zimbabwe campaign led by Britain in the aftermath of the fallout between the two countries over the land reform programme.

On the first day of the election, Herald carried a front page comment entitled, “D-Day for Zimbabwe” (9/3/2002). The lengthy comment, which was carried over to the next page, urged the electorate to vote for the Zanu PF candidate, as failure to do so would result in Zimbabwe being doomed to being a “…country where the social and economic divide between white and black will be perpetuated” (Herald, 9/3/2002). The comment defined the coming poll as “no ordinary plebiscite” but one whose outcome had implications for the sovereignty of the country and for the SADC region. The Sunday Mail also viewed the election in terms of both Zimbabwe and Africa’s sovereignty. In an editorial entitled “Zimbabwe’s polls: Africa’s defining moment,” the paper wrote that voters had to choose between “straightforward consolidation of independence” or “reverting to colonial rule” (3/2/2002). The paper added: “The inevitable resounding victory of President Mugabe will be a strong message to Tsvangirai and his unholy alliance that Africa has come of age” (Sunday Mail, 3/2/2002).

In its first issue after the election, Sunday Mail carried the lead story: “Club report shallow” (17/3/2002). The story quoted several unnamed African diplomats slamming the Commonwealth observer team’s interim report which had declared the election to have been neither free nor fair. The only named diplomat in the story was Namibian Member of Parliament, Margaret Mensah, who was quoted saying she distanced
herself from the interim report. On the same page, the paper carried a story entitled: “Visiting SADC leaders throw weight behind poll results,” which quoted Presidents of Malawi and Tanzania endorsing the election results.

As part of their construction of Mugabe’s legitimacy in Zimbabwe and on the continent, the public press framed the electoral system and process as fair and foolproof. In an editorial entitled: “Thumbs up for electoral process”, Sunday Mail argued that the high turnout in the ongoing poll was “as sign that people have full confidence in the electoral system that will reflect their will” (10/3/2002). The paper criticised the opposition MDC and some international observers for expressing their reservations about the electoral process and allegations of rigging by the Zanu PF government. In an editorial entitled “Reports of rigging were fabrications”, Herald (8/3/2002), dismissed civil society concerns and media reports about the police and the army having been forced to cast their ballots in front of their officers to ensure they voted for Mugabe. The paper argued that Zimbabwe’s electoral system could not lend itself to any form of fraud, and urged Zimbabwean voters to “give an emphatic ‘No’ to those who want to reverse the gains of independence and to recolonise the country” (Ibid).

8.2.3 Mugabe versus Tsvangirai

As was the case with most other publications under review, the ‘patriotic’ press devoted some attention to personalities behind the two major political parties contesting the election. Personalisation of the contest was meant to either legitimize or delegitimize the contestants. It was also consistent with the press’s general coverage of the political formations involved in the election. The public press generally sought to present Mugabe and Tsvangirai in terms of binary opposites of magnanimity and treachery, patriotism and betrayal.

As with other themes in the coverage, headlines in the two papers communicated much about the papers’ attitude towards the dramatis personae in the contest. Headlines bearing Tsvangirai’s name generally depicted him in villainous terms, associated with violence, treason and conspiracy. On the other hand, headlines bearing Mugabe’s name depicted him as a popular, patriotic and legitimate leader.
Table 8.i. below illustrates the contrasts in sample headline stories about the two personalities ahead of the 2002 election.

Table 8.i Sample Public Press Headlines on Mugabe and Tsvangirai

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Headlines on Mugabe</th>
<th>Headlines on Tsvangirai</th>
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<tr>
<td>Church leaders hail Mugabe <em>(SM, 13/1/2002)</em></td>
<td>Canada probes Tsvangirai <em>(SM, 17/2/2002)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(TH, 12/2/2002)</em></td>
<td>Tsvangirai meets ex-Selous Scouts commander <em>(TH, 6/2/2002)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(TH, 14/2/2002)</em></td>
<td>Tsvangirai heading for defeat <em>(TH, 11/2/2002)</em></td>
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Note: SM: Sunday Mail; TH: Herald

Besides carrying headlines depicting the two leaders in opposite terms, the public press sourced most of its information for election stories from Zanu PF and/or its candidate. Where the MDC was the source of news, it was mostly negative and attributed to unnamed sources inside the party making damaging allegations. As Figures 8.ii and 8iii overleaf show, both Herald and Sunday Mail relied heavily on the ruling party for stories and almost completely kept the smaller political parties and their candidates off their agenda.
Figure 8.ii Herald, *Presidential Candidates as Sources of Information* (7 Jan-8 March, 2002)


Note: RM: Robert Mugabe; MT: Morgan Tsvangirai; PS: Paul Siwela, SM: Shakespeare Maya; WK: Wilson Kumbula

Figure 8.iii. Sunday Mail, *Presidential Candidates as Sources of Information* (7 Jan-8 March, 2002).

Source: MMPZ, 2002
Note: RM: Robert Mugabe; MT: Morgan Tsvangirai; PS: Paul Siwela, SM: Shakespeare Maya; WK: Wilson Kumbula

8.2.4 ‘Patriotic’ Journalism and the 2002 Election: A Concluding Discussion

In its report on the media coverage of the 2002 election, the MMPZ made the following observation about the public press’s coverage of the poll:

The public media created an explanatory framework for the entire election campaign that consisted of a giant conspiracy theory, containing within it a number of minor conspiracies. The largest of these was the entrapment of MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai in a supposed plot to kill President Mugabe. Evidence of this was brazenly manipulated in the public media (MMPZ, 2002: 13).

The ‘patriotic’ press was unambiguous in its editorial support for the ruling party which it saw as the hope for the crisis-riven country. In their coverage of the election, the papers largely reproduced the Zanu PF official version of the crisis and the challenges facing the country. In exclusivist terms, the ‘patriotic’ press labelled the opposition and the West as enemies and threats to national sovereignty, while the ruling party and its African allies were framed as the necessary guarantors of sovereignty and progress. The agency of violence was given to the opposition ‘other’, while the ruling party was presented as the victim.

What was noteworthy about the coverage of the election was the absence of voices from civil society groups not aligned to the state, nor other aspects of the electoral contest apart from the MDC/Zanu PF dichotomies. While editorials in the public press made it clear that the contest was about the preservation of national sovereignty or lack thereof, there was silence about economic policy (apart from the land reform programme), human rights, health, the cost of living among other issues that were immediately relevant to ordinary citizens.

There was a traceable link between the ‘patriotic’ press’s framing of the election and the state’s ruthless subjugation and restructuring of the public press in the aftermath of the 2000 elections. As discussed in Chapter Six, a policy intervention to effectively transform the public media into *de facto* apparatuses of state hegemony was a key political strategy adopted by Zanu PF at the outset of the ‘third’ transition. Amidst the
fierce tussle between the ruling party and an opposition coalition of civil society and fractions of capital for control of the state, a cheerleading public press enjoying a principal-agent relationship with the state was conceived as instrumental to a Zanu PF electoral triumph.

8.3 The ‘Oppositional’ Press and the 2002 Election (The Daily News, Zimbabwe Independent and Financial Gazette)

In their coverage of the 2002 election, the Daily News, Zimbabwe Independent and the Financial Gazette applied largely the same frames that informed their reportage of the 2000 parliamentary elections. Although they varied in emphasis and sometimes style, these papers tacitly endorsed the MDC’s candidate through according him and his party a dominant ‘democratic’ agency while simultaneously foregrounding numerous electoral ills they associated with Zanu PF, in particular state-orchestrated violence and electoral fraud. The papers’ symbol-handling of the electoral discourse was generally consistent across the news and editorial genres.

Below is a thematic discussion of the ‘opposition’ press’s framing of the major issues around the election.

8.3.1 The President of the New Millennium

On 14th January 2002, the Daily News published an editorial entitled: “Search for a President of the new millennium,” in which the credentials of the two major protagonists were hurriedly examined. Mugabe was described as insatiably power-hungry even after 22 years in office with little to show for it, while Tsvangirai was presented as a democrat who, if elected into office, would only serve one term (Daily News 14/2/2002). The contest between Mugabe and Tsvangirai was also reduced to the question of age. While Mugabe went into the election at 78, Tsvangirai had just turned 50. The paper argued that Zimbabweans would be better off choosing a younger and more agile president than an old and exhausted man.

In its characterisation of two candidates, the Daily News also argued that a victory for Mugabe, would be a “bitter disappointment” for the majority of the people (14/2/2002). Were Mugabe to win the election, the paper lamented that: “Instead of a
leader imbued with the go-getting spirit of the new millennium, they (Zimbabweans) [would] be lumbered for six more years with this old man who has been at the helm since independence” (Ibid). The Financial Gazette also gave salience to the contrasting political personas of Mugabe and Tsvangirai and what each of the two’s victory would mean for the country. In a stark comparison between Mugabe and Tsvangirai ahead of the polls, the paper argued that Mugabe’s victory would mean that “the doomsday upheaval [would] be even more traumatic, with Zimbabwe totally isolated from the rest of the world until a fresh ballot that is seen to be free and fair is staged” (7/2/2002). Mugabe’s victory was also framed as one that would force the country to “slide back into the Stone Age,” while Tsvangirai as President would be “assured of a quick return to Zimbabwe of international aid, capital investment which will ameliorate Zimbabwe’s meltdown” (Financial Gazette, 7/3/2002).

News story headlines about Mugabe in the Daily News were also generally in alignment with editorials calling for his defeat. A day before the election, the paper’s lead story had the headline: “Walkout rock Mugabe rallies” (8/3/2002). It alleged that, “hungry and sun-scorched Zanu PF supporters” had walked out of Mugabe’s rallies in the towns of Kadoma and Marondera because they had simply lost interest in the man. The story also revealed that some of these people had either been forced to attend the rallies, or had been bussed from rural areas to boost numbers and create the false impression that Mugabe was still popular as a leader. On 12th March, as the counting of ballots was underway, the paper led with another headline: “Mugabe should go gracefully—Zvobgo”. The story was based on an interview that former Zanu PF Secretary for Legal Affairs and government minister Eddison Zvobgo had given to the UK-based Scotsman newspaper. In the story, Zvobgo was quoted saying Mugabe was likely to lose the election and urged him to respect the results like an elder statesman.

While the Daily News dismissed Mugabe’s argument that he needed another term so he could complete the land reform programme, it simply endorsed Tsvangirai’s claims that he would only serve one term if elected, adding uncritically that he “would have succeeded in achieving the change that his party has been promising the people since its inception in 1999” (14/1/2002). With Mugabe framed as the archetypal Machiavellian dictator and politician, Tsvangirai was viewed by the paper as “an honest, hardworking trade unionist with not a hint of devilry in his portfolio” (Daily
Ahead of the election, headlines about Tsvangirai or the MDC generally presented them in either in favourable light or as victims of tyranny visited upon Zimbabweans by Mugabe and Zanu PF. (See for example; “Tsvangirai predicts victory” (8/3/2002); “MDC warns of poll fraud” (11/3/2002); “Further allegations of Zanu rigging” (7/3/2002)). The continued reinforcement of the dichotomies of good (MDC) versus evil (Zanu PF) ahead of the poll were arguably intended to present before the reader/voter what appeared to be a very clear choice between an ageing dictator and a youthful, magnanimous democrat.

The *Zimbabwe Independent* also framed Tsvangirai as the most appropriate presidential candidate ahead of the election. One of the ways in which the paper did this was through its editorial defence of the MDC President in the treason case which emerged just ahead of the poll. In February 2002, Tsvangirai was charged with plotting to assassinate President Mugabe. The state’s case was based on video-taped meetings between senior MDC leaders (including Tsvangirai) and a Canadian-based political consulting firm, Dickens and Madison. Like most of political events and processes in Zimbabwe at the time, the reportage of the Tsvangirai assassination plot case assumed sharp dichotomies in the media. The case became hostage to fierce electioneering pitting Zanu PF against the MDC. The public media capitalised on the “evidence” from the grainy VHS video to create the impression of a guilty MDC leader before trial, while the *Zimbabwe Independent* dismissed the state’s case as contrived. The paper argued that the assassination plot was “another dirty trick” employed by Mugabe to gain political mileage. The paper exonerated Tsvangirai as having been “led” to make statements bordering on treason, while dismissing the rest of the video footage as “disjointed” (*Zimbabwe Independent*, 15/2/2002). “The suggestion that Tsvangirai had no confidence in his ability to win the upcoming election,” argued the paper in an editorial, “is at variance with all the evidence on the ground that the MDC leader is heading for a landslide” (15/2/2002).

Meanwhile, the *Zimbabwe Independent*’s news and analysis pages also continued to dismiss the treason case, in particular questioning the legitimacy of the state’s chief witness, Ari Ben Menashe. In a lead story entitled: “Tsvangirai: The plot thickens”, the paper quoted Tsvangirai admitting to a set-up by Ari Ben Menashe, whom the story alleged was “a veteran Mossad spy involved in a number of episodes ranging
from the Iran/Contra affair to the Zambian US$6 million maize scam” (15/2/2002). In a sidebar, entitled: “Menashe a master of dirty tricks”, the paper further dismissed Menashe’s allegations against Tsvangirai, describing the former as “a veteran spinner of stunning-if true-but-yarns” (Ibid). The paper’s framing of Ben Menashe was consistent with its framing of other aspects of the electoral contest. The state was presented as undemocratic, fraudulent and violent, and hence the case against Tsvangirai was framed as one of many tricks employed by Zanu PF, through the state, to tilt the electoral playing field in favour of the incumbent President.

8.3.2 The Case for Change of Government

Closely related to the contrasting personalities of Mugabe and Tsvangirai was a strong articulation of the cause for change by the ‘opposition’ press. In its last issue ahead of the election, the Financial Gazette carried an editorial which epitomised its position on the electoral contest. Part of it read: “Zimbabwe’s long promised moment of reckoning has finally arrived. It beckons all patriotic and valiant citizens to stand up with one voice and tell one Robert Mugabe: Please go, and go now” (Financial Gazette, 7/3/2002).

With reference to the Financial Gazette, the case for political change was usually articulated unequivocally in editorial pages, while news stories generally quoted sections of civil society and sections of business not aligned with the state to present the same picture of a moribund government too inept and violent to be entrusted with the nation’s future in the new millennium. A change of government was therefore framed as the panacea for the country’s economic and political crisis. The paper repeatedly outlined the ruling party’s litany of political transgressions, from supporting political violence to mismanaging the economy, and urged the electorate to use their votes to effect political change.

Two weeks before the elections, the paper made a rare personal appeal to Mugabe to leave office. “Mr President,” wrote the paper’s political editor, Sydney Masamvu in an editorial, “you don’t deserve another term…you may have done your bit but it is time, though quite belated, for you to go and go now” (Financial Gazette, 7/3/2002). If Mugabe refused to leave willingly, the voters would ensure they saw him on his way out, argued the paper.
The *Zimbabwe Independent* also endorsed the opposition cause for a change of government, more explicitly in editorials and implicitly in news stories. A day before the election, the paper ran an editorial describing the forthcoming watershed event as a “simple” choice, “between a fist and a palm” (8/3/2002). The fist was the ruling Zanu PF’s campaign symbol, while the MDC had the open palm. The editorial argued that the voter’s choice was between peace and violence. “This is a choice between a blind and malignant nationalism rooted in the past, and a future full of promise based on democracy and respect for human rights,” argued the paper (Ibid). Voters were implored in the lengthy editorial to consider themselves doomed in the event of the incumbent President getting another six-year term. So clear was the choice facing the electorate that the paper noted: “Rarely has a country faced such an unambiguous choice between good and evil, between progress and failure” (Ibid).

8.3.3 *Zanu PF as Architect of Violence and Electoral Fraud*

The *Daily News* regarded Zanu PF and the state as having exclusive monopoly of pre-election violence. Most editorial comments and stories on violence catalogued numerous incidents of torture, all attributed to war veterans, the youth militia or ‘Zanu PF thugs’. A month ahead of the elections, the violence increased, prompting the paper to ask whether Zimbabwe was on the throes of a civil war. The paper gave the following explanation for the escalating spate of violence:

> Zanu PF is clearly frightened that it will lose the Presidency in a free and fair election. Its strategy is now to use every foul means to improve its chances of victory. Murder and mayhem constitute one element of this strategy (*Daily News*, 11/2/2002).

The paper also accused both the ruling party and *Herald* for playing the racism card as a campaign tool against the MDC. Behind the *Daily News*’s consistent delegitimisation of the Zanu PF-led government was a recurring statement to the effect that the ruling party had been a disaster right from its assumption of power at independence in 1980. When the European Union (EU) imposed ‘smart’ sanctions on Zimbabwe ahead of the presidential elections, the paper endorsed the decision, arguing that the ruling party had made “concerted efforts” to steal the elections (20/2/2002). The paper argued that most Zimbabweans had welcomed the smart
sanctions “wholeheartedly” because “the history of Zanu PF’s reign (was) the greatest disgrace to Zimbabwe” (Ibid).

On the same day the paper welcomed the EU ‘smart’ sanctions in its editorial comment, the Daily News published a front page lead story with the headline: “Mugabe on way out” (20/2/2002). The story was based on a poll survey by the Mass Public Opinion Institute, a local research institute led by a local academic and regular critic of Zanu PF, Professor Masipula Sithole. The same organisation had done the 2000 pre-election survey which predicted a “massive” victory for the MDC (see Chapter Seven). This time around, the survey—based on a questionnaire sample of 1693 in a country with 5,6 million registered voters—found out that 19.8 percent of the voters would vote for Tsvangirai, while 11.3 percent would vote for Mugabe. Of the 59.7 percent who said their ballot was secret, it was assumed that the majority would vote for the MDC. As in the previous elections, the publication of these results attracted a critical response from the state media, in what had become a kind of ‘war of the surveys’ around election time.

When the results of the elections were announced—with Mugabe winning the election—the Daily News dismissed Mugabe’s victory as fraudulently achieved. It gave editorial prominence to observers’ reports which had ruled the elections to have been neither free nor fair. The only thing that was free and fair about the election, the paper commented, was the rigging itself (Daily News 20/3/2002). Given that “now most Zimbabweans know that Zanu PF stole the presidential election,” the paper called on its readers to “prescribe the appropriate punishment for the offenders” (Ibid).

The Daily News sourced most of its stories from the MDC and/or its candidate spokesperson, in the process giving the party the power of agency. Although Zanu PF and its candidate also got some salience as sources of news (see Figure 8.iv), they were usually depicted as merchants of violence and mayhem ahead of the elections. Like other newspapers under analysis here, the Daily News did not give any substantial coverage to the three other main contenders to the election.
**Figure 8.iv. Daily News Presidential Candidates as Sources of Information (7 Jan-8 March, 2002)**


**Key:** RM: Robert Mugabe; MT: Morgan Tsvangirai; PS: Paul Siwela, SM: Shakespeare Maya; WK: Wilson Kumbula

**Figure 8.v. The Zimbabwe Independent & Financial Gazette: Candidates as Sources of News (7 Jan-8 March, 2002)**

Source, MMPZ, 2002.

**Note:** RM: Robert Mugabe; MT: Morgan Tsvangirai; PS: Paul Siwela, SM: Shakespeare Maya; WK: Wilson Kumbula

The *Zimbabwe Independent* also consistently dismissed the prevailing electoral framework in the country as one that was susceptible to official abuse in favour of President Mugabe. As early as January 2002, the paper had begun flashing warning
signals of an unfree and unfair election ahead. An editorial headlined “A bleak outlook as electoral rigging looms”, decried the state’s decision to enlist civil servants to run the elections and the barring of local observers from non-governmental organisations. The paper also took a swipe at the Electoral Supervisory Commission and the Registrar-General’s office, accusing them of being “manifestly not up to the task ahead of them, largely because they have difficulties understanding the word ‘independent’ and because they are starved of funds by the government” (Zimbabwe Independent, 4/1/2002).

A month later, the paper argued that there were “roadblocks to a free and fair election” (8/2/2002). The editorial criticised the government for turning down an offer of translucent ballot boxes from donor countries, insisting on the continued use of wooden boxes. This was viewed as an attempt to rig the election. Both the Registrar-General and the Attorney General’s offices were also blamed for complicity in the rigging process.

Besides editorials, most lead stories published ahead of the election painted a gloomy picture about the impending poll. Reportage of violence or most state activities was almost always linked to alleged attempts by the ruling party to steal the poll. On January 4th, the paper carried the lead story entitled: “CIO harass food aid workers,” which alleged that members of the Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) were stalking aid workers distributing food in rural areas for fear that the MDC could make political capital out of food aid. However, the story also alleged the ruling party itself was actively involved in using food aid to buy votes ahead of the poll. The paper carried other headlines: “Govt blocks aspiring new broadcasters” (Zimbabwe Independent, 04/1/2002), and, “Violence spreads to Ruwa, Chinhoyi” (04/1/2002). The first story alleged that the government was blocking attempts by independent broadcasters to secure broadcasting licenses before the elections for fear of creating a diverse media environment that could challenge the hegemony of the ruling party ahead of a crucial poll. This came against the background of the state’s conversion of the national broadcaster, the ZBC, into a Zanu PF propaganda apparatus. The latter story on violence alleged that, “political violence [had] been given further impetus following the unleashing of the Zanu PF-sponsored National Youth Service brigades, with roving members creating mayhem” (04/1/2002).
A day before the poll, the *Zimbabwe Independent*’s lead headline was: “Mugabe in last ditch poll fraud” (08/3/2002). The story alleged that Mugabe had used Presidential powers to legitimise the deployment of the army, the police and prison officers to manage the elections because he was staring “defeat in the face in the hottest Presidential race in Zimbabwe’s history” (Ibid). The paper argued that the uniformed forces were selected to run the elections because they were generally sympathetic to Mugabe. In related stories like: “Government sets up 146 militia bases” and, “Thousands of poll monitors could miss vote” (01/3/2002), the paper highlighted concerns from civil society groups and the opposition that the elections were unlikely to be free and fair because of both the role of militias in pre-election violence, and the state’s delays in accrediting poll monitors from non-governmental organisations.

After the election results were announced, with the incumbent having won, the *Zimbabwe Independent* described the election as “stolen” (15/3/2002). The paper’s first post-election issue led with story entitled: “World leaders reject Mugabe win”. The story quoted US President George W. Bush, British Foreign secretary Jack Straw, US Secretary of State Colin Powell, leaders of Germany and France—among many others—rejecting the outcome of the elections on the basis that they had been rigged. The same issue carried other front-page stories under headlines: “Elections rigged on a massive scale—ZESN” and, “Mudede inflates rural vote numbers”. Both stories were based on reports from the Zimbabwe Elections Support Network (ZESN), a non-governmental organisation that monitors elections. The reports catalogued incidents of alleged rigging, and concluded that the elections were neither free nor fair. In an editorial, the paper also dismissed Mugabe’s victory. The editorial entitled: “Over 1, 2 million Zimbabweans refuse to be coerced”, praised the voters who cast their poll in favour of the opposition, while decrying Mugabe’s “transparently stolen victory” (15/2/2002).

The *Financial Gazette*, like other publications under the ‘opposition’ press banner, framed the question of violence as a one-sided phenomenon for which Zanu PF was solely responsible. The paper cited war veterans and other ruling party supporters as acting on behalf of a besieged and belligerent state bent on the path of repression.
When the government announced its set of conditions for European Union (EU) observers, including the barring of British nationals, the paper viewed the move as an attempt to control the observer team and a cover-up for state-sponsored mayhem on the farms and rural areas. The election would almost inevitably be neither free nor fair because, “most of those killed by ruling Zanu PF supporters and their so-called militant war veterans have been opposition followers” (14/2/2002).

Besides editorial comments, news stories in the paper devoted significant space to coverage of both pre-election violence and allegations of electoral fraud ahead of the poll. Most lead stories ahead of the poll presented the ruling party as the architect of both violence and electoral fraud. The headlines of most of the stories were coined in a dramatic, if alarmist fashion, portraying the electoral season in terms of a state-sponsored pogrom and systematic election rigging. Table 8.vi below shows a sample of Financial Gazette stories on violence and the alleged perpetrator of the violence and electoral fraud in January and February 2002.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Headline</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>(Alleged) Culprit</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zanu PF terror plot exposed</td>
<td>10/1/2002</td>
<td>Zanu PF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villagers flee violence to the cities</td>
<td>17/1/2002</td>
<td>Zanu PF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brutal attack numbs Lupane</td>
<td>17/1/2002</td>
<td>Zanu PF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trigger-happy police ignite orgy of</td>
<td>24/1/2002</td>
<td>Government/Zanu PF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>violence in Bulawayo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hundreds missing from voters roll</td>
<td>28/2/2002</td>
<td>Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terror squads camp on farms</td>
<td>07/2/2002</td>
<td>Zanu PF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key role for the military</td>
<td>31/1/2002</td>
<td>Zanu PF/government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zanu PF youths terrorise Harare</td>
<td>14/2/2002</td>
<td>Zanu PF youths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>residents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The headlines above, whose thrust represents that of the majority of the stories carried by the paper on the subjects of violence and electoral rigging, pointed to the ruling party as the architect of both violence and electoral fraud. Most of the stories quoted civil society groups and activists and the MDC, and, occasionally, the ruling party denying the charges of inciting violence. Whereas the paper sourced most of its
stories from urban areas—notably Harare and Bulawayo, in its 2000 elections coverage, there was a significant presence of rural and semi-urban stories on the 2002 election. This included stories from Lupane, Gwanda, Uzumba-Maramba-Pfungwe, Masvingo, among others, which were written by the paper’s own reporters and correspondents. In doing so, the paper sought to present a ‘national’ picture of the extent of violence, intimidation and rigging.

8.3.4 Headlines of Hope and Despair

If the Daily News had its finger on the pulse of the nation in the heavily contested electoral season as its assistant editor claimed⁴, then the paper’s headlines effectively captured both the hope and despair that came with fighting Zanu PF at the polls. In the run-up to the election, the paper’s headlines painted a gloomy picture of an election that was about to be rigged by the incumbent ruling party. On 7th March, just four days before the poll, the paper’s lead story was: “Further allegations of Zanu rigging”. The story alleged that the Registrar-General’s office was still registering Zanu PF supporters in the town of Chinhoyi well after the deadline for voter registration had passed. Although the story quoted a government official saying the belatedly registered voters would not vote in the Presidential election, the thrust (and headline) of the story suggested some electoral fraud on the part of the ruling party.

The fate of white voters with dual citizenship was also highlighted by the paper as an issue related to the ruling party’s attempt to rig the election. The story under the headline: “Fate of white voters still uncertain” (Daily News, 7/3/2002) argued that the delays by the courts to give a judgement on the contested issue of dual citizenship was all part of an elaborate scheme to deny whites the vote because they were perceived as pro-MDC. The same issue of the paper carried another headline, entitled: “World urged to reject rigged election results”. The story was based on a press statement by the International Crisis Group, which urged world leaders including South African President Thabo Mbeki, Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, British Premier Tony Blair, U.S President George W. Bush and UN Secretary general Kofi Annan to warn President Mugabe that they would not accept a rigged poll.

⁴ Interview with Bill Saidi, former Assistant Editor of the Daily News, April 2004.
The *Daily News* also published other despairing headlines ahead of the elections, including the March 8th lead story entitled: “Police officers continue to vote”. The story alleged that police force members were being forced to cast their ballots in front of and under the watchful eyes of their superiors, who insisted they should vote for Mugabe. Anonymous sources from the police were quoted in the story.

The paper also carried ‘hopeful’ headlines which suggested the possibility of victory for the MDC despite the alleged rigging. The most dramatic of these was the March 9th (2002) headline: “The hour has come”. The story predicted victory for the MDC, on grounds that there were more registered voters in urban areas than rural areas. The same story also argued that factionalism within Zanu PF in Masvingo province and in Chipinge would contribute to Mugabe’s loss. A political scientist, Morgan Changamire, was quoted in the story predicting that Mugabe would lose to Tsvangirai by at least 10 percent of the vote. Other headlines like: “Tsvangirai predicts victory” (09/3/2002), “Mugabe should go gracefully—Zvobgo” (12/3/2002), and; “Prepare for victory, says Tsvangirai” (13/3/2002), were all predicated on the assumption that Mugabe would lose the election.

Attendance at Tsvangirai’s campaign rallies was also reported as reason for hope for the MDC. The *Daily News* front page story under the headline: “50 000 attend Tsvangirai rally” (4/3/2002), for example, was used to construct the image of a popular politician whose victory would save the country from collapse. The rally, which the paper described as “the biggest Tsvangirai has ever addressed,” had the MDC leader promise his supporters a new era of good governance, “orderly land reform” and comprehensive HIV/AIDS policies if he got elected. The story was contrasted with another campaign rally in the same issue, entitled “Mugabe appeals for support” (4/3/2002). The story reported Mugabe as having addressed three low key rallies in Harare and Chitungwiza, where most of the people who attended were members of the Johanne Masowe religious sect who had been coerced to attend.

After the announcement of the election results, the *Daily News* headlines slipped back into the despair mode. As stated earlier, the paper foregrounded reports from observer missions which had condemned the election as neither free nor fair. The paper carried several gloomy headlines in the aftermath of the election, including: “Harare feels
robbed” (14/3/2002), “Bulawayo residents declare Mugabe win null and void” (Ibid) “Sadc observers condemn poll” (13/3/2002), and: “Zanu PF youths celebrate victory with violence” (15/2/2002). In a headline entitled: “No joy in cities over Mugabe re-election”, (14/3/2002), the paper reported that its switchboard had been jammed by dejected callers from across the country after the announcement of the final poll result. The paper predicted that the economic crisis gripping the country would worsen after Mugabe’s victory.

Like the Daily News, the Financial Gazette was also conspicuous in its headlines which communicated both messages of hope and despair associated with each of the two main candidates contesting the poll. Most of the headlines and stories on Mugabe presented him in terms associated with tyranny and despair, (e.g., “Shock Mugabe”), deceit (e.g., “Mugabe sells SADC another dummy”, and violence (e.g., “Zanu PF threatens coup if Mugabe loses”) [see table below]. On the other hand, headlines and stories on Tsvangirai were framed in hopeful tones. Tables 8.vii and 8.viii below illustrate the headlines ‘campaign’ under discussion.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Headline</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Genre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Mugabe’s costly mistakes’—Chikerema</td>
<td>10/1/2002</td>
<td>News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shock Mugabe</td>
<td>07/3/2002</td>
<td>Editorial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU tells Mugabe time’s up</td>
<td>31/1/2002</td>
<td>News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zanu PF threatens coup if Mugabe loses</td>
<td>07/3/2002</td>
<td>News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mugabe dangles old carrot in Matabeleland</td>
<td>07/3/2002</td>
<td>News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mugabe says he will ban ZCTU, expel whites</td>
<td>21/2/2002</td>
<td>News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mugabe sells SADC another dummy</td>
<td>17/1/2002</td>
<td>News</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In devoting attention to the persona of Mugabe in its election coverage, the Financial Gazette’s news stories dovetailed with its editorials which were more pointed in their calls for Mugabe to be “shocked” at the polls (see, 07/3/2002). Where the news stories, with their presumption of being factual, would report on Mugabe making
empty promises or “dangling the old carrot” during his campaign forays in Matabeleland, or promising to ban a highly popular and respected labour union together with white citizens, or deceiving SADC, editorials would follow up to express opinions based on the news reports.

In a closely contested election and a highly polarised society, the opposition MDC leader was framed as everything Mugabe was not. Where Mugabe’s political rallies were portrayed as arenas of tired rhetoric attended by bussed supporters, Tsvangirai’s rallies were depicted as well attended by enthusiastic crowds, with the opposition leader “vowing” to correct a litany of Mugabe’s mistakes if he got elected. In the headline story: “Tsvangirai vows to carry out land audit” (7/3/2002), Tsvangirai is quoted “in typical fire-in-the-belly style” as saying he would restore productivity on farms through a land audit, and amend the constitution to strip the presidency of “too much executive and dictatorial powers”, if elected into office (Ibid). Generally the headlines featuring Tsvangirai were hopeful and positive, as opposed to despairing headlines on Mugabe. Table 8.viii shows a sample of headlines on Tsvangirai and the MDC.

Table 8.viii: Sample Headlines on Tsvangirai/MDC published by the Financial Gazette between January and March, 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Headline</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Genre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thumbs up for Tsvangirai in critical Midlands</td>
<td>14/2/2002</td>
<td>News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tsvangirai will increase war vets pensions</td>
<td>28/2/2002</td>
<td>News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tsvangirai rejects Mugabe victory</td>
<td>14/3/2002</td>
<td>News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defiant Beitbridge folk fete MDC leaders</td>
<td>21/2/2002</td>
<td>News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tsvangirai vows to carry out land audit</td>
<td>07/2/2002</td>
<td>News</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By crafting dramatic headlines carrying diametrically opposed messages of despair and hope, the ‘oppositional’ press reinforced its editorial framing of the election characterised by a resort to binary opposites of good and evil.
8.3.5 SADC should rein in Mugabe

An interesting aspect of *Zimbabwe Independent* was its calls for SADC to intervene in Zimbabwe’s crisis ahead of the election. This position was in sharp contrast with the ‘patriotic press’ which used pronouncements by SADC and other regional and continental bodies as endorsements of the legitimacy of the Zimbabwe government. The *Zimbabwe Independent* made several editorial appeals to the leadership of SADC to adopt a tough stance on President Mugabe regarding violence, intimidation of the opposition and the possibilities of a rigged election. On February 22, the paper implored SADC to “do the right thing” about Mugabe. The editorial decried that:

> SADC members are meant to be awed by Mugabe’s bravado to challenging the entire EU bloc single-handed…their position has been rendered so tenuous that at best they will have to endorse whatever Mugabe says, at worst say nothing about his cruel treatment of Zimbabweans (*Zimbabwe Independent*, 22/2/2002).

In the paper’s view, a tough-talking SADC could force Mugabe to create conditions for a free and fair election in the country. A week after the appeal for SADC policy change on Zimbabwe, a group of South African election observers were attacked by alleged Zanu PF youths in the Midlands city of Kwekwe. The event generated much media interest locally and internationally. For the *Zimbabwe Independent*, the assault on observers was enough evidence of the lawlessness in the country ahead of the elections, and enough reason for a tougher SADC stance on Mugabe. Under the headline, “Attacks on SADC observers were inevitable”, the paper’s editorial challenged regional leaders to shift their position towards Mugabe in light of the increasing violence. It argued that: “[Jacob] Zuma, Aziz Pahad, Sam Nujoma, Kaire Mbuende and other apologists for this violent regime should reflect carefully on the consequences of being seen to indulge rulers who block the democratic rights of their people” (*Zimbabwe Independent*, 1/3/2002).

The *Financial Gazette* also implored SADC to intervene in the Zimbabwe crisis, or risk being irrelevant. In January 2002, SADC heads of state convened in Malawi to discuss the crisis in Zimbabwe and emerged out of the meeting expressing their solidarity with President Mugabe. In a hard-hitting editorial entitled, “Mbeki: are you with us or against us”, the *Financial Gazette* wrote:
If the whole SADC has shamelessly abdicated its duty to rein in a member gone beserk, none is so culpable as South Africa’s President Thabo Mbeki. His persistent refusal to use Pretoria’s might to stave off a tragedy that is in the making north of the Limpopo must surely mark him out as either a leader who is unmoved by the unfolding events or a hypocrite who cannot stand the heat (*Financial Gazette*, 17/1/2002).

The paper argued that the resort by SADC leaders to the politics of solidarity in the face of the Zimbabwe crisis rendered the regional group “a disgraceful albatross” on the people of Southern Africa, and hence it was time to have the group disbanded (Ibid).

### 8.4 The ‘Opposition’ Press on Election 2002: A Concluding Discussion

Bill Saidi, former assistant editor of the *Daily News*, argued that, with the arrival of the *Daily News*, “Zimbabwean people began to realise that it was possible to vote Zanu PF out, and that it wasn’t a betrayal of Zimbabwe to vote for another party.” (Interview, April, 2004). Based on the analysis of the stories and editorials carried by the paper during the election season, it could be argued that the *Daily News* sought to give democratic agency to the opposition, while questioning and dismissing, the ruling party’s claims to legitimacy. The same applied to both the *Financial Gazette* and the *Zimbabwe Independent*, which gave salience to allegations of electoral fraud and violence perpetrated by Zanu PF, and sought to draw the attention of the regional and international communities to question the legitimacy of the poll.

The ‘opposition’ press generally sought more comments from the MDC or its leader Tsvangirai or civic groups aligned to the opposition than from Mugabe or Zanu PF or other political parties and their candidates. Although this could partly be due to the fact that the ruling party and some state institutions resolved not to supply any information to sections of the private press, especially the *Daily News* as early back as 2000\(^5\), there is evidence in both news and editorials in these papers that they consciously framed the electoral story from the perspective of the MDC.

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\(^5\) Nyarota, Interview, May 2004
Like the ‘patriotic’ press, the ‘opposition’ press framed the election as a dichotomous contest between good and evil, democracy and tyranny. The MDC leader was presented as a victim of state repression, and the country’s hope for the future. Mugabe was associated with electoral malpractice, repression and violence, as well as mismanagement of the economy. Most of the stories in the papers were based on sources from the opposition and civil society, especially University of Zimbabwe academics. Where Zanu PF sources were cited, they spoke on condition of anonymity. The three papers in this category did not carry any front page stories or editorial comments on the three other ‘minor’ contenders to the election. The coverage therefore was centred on the two major protagonists, the MDC and Zanu PF.

8.5. The ‘Independent Nationalist’ Press and the 2002 election: The Mirror

I argued in Chapter Seven that, in the dichotomous terrain of post-2000 Zimbabwean electoral politics and the media, the Zimbabwe Mirror adopted an ‘independent nationalistic’ model of journalism. In its coverage of the 2002 election, the paper applied largely similar frames that informed its coverage of the 2000 parliamentary elections. These consisted of a general delegitimisation of the MDC, which ran along an endorsement of the ruling party, and a call for a peaceful election without condemning anybody for the violence. However, what was different in the paper’s framing of the 2002 election was its occasional alarmist, tabloid-style headlines and stories whose authenticity was highly questionable. These stories indicated the paper’s degeneration into ‘patriotic’ journalism. Some of the stories included the paper’s allegations that a ‘third force’ was spearheading pre-election violence, and the allegations that the British government had hatched a plot to assassinate President Mugabe ahead of the election. In some editorials, the paper also maintained its argument that the crisis of Zimbabwe was a creation of the West rather than the incumbent government. The following themes were salient in the Zimbabwe Mirror’s framing of the 2002 election.

8.5.1 The Meddling Hand of the Foreign ‘Other’

As in the 2000 elections, the Zimbabwe Mirror made constant reference to the foreign ‘other’ whom it accused of interfering with the domestic affairs of the country in the run up to the 2002 presidential election. In particular, Britain and generally the West were identified as party to the crisis that resulted from the state’s controversial
decision to acquire white-owned commercial farms without paying the requisite compensation. The paper identified Zimbabwe as a victim of the West, and absolved the ruling political elite of wrongdoing; insisting rather that an unfinished business of land reform was being addressed in the interest of the nation. In mid January, hardly two months ahead of the elections, the paper, in an editorial, blamed pre-election violence in general in Africa on “the nature and content of the postcolonial state itself” (*Zimbabwe Mirror*, 17/1/2002). The absence of a national bourgeoisie to provide a national anchor around which both the ruling and opposition parties could develop a consensus was cited as a problem inherent in the African state modelled on the European Westphalia bourgeoisie state. The editorial entitled “Stop the violence,” argued that the violence and antagonism associated with elections in Africa had increased, “thanks to the involvement of those in the Northern hemisphere whose new mission now is the self-anointed task of assessing the extent to which the ‘natives’ have understood and implemented the ‘rules of governance’” (*Zimbabwe Mirror*, 17/1/2002).

In attributing violence to the ‘other,’ the *Zimbabwe Mirror* legitimised the phenomenon. In fact, the paper suggested that the rise of a strong opposition was inherently responsible for pre-election violence. It yearned for earlier violence-free campaigns in Africa, “when there was either a one-party state or when an opposition movement could match the state neither in terms of resources…nor the potential for violence as the contest became heated” (17/1/2002).

In its typical avoidance of attributing violence to Zanu PF, the paper reported a week before the election that violence was being caused by the ‘third force’. In a front page headline entitled: “Third force implicated in political violence” (1/3/2002), the paper quoted police officials alleging that they had uncovered a plot to destabilise rural areas in Matabeleland by a shadowy South African-based pressure group aligned with the MDC. Police spokesperson Wayne Bvudzijena was quoted in the story saying the group, called Campaign in Rural Areas (CIRA), was planning “to carry out violent campaigns for the MDC in the rural areas, particularly in Matabeleland provinces” (Ibid). The same story quoted MDC spokesperson Learnmore Jongwe dismissing the police charge as “nonsense” but only in the last paragraph.
A day before the election, the paper carried a lead story under the headline: “British plot Mugabe assassination” (8/3/2002). The story, with the simple by-line of “Mirror correspondent”, alleged that South African intelligence services has uncovered a plot by the British government to assassinate Mugabe with the aid of former Rhodesians based in South Africa. Although the story argued initially that it had got its information from the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) in South Africa, towards the end it quoted a spokesperson of the NIA, Dennis Nkosi saying about the story: “I have checked with the NIA and what I can tell you is that the story can only be described as absolute rubbish because there is no such thing.” Also quoted in the story were the British High Commission officials in Harare describing the allegations as “absurd”, and Zimbabwe’s State Security minister Nicholus Goche saying: “I don’t have information to that effect. Whoever told you that is lying” (Ibid). The assassination story was an example of the ‘agenda-setting’ type of journalism that the Zimbabwe Mirror was hardly associated with prior to 2002. It could be argued that by publishing the story just a day before the election the paper sought to draw national sympathy towards the incumbent candidate and further entrench the state and public press view that election was a contest between patriotism and national betrayal sponsored by the West.

8.5.2 Endorsement of Zanu PF
The paper’s depiction of both the MDC and the external ‘other’ was contrary to its legitimisation of Zanu PF’s candidature in the 2002 elections. The ruling party was variously credited with creating a democratic dispensation in the country, a legacy that external forces fronted by the MDC were threatening to undo. Just when most civil society groups and the opposition decried the increasingly authoritarian media policy regime in the post-2000 era where journalists from the private press were regularly threatened and arrested and foreign journalists illegally deported, the Zimbabwe Mirror praised the government for granting its citizens “a free media, freedom of association, freedom of speech and all other features that are attendant to any democratic society” (31/1/2002). The same editorial praised the promulgation of the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and the presence of the opposition in parliament as “no small achievement in the history of a young democracy” (Ibid). As discussed in Chapter Six, POSA, along with AIPPA, were condemned by civil society, the international community as well as sections of the ruling party itself, as
draconian pieces of legislation which curtailed freedoms of association, expression and the media.

In its first editorial comment after the elections—which were won by President Mugabe but disputed by the MDC and judged neither free nor fair by some of the observer missions—the paper argued that claims about a ‘stolen’ election were “desperate” (15/3/2002). While admitting there had been “administrative oversights” in the election, the *Zimbabwe Mirror* condemned “Tsvangirai and his external supporters” for refusing to accept the election outcome and argued that this was mere political expediency (15/3/2002). On the other hand, the paper eulogised President Mugabe as a “true nationalist and one that has given the best of his life to the struggle for liberation” (Ibid). In light of its victory, the paper called upon the ruling party to take steps to arrest the economic decline and, almost as an afterthought, to realise that the MDC and its supporters are part of the Zimbabwean family.

In its lead story under the headline: “Mugabe victory legitimate”, (15/3/2002) the paper gave salience to ‘friendly’ observer reports mostly from African countries, which “hailed the Presidential elections in Zimbabwe as a true reflection of the will of the people” (Ibid). Towards the end, the story also quoted dissenting reports from “others, mainly from Europe”, who had “raised concern about the environment under which the process was held” (Ibid). The paper also quoted the losing MDC and some political scientists either endorsing or dismissing Mugabe’s victory. Dissenting reports and voices were quoted only at the end of the stories.

**Figure 8.ix. Presidential candidate as a source of news for the Zimbabwe Mirror**

![Bar chart showing presidential candidate mentions](image)

**Note:** RM: Robert Mugabe; MT: Morgan Tsvangirai; PS: Paul Siwela, SM: Shakespeare Maya; WK: Wilson Kumbula

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Like the ‘patriotic’ press, the *Zimbabwe Mirror* sourced most of its stories from either Zanu PF/Mugabe spokesperson or unnamed sources (see Fig. 8.ix above). This was unlike in the 2000 elections when the paper’s sources went beyond the two major political parties to include independent candidates, smaller parties and civil society groups on both sides of the political divide.

8.6. Media Framing of 2002 Election: A “Rare Media Aberration”?  
In the run-up to the 2000 elections, *Herald* acknowledged the unprecedented polarised media coverage of the elections:

> What we are seeing in Zimbabwe is *a rare media aberration* that can only be explained by the unprecedented prevailing political and economic situation. The media have never had to deal with anything like this before. The readers, at whom the campaign reports are targeted, are the unfortunate victims who get a one-sided version of events (9/05/2000, *emphasis mine*)

As observed in Chapters Six and Seven, the ‘third’ transition was the most closely contested political era in post-independence Zimbabwe. Political and cultural life—both lived and mediated—was largely defined in binaries of ruling party/opposition, foreign/local, patriot/sell-out. For the media, it was a tempestuous ethical phase, as *Herald* editorial (cited above) acknowledged. And yet, despite making the acknowledgment, the paper implicitly also acknowledged that there was perhaps nothing it could do to stop the “rare media aberration”. The major newspapers, including the public press, framed the 2002 election the way they did the 2000 polls, almost exclusively in terms of the Zanu PF/MDC political dichotomy. Generally the private commercial press—with the exception of the *Zimbabwe Mirror*—threw its weight behind the MDC while the public press supported the ruling party’s candidature.

A trend that firmed in the ‘third’ transition was the elevation of the ownership factor as a key definer of political representation by the media. In their analysis of the media’s framing of international events premised on the good guy/bad guy dichotomy, Herman & Chomsky (2002) use the “propaganda model” as an analytic category to illustrate how elite domination of the media through ownership affects
patterns of media representation, including the tendency to marginalise dissent. Ownership structures, among others, are cited by the two scholars as significant filters which operate so naturally and frequently that even journalists in the system “are able to convince themselves that they choose to interpret the news ‘objectively’ and on the basis of professional news values” (Herman & Chomsky, 2002:2).

Applying the concept of filters to the media’s coverage of the elections in Zimbabwe during the period under review can help us interrogate claims of ‘telling it like it is’ as applied especially by the ‘opposition’ press in Zimbabwe on the eve of the election. The influence of fractions of capital and civil society—which in both elections were at ‘war’ with the state—was manifested in the ‘opposition’ press’s representation of elections. Zanu PF was consistently cited as the villain, and an impression was created that with the MDC in power, Zimbabwe’s woes would be a thing of the past. The dichotomous presentations in the ‘opposition’ press largely ignored the nuances of the land reform programme and its historical and cultural dimensions. The matter was simply dismissed as a ruling party election gimmick.

On the other side of the divide, the public press was obsessed with identifying the pitfalls of the MDC as an irrelevant, externally funded and sell-out party. Even after the party had secured 57 seats in the 2000 elections—arguably an indication of public confidence in the party—the public press continued to vilify it ahead of the 2002 elections.

The coverage of the 2002 election confirmed what the MMPZ called the ‘media war’ featuring the private and public media beginning in 2000 (MMPZ, 2000). The Daily News and Herald led the warring camps. What was particularly interesting about this ‘war’ was that each camp accused the other of igniting it. Prospects of negotiating a common path or a ‘third way’ were not possible in the polarised terrain, just as the Daily News dismissed the prospects of a national unity government in the aftermath of the 2002 election because that would be like having “the Pope and the Mafia running the Vatican” (20/3/2002).

The polarized coverage of the elections by the major competing dailies, Herald and the Daily News on the campaign events can be illustrated in the table overleaf.
What emerges from Figure 8.x. above is that there was no consensus between representatives of the ‘patriotic’ and ‘oppositional’ journalism about the issues around which the election was fought. Where the *Daily News* foregrounded corruption, food shortages and violence linked to war veterans and the land reform programme as the most important issues, *Herald* gave salience to the merits of the land reform programme and alleged conspiracies by the MDC and Western governments to topple the government. The editorial positions of the papers were consistent with the political positions of Zanu PF and the MDC.

As argued earlier in this chapter, the adoption of personalisation as a framing strategy was conspicuous in the media coverage of the 2002 election. The *personae* leading the two major political parties were given considerable media attention, and associated with either the good or the bad in an environment of polarised politics. As a technique of political reporting, personalisation has become common practice although it may distort the political process and underlying issues around which most elections are fought. Johnson-Cartee (2004) has noted that:

> News framing that personalises politics often distorts the true nature of the political process, for the political world is far more complicated than two lone combatants attacking one another. Complex social problems should not be reduced to trivial political contests, because such presentations disguise the
complexities involved in policy making and produce unrealistic expectations for quick and easy solutions. (2004:299).

Hawk (2002), agrees. He has argued that, with reference to the reportage of African political elections, the media

...misrepresent African political change through personalisation. They do so chiefly to attract audience interest. Yet when applied to politics, this practice exaggerates the promise of individual leadership...Coverage emphasising actions of an individual undermines a more complex understanding of political change by reinforcing the assumption that leaders determine African political events. (2002:171)

In the case of the 2002 elections, personalisation of the reportage reduced the contest to two diametrically opposed possibilities for the country; namely doom and glory. Each of the two major candidates was presented as everything that his rival was not. This dichotomous framing overlooked important issues such as similarities between Zanu PF and MDC economic policies, the problematic but legitimate issue of land redistribution, the merits and demerits of the discourses of sovereignty and globalisation, as well as the crucial issues of human rights, especially rights of women and children who bore the brunt of pre-election violence. In depicting the election as a passing event involving the personalities behind the MDC and Zanu PF, the media also overlooked the fact that the election was part of a process of citizen struggles for a democratic transition which had begun with the assumption of independence in 1980.

The framing of the election by representatives of the three categories of the post-2000 press (i.e., ‘patriotic’, ‘oppositional’ and ‘independent nationalist’ press) can be explained in a number of ways. One commonly proffered explanation is the hyper-commercialisation of the press and the tendency to sensationalise, personalise and dramatise news in a bid to appease audiences. All the newspapers under study operated as commercial entities and most of them were profitable at the time of the 2002 election. Arguably, the decision to dramatise the political polarities already existing in the country made economic sense for both the public and the private press.
Another explanation for the patterns of coverage is the acrimonious relationship between the press and the authoritarian state at the time. As discussed in Chapter Six, the post-2000 era saw the state increase its clampdown on the private press through both legal and extra-legal methods. In some cases—as cited elsewhere in this chapter—state officials including the police refused to provide information to sections of the private press. At the same time, through a controversial restructuring process (discussed in Chapter Six), the state usurped what was left of the editorial autonomy at Zimpapers, resulting in a tame and deferential public press which remained at the service of the ruling party throughout the electoral season. This untenable relationship between the state and both the private and public press influenced media coverage of the 2002 election.

8.7. The lost promise of the *Zimbabwe Mirror*

In 2000, the *Zimbabwe Mirror* backed Zanu PF, but without resorting to the shrill and outright partisan reportage of the ‘patriotic’ and ‘oppositional’ press. Occasionally, the paper interrogated the larger issues around which the election was being fought. Issues of land, the economy and the political crisis were generally framed within their broader historical contexts. The paper’s editorials identified the racial, colonial and neo-colonial nexus of the crisis, and located Zimbabwe in the context of the regional and international political economy. In so doing, the paper in 2000 did not simplistically present the reader with ready-made choices of villain and hero ahead of the crucial elections. Where both the ‘patriotic’ and ‘oppositional’ press focused almost exclusively on the main political contenders in their election reports in 2000, the *Mirror* devoted significant attention to smaller parties and independents, thus arguably providing an alternative public sphere to political voices marginalised by the major newspapers on both sides of the divide.

However, as observed in this chapter, the *Zimbabwe Mirror* abandoned this editorial stance, and adopted ‘patriotic’ journalism in its framing of the 2002 elections. In so doing, the paper arguably lost its promise of being a credible arena for diverse political perspectives ahead of the elections. The paper’s neutrality was largely confined to commentary on the ruling party. Although not in terms so nakedly partisan as *Herald* or *Sunday Mail*, the *Mirror*’s contempt for the MDC was hardly veiled in its editorial pages and in many of its news stories. The paper’s uncritical
identification of the ruling party with progressive nationalism and the opposition with uneven globalisation, new imperialism and the erosion of sovereignty led to its relative silence on key election issues including violence, election rigging and corruption. The *Zimbabwe Mirror* was in 2002 also arguably obsessed with conspiracy theories around the cause of violence in the run-up to the election.

When it provided coverage to voices other than just Zanu PF and the MDC in 2000, the *Zimbabwe Mirror* approximated a functional public sphere in which a diversity of voices and competing political interests found expression, notwithstanding the paper’s general editorial endorsement of Zanu PF. The move towards ‘patriotic’ journalism in 2002 was arguably a result of changes at the level of ownership at the paper. As discussed in the previous two chapters, the *Mirror*’s weak financial base and its editor-in-chief’s proximity to both the ruling party and the state made it vulnerable to political influence and control. It was not until August 2005 that the clandestine takeover of the *Mirror*’s holding company, Sappho, by the Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) through shelf companies became a matter of public knowledge.

### 8.8. Conclusion

In light of the foregoing, it is important to reflect on whether media coverage of the 2002 election provided the critical discursive realms in the ideal sense of the public sphere. It has been observed in this chapter that the coverage was largely framed in terms of binaries between good and evil, patriot and traitor. Seeking to provide voters with ready-made electoral choices and reducing complex processes to simple dichotomies is hardly consistent with the ideal democratic-agency role of the press in democratic transition.

What the press did in 2002 was to highlight the official and alternative versions of the crisis and the perspectives of the major political formations regarding solutions. The election was presented as an opportunity to vote a candidate who could offer the solutions. Both news stories and editorials were consistent in toeing the either/or line.

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The polarised coverage did not facilitate critical-analytical debate. Neither did the mainstream press under review give expression to voices outside the two major political parties contesting the election. On the one hand, this could be a reflection of the extent to which bad media policy and legislation, as well as situations of economic collapse, social unrest and political turbulence, all affect the media’s framing of important national events and processes like elections. On the other, as indicated above, this could be a reflection of a trend globally where the commercial media frame political events and processes through personalisation, trivia and emphasis on titillating aspects of the contest rather than broader issues at stake in the contests. In a situation of low media density and limited media choices such as Zimbabwe, the implications for the public sphere are arguably more negative than where the more media choices exist for citizens.