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Press-citizen interface in a fragile society: mapping press and citizen discourses on election violence during presidential and parliamentary elections in Zimbabwe, 2000-2013

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2016

http://hdl.handle.net/10539/22743

Chari, Tendai Joseph (2016) Press-citizen interface in a fragile society: mapping press and citizen discourses on election violence during presidential and parliamentary elections in Zimbabwe, 2000-2013, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, < http://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/handle/10539/22743>

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ABSTRACT

Many African countries have been holding regular elections since the "Third Wave" of democratisation which reintroduced multi-party politics on the African continent, but few of these elections meet the democratic litmus test, due to, among other factors, the prevalence of election violence. The press has been justifiably or unjustifiably indicted for these imbroglios on account of alleged transgressions linked to its overt or covert incitement to violence. In the ensuing political contestations, citizens bear the burden of diminished prospects of credible information occasioned by a highly politicised press. In the Southern African region, there is no better case to illustrate the entanglement of the press in electoral contestations than Zimbabwe. This study is a qualitative exploration of press and citizen discourses on election violence during the presidential and parliamentary elections held in Zimbabwe between 2000 and 2013. A Foucauldian discursive analytic approach was used to analyse the representation of election violence in two-state-owned and four privately-owned newspapers during presidential and parliamentary elections held over the specified period spanning thirteen years. The study also examined how these press discourses interrelate with citizen discourses. Empirical data were drawn from a corpus of archival textual data comprising hard news and feature articles published in *The Herald*, *The Sunday Mail*, *The Zimbabwe Independent*, *The Financial Gazette*, *Newsday* and the *Daily News*. In-depth interviews were conducted with purposively targeted journalists and editors from the selected newspapers. In addition, in-depth-interviews were held with twenty-one (21) regular newspaper readers who were also politically engaged citizens. The main observation was that press representation of election violence was marked by antagonistic discursive practices reflective of the rivulets of political and ideological bifurcation. Consequently, competing and politically expedient journalistic philosophies emerged. The state-owned press used a model of 'national interest' journalism while the privately-owned press preferred the 'human-rights' model which crystallized into an over-arching 'activist journalism'. This 'activist' journalistic approach found expression through an array of anti-democratic press discursive practices epitomised by selectivity, silence and salience, the consequence of which was that citizens were starved of credible and impartial information. This thesis argues that the anti-democratic discursive practices deployed by the press camps blunted the citizenry's critical engagement with the exact motivations, causes and manifestations of election violence. These anti-democratic discursive practices have a potential to engender a culture of political intolerance with long-term consequences that predispose society to political conflict rather than consensus building.

KEY WORDS: Activist Journalism; Anti-democratic Practices; Citizens; Election Violence; Press; Discursive Construction; Human Rights; Political Culture; National Interest; Zimbabwe