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**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Willems, Wendy (2010) *Beyond dramatic revolutions and grand rebellions: everyday forms of resistance during the 'Zimbabwe crisis'*. [Comunicare](#), 29 . pp. 1-17. ISSN 0259-0069

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Available in LSE Research Online: July 2013

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Beyond dramatic revolutions and grand rebellions: everyday forms of resistance in the 'Zimbabwe crisis'

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Original citation:

Willems, W. (2010). Beyond dramatic revolutions and grand rebellions: everyday forms of resistance during the 'Zimbabwe crisis'. In: *Communicare* 29, Special Edition, September 2010: 1-17.

Abstract

In the context of the 'Zimbabwe crisis' of the early 2000s, both popular and academic accounts frequently discussed Zimbabweans as passive victims of their government, hereby suggesting that the extensive efforts of the state to create a 'patriotic' citizenry through the cultural project of the Third Chimurenga were largely successful. This article argues that the absence of physical protests in the streets should not be equalled to an absence of resistance. By adopting a narrow focus on the forms of resistance associated with dramatic revolutions and grand rebellions, journalists and scholars neglected the everyday forms of resistance through which Zimbabweans sought to challenge the state such as popular humour and rumour. These nascent forms of resistance could have been drawn upon in a more sustained way by the political opposition and civil society in order to provoke political change.

Popular and academic accounts on the 'Zimbabwe crisis' have expressed disappointment or surprise about the lack of resistance among Zimbabweans against the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) regime. These accounts expected a particular kind of resistance to occur, echoing the street protests part of the 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine in late 2004, the popular protests in Madagascar in January 2009 and the demonstrations in Georgia in April 2009. This discourse on 'passive Zimbabweans' was expressed both in popular media and academic accounts. For example, in a 2005 article entitled "Dictator's grip is tightened by weak protest" in the British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*, journalist David Blair suggested that the 'docile nature' of Zimbabweans had enabled President Mugabe to strengthen his rule. Against the background of 'Operation Murambatsvina'¹, Blair lamented the way in which Zimbabweans failed to resist the attempts of the state to demolish their homes:

In fairness, there has been little spontaneous discontent. A few stones were thrown at police during the urban demolitions and street battles briefly erupted in towns such as Chitungwiza. But many Zimbabweans meekly submitted to the destruction of their homes and livelihoods. Any outsider with goodwill towards this beautiful country is led towards some profoundly disturbing conclusions. The entire Zimbabwean nation seems to have given up opposing Mr Mugabe. Put bluntly, they are waiting for God to remove him. The MDC's failure to offer any protest or resistance reflects the popular mood.

¹ Operational Murambatsvina ('Operation Drive Out Trash' in chiShona) refers to the 2005 attempts of the Zimbabwean government to 'clean up' the urban areas. The Operation resulted in widespread displacement of urban backyard dwellers and street vendors.

But if 12 million Zimbabweans have no will to rid themselves of a dictator, why should anyone else help? Perhaps Zimbabweans deserve the most damning verdict of all - that they have the leader they deserve.

I hasten to add that I do not believe this. But looking at the country's recent history, I find it hard to listen to Zimbabweans who blame the outside world for failing to help. They have done precious little to help themselves and Mr Tsvangirai seems most adept at machine-gunning himself in both feet.²

Similarly, Richard Dowden, the previous Africa Editor of *The Economist*, wrote in an article in *The Times* that “[t]he opposition Movement for Democratic Change has missed its chance to follow the example of the citizens of Ukraine, Georgia and Madagascar and take to the streets to force out a tyrannical ruler”.³ Especially, in the run-up to Zimbabwe's presidential elections in April 2005, comparisons between the lack of resistance in Zimbabwe and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine were often made. International media expected ordinary Zimbabweans to rise up and stand against the Mugabe regime through protests in the streets. Whereas South Africans had actively resisted the Apartheid regime in a heroic, grassroots struggle for freedom, Zimbabweans were castigated for passively accepting a murderous government.

While popular media accounts emphasised Zimbabweans' lack of resistance against the ZANU-PF regime, some academic accounts have argued that government's efforts to create a 'patriotic' citizenry devoted to ZANU-PF through state-controlled media such as *The Herald* and the monopoly broadcaster, Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC), have been largely successful. A public opinion survey, part of a series known as Afrobarometer, concluded that government media in Zimbabwe had succeeded in their efforts to win the hearts and minds of Zimbabweans (Chikwanha, Sithole and Bratton 2004; Bratton, Chikwanha and Sithole 2005). Afrobarometer measures “the social, political and economic atmosphere in Africa”.⁴ The project compares “trends in public attitudes” in various African countries and shares results with “decision makers, policy advocates, civic educators, journalists, researchers, donors and investors, as well as average Africans who wish to become more informed and active citizens”.⁵

The researchers of the Afrobarometer survey were confronted with an outcome that they found difficult to explain. Although Zimbabweans seemed to blame the government for the deteriorating economic conditions, the results of the survey concluded that many Zimbabweans still respected and supported President Mugabe. The research team attempted to explain this 'paradox' through three factors: economic patronage, political fear and persuasion by the mass media. They did not detect a statistically significant relationship between the first two factors and continued support to the government. However, they found that the relation between the third factor (persuasion by the mass media) and the positive evaluation of government was statistically significant. Because readers attached a significant amount of trust in government media, they concluded that this confidence must have motivated and convinced readers to continue to support the ruling regime.

The research team here implied a straightforward, causal relation or 'hypodermic needle effect' between trust in the media and support for the regime. However, this relation could be turned around as well. Would readers who are inclined to support the regime at all costs not also support the type of media in which their leaders are portrayed in a favourable way, i.e. state-

² Blair, David, Dictator's grip is tightened by weak protest. In: *The Daily Telegraph*, 27 July 2005.

³ Dowden, Richard, We've got to talk to Mugabe. In: *The Times*, 16 May 2005.

⁴ See the Afrobarometer website: <http://www.afrobarometer.org>.

⁵ See the Afrobarometer website: <http://www.afrobarometer.org>.

controlled media such as *The Herald* and ZBC? In other words, could people's support to government not *precede* their preference for certain media? The research team decided to argue the other way around in order to enable them to give their final report the catchy title "The power of propaganda" or, as David Moore cynically noted in a response to the report, to ensure that "we can guarantee continued donor funding for the science of surveying democratic progress across the Dark continent" (2005, p. 112). While Blair and Dowden expected a particular type of resistance that Zimbabweans did not demonstrate, the Afrobarometer research team concluded on the basis of a quantitative data that ZANU-PF's 'propaganda' had been successful.

Beyond dramatic revolutions and rebellions

Blair and Dowden's focus on dramatic confrontations between Zimbabweans and their regime, expressed in street protests, has ignored other ways in which ordinary Zimbabweans might have resisted their government in their day-to-day lives. Similar to the analysis of Blair and Dowden, scholars belonging to the field of subaltern studies have pointed to the important role of ordinary people in bringing about revolutions and rebellions.⁶ The Subaltern Studies Group, which was founded by the Indian historian Ranajit Guha and drew major inspiration from Antonio Gramsci's work, responded to the elitist bias of particularly Indian historiography and its focus on the agency of 'Big Men'. Instead, subaltern studies scholars emphasised the role of women, peasants, industrial workers and low-caste labourers in bringing about a change in power. As Haynes and Prakash (1991, p. 1) have argued, many scholars have been attracted to highlight the role of ordinary people in rebellions and insurgencies:

Dramatic confrontations between the dominant and the dominated – manifest in riots, rebellions, revolutions and organized political movements – have always constituted a major source of attention for social historians, sociologists and political scientists, particularly those keen to find among the oppressed the universal urge toward liberation.

However, as they argue, the focus on these "extraordinary moments of collective protest" has precluded scholars from examining the "more enduring, 'everyday' forms of resistance constantly present in the behaviours, traditions and consciousness of the subordinate" (Haynes and Prakash, 1991, p. 1). According to them, resistance should not strictly be understood as referring to physical and material protests in the streets but is defined as the broader set of practices used by the dominated to contest those who make attempts to dominate them. The concept of resistance then encompasses a wide-ranging collection of cultural practices such as rituals, gossip, humour, dress and behavioural codes. Similarly, in his influential book *Weapons of the weak*, James Scott conceptualised everyday forms of resistance as "the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labour, food, taxes, rents, and interest from them. Most forms of this struggle stop well short of outright collective defiance" (1985, p. xvi).

While Dowden and Blair failed to take into account everyday forms of resistance, the Afrobarometer research team concluded that state media had largely been successful in interpellating Zimbabweans as loyal supporters of the ruling party ZANU-PF. In their analysis, they relied on quantitative research in order to investigate what they understood as a causal relationship between state media and Zimbabweans' support to the ruling party. However, the attempt of the research team to prove the 'effect' of media on ordinary people has long been

⁶ See for example: Guha (1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1987, 1989).

problematised by a range of qualitative audience studies scholars. For example, David Gauntlett (1998, p. 120) has argued that if “after over sixty years of a considerable amount of research effort, direct effects of media upon behaviour have not been clearly identified”, we therefore “should conclude that they are simply *not there to be found*”. Although actors ranging from governments to advertising agencies have a vested interest in knowing the impact of media on audiences, Gauntlett and others deem it impossible to find clear empirical evidence of the influence of media on people’s behaviour or beliefs.

Furthermore, by virtue of its method, quantitative audience research has not been able to document the complex ways in which newspaper readers, television viewers or radio listeners read and interpret a text. The Bratton team was faced with the finding that many Zimbabweans appeared supportive of their government. In their search for an explanation for this finding, they ultimately concluded that their support must have been the result of successful government propaganda. However, their use of a quantitative methodology ignores the highly divergent ways in which Zimbabweans might engage with state media. Active audience scholars have highlighted the creative ways in which audiences have interpreted media texts and have emphasised the failure of ideology in interpellating audiences (Fiske & Hartley, 1978; Fiske, 1987; Ang, 1985, 1991, 1996; Morley, 1980, 1992; Liebes and Katz, 1990).

This article treats popular humour and rumour as everyday forms of resistance through which Zimbabweans sought to contest attempts of the state to both interpellate them as loyal ruling party supporters and to counter efforts of the state to monopolise the public arena. Furthermore, the article argues that an investigation of popular humour defies the findings of the Afrobarometer research team and highlights the multiple ways in which Zimbabweans have engaged with the attempts of government-controlled television, radio and press to influence their political views.

Public speech in the context of the ‘Zimbabwe crisis’

The efforts of the Zimbabwean government to restrict the public sphere have been widely documented. Since 2000, government has deployed a range of measures with the aim to exclude critical perspectives on the crisis, mediated by either global news media or local private newspapers, from reaching the public arena. In the run-up to the 2002 presidential elections, new legislation such as the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) resulted in tighter controls on private newspapers and foreign media houses. The national broadcaster Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) dominated the airwaves and government did not allow any private radio or television station to start broadcasting. The imposition of local content quota on ZBC resulted in the disappearance of CNN and BBC news bulletins, foreign soap operas and foreign pop music.

Apart from curtailing formal media, the Zimbabwe government also introduced a range of measures to gain control over public speech. For example, the Public Order and Security Act (POSA), which was gazetted into law on 22 January 2002, imposed severe restrictions on the publication or communication of false statements prejudicial to the state and of undermining the authority of, or insulting, the President.⁷ It also imposed severe constraints on demonstrations

⁷ While POSA was supposed to repeal the repressive Law and Order (Maintenance) Act (LOMA) which dated back from the colonial regime, POSA did not significantly differ in content from LOMA. The text of POSA can be downloaded from Kubatana, a NGO network alliance project. Check: http://www.kubatana.net/html/archive/legisl/020122posa.asp?orgcode=par001&year=2002&range_start=1 (last accessed: 11 January 2009).

and public gatherings under the pretext of “maintaining public order”. In addition, government introduced the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act, which became effective on 1 July 2006 and also introduced similar restrictions to those under POSA.⁸

In the wake of the introduction of these new laws, a number of people were arrested and some charged for uttering statements deemed to be insulting or undermining the President. Travellers in commuter omnibuses were particularly victimised. In Zimbabwe, passengers often engage in lively conversations and discussions in buses and taxis. Politics or the broader economic crisis have been recurrent topics of these public conversations but these public forms of critical speech have not been without their risks. For example, in November 2004, a commuter omnibus traveller was overheard by an intelligence agent as saying that “Mugabe was a dictator while British Prime Minister Tony Blair was a liberator”.⁹ Subsequently, he was arrested for undermining the authority of the president. In December 2004, another traveller was overheard telling his brother not to be “thick-headed like Mugabe”. Subsequently, he was held in custody for a number of days.¹⁰ In January 2007, a commuter was arrested after he shouted that he wished the US government would intervene in Zimbabwe like it had done in Iraq in order to remove Mugabe.¹¹

In this repressive context in which Zimbabweans had limited access to information outside control of government and in which their attempts to criticise government in public speech were criminalised, popular humour and rumour still flourished. Jokes and rumours are of course not identical. Rumours could be seen as ‘counter-truths’ or other accounts of some sort of ‘reality’ whereas jokes generally do not make a claim to truth but instead primarily serve to make others laugh. What jokes and rumours share is that they are both orally transmitted (although increasingly also via the internet, mobile phones and occasionally through tabloids or broadsheets) and also frequently seek to comment on social or political affairs. As Zimbabwean poet Comrade Fatso pointed out in his blog, rumours were rife in the capital city Harare:

Rumour rhymes with ‘ruma’, Shona for bite. Harare has literally been bitten by rumours. Our city is famed for many things but one thing specifically. The ability to turn no news into headlines. The skill of spinning no knowledge into street wisdom. The hustle of selling unconfirmed stories on a hungry parallel market. Our only non-state daily newspaper [*The Daily News*] was bombed so the people’s paper is the people’s stories, nyayas [‘story’ in chiShona] that circulate like a whisper at a bottle store.¹²

In the numerous queues that rapidly appeared and grew in length since 2000, Zimbabweans actively debated politics irrespective of their fears. In commuter omnibuses, hair salons and beer halls, Zimbabweans shared jokes mocking the ZANU-PF regime. Jokes and gossip did not only

⁸ The text of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act can be downloaded from Kubatana, a NGO network alliance project. Check: http://www.kubatana.net/html/archive/legisl/050603crimlaw.asp?orgcode=par001&year=2005&range_start=1 (last accessed: 11 January 2009).

⁹ Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum (2005). *Zimbabwe: facts and fictions. An audit of the recommendations of the fact-finding mission of the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights*, p. 46, available from: http://www.hrforumzim.com/special_hrru/audit_achpr_fact-finding_mission.pdf (last accessed: 11 January 2009).

¹⁰ Zimbabwean held for Mugabe ‘slur’, *BBC News online*, 15 December 2004, available from: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/4098237.stm> (last accessed: 11 January 2009).

¹¹ Phiri, Gift, Mugabe faces unprecedented ridicule, *The Zimbabwean*, 26 January 2007.

¹² See Comrade Fatso’s blog: <http://comradefatso.vox.com/library/post/the-rumour-city.html> (last accessed: 1 November 2008).

circulate in Harare but also reached rural areas of Zimbabwe as well as the growing Zimbabwean diaspora in the United States, the United Kingdom and South Africa. Rumours and jokes were not only transmitted orally but were increasingly mediated via SMS messages and emails (Moyo, 2009; Willems, 2009).

The prevalence of popular humour and rumour in Zimbabwe should be understood in the context of what has often been referred to as ‘radio trottoir’ (‘pavement radio’ in English), i.e. “the popular and unofficial discussion of current affairs in Africa” (Ellis, 1989, p. 321). The term radio trottoir was invented by inhabitants of Brazzaville and Kinshasa in Congo but there are equivalent terms in other parts of Africa such as ‘Radio Mall’ in Botswana, ‘Radio Kankan’ in Guinea, ‘Radio Treichville’ in Cote d’Ivoire, ‘Radio Potato’ in South Africa, ‘Radio Boca Boca’ in Lusophone Africa and ‘le téléphone arabe’ in North Africa (Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004, p. 28; Nyamnjoh, 2005, p. 210). Similar terminology can also be found elsewhere in the world such as in Armenia where the term ‘Radio Yerevan’ referred to the practice of joking during the Soviet period. Because Zimbabweans had restricted access to alternative views of the crisis due to the high costs and lack of availability of print media, internet and alternative broadcasters, jokes and rumours emerged as important alternative media and, as Moyo (2009) has argued, could even be treated as forms of ‘citizen journalism’.

As Nyamnjoh points out, “rumour is most likely to become an alternative source of information during a crisis, when there is a heightened need for information in the public. This is especially likely when the conventional media, for whatever reason, lack credibility” (2005, p. 216). Ellis argues that radio trottoir should be seen “in the context of the oral traditions and respect for oral culture which modern Africa has inherited from its past” (1989, p. 321). Nyamnjoh similarly explains “the ubiquity of rumour in Cameroon, not simply by the country’s strong oral tradition, but also owing to the rigid control of information and communication by the power elite” (2005, p. 211).

Popular humour and rumour as everyday forms of resistance

Given the constraints that were imposed on public speech in Zimbabwe, popular humour and rumour can be considered as the everyday ways in which Zimbabweans resisted to be subjected to power. While Dowden and Blair as well as the Bratton research team conceptualised Zimbabweans as docile, passive victims of ZANU-PF propaganda, an investigation of popular humour and rumour points us to the less visible ways in which resistance in Zimbabwe manifested itself on an everyday basis. Many scholars, including those in the field of subaltern studies, have understood resistance in a narrow manner, as referring to mass protests in the streets. Furthermore, because of their analytical focus on resistance, they have also neglected the way in which resistance is constantly shaped by forms of power and conversely, shape relations of power. It is impossible to analytically separate power from resistance; both are entangled with each other. Power and resistance should not be treated as “polar opposites but as phenomena which often coexist and shape each other” (Haynes and Prakash, 1991, p. 13).

In the case of the Zimbabwe crisis, one cannot understand the ways in which the ruled related to the rulers without taking into account how those in power sought to subject citizens to their rule. Analyses that have stressed the passivity of ordinary Zimbabweans in the face of the crisis have often failed to analyse the manner in which the Zimbabwean government sought to discipline its citizens into submission. As the previous section demonstrated, the state introduced a number of measures to restrict not only media but even public speech. Within the constraints of such a repressive state, mass street protests are risky affairs which could cost lives. In these

contexts, less visible and underground forms of resistance become more prevalent. As the previous section demonstrated, there were also clear risks involved in telling a joke or spreading a rumour. But Zimbabweans defied constraints on public speech and attempts by the government to monopolise the public arena through popular humour and rumour. Jokes and rumours should then be understood as response to an environment in which public talk and verbal culture are common but also should be seen as a reaction to a situation in which a government makes attempts to monopolise the public arena and to clamp down on dissent. Jokes did not only mock the way in which the state mediated itself in *The Herald* and on ZBC but also defied the limits on freedom of expression imposed by the state.

As a number of scholars have pointed out, after 2000, the ruling party ZANU-PF faced a crisis of legitimacy and increasingly began to use a narrow form of patriotic history in order to justify its continued rule over Zimbabwe (Ranger, 2004; Bull-Christiansen, 2004; Kriger, 2006; Tendi, 2008; Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems, 2009). State-controlled press, radio and television were crucial in inviting Zimbabweans to become part of this patriotic ‘party-nation’ (Kriger, 2003, p. 74). Veterans of the 1970s liberation war took centre stage in these mediations as the true heroes who had been crucial in the birth of the nation. The concept of ‘national hero’ became a key feature on the national broadcaster ZBC, popularised for example through the annual televised ‘Heroesplush’ music gala and the commemorative galas introduced to honour deceased politicians such as Joshua Nkomo and Simon Muzenda. In Zimbabwe, the declaration of ‘national heroes’ has always been highly contested (Kriger, 1995; Werbner, 1998). However, commemorative practices became even more politicised in the climate of the early 2000s in which the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) was constantly delegitimised by government as an ‘unheroic’ party, a party without liberation war credentials and a party of ‘unpatriotic sell-outs’ who primarily took their orders from white Rhodesians and ‘the British’.¹³

In the early 2000s, government’s official definition of a ‘national hero’ did not only refer to ‘fallen heroes’ (i.e. those who passed away during the liberation war) and veterans of the 1970s guerrilla war but also came to include new ‘heroes’ of the *Third Chimurenga* who had shown their loyalty to the ruling party ZANU-PF through for example their prominent role in the government-sponsored land occupations.¹⁴ Through their tributes to ‘national heroes’, state television and radio invited Zimbabweans to honour them and to show their gratitude towards these ‘vana vevhu’ (‘sons of the soil’ in chiShona) who had sacrificed their lives to fight in the bush guerrilla war to liberate Zimbabwe from the colonial yoke. However, popular humour frequently challenged official definitions of the ‘national hero’. Through jokes, Zimbabweans resisted to be interpellated as ‘patriotic’ subjects who were called on to honour old and new ‘heroes’. For example, in December 2006, the following joke circulated via SMS:

You are my hero!!!!!!!!!!!! Hie

¹³ The MDC was established in the wake of the National Working People’s Convention organised by the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) in February 1999. This convention was attended by workers, some peasants, representatives from civil society organizations including the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) which later came to play an important role in the formation of the MDC.

¹⁴ The chiShona word ‘Chimurenga’ refers to a traditional warrior and legendary hero in the 1890s, Sororenzou Murenga, who was renowned for his fighting skills (Vambe 2004: 167). The word is normally used to refer to the early Shona and Ndebele uprisings of 1893 and 1896 against white settler rule (First Chimurenga) and to the liberation struggle against the Rhodesian Front regime in the 1960s and 1970s (Second Chimurenga). In the course of the major land occupations which commenced in February 2002, the government came to refer to these invasions and to the fast track land reform programme as the ‘Third Chimurenga’.

You are a true hero! U survived with no fuel, sugar, cooking oil, bread , drinking dirty water, power cuts, was hit by Operation Murambatsvina but missed Operation Garikai¹⁵, robbed of your millions by Gono¹⁶, and it now costs you Z\$30 000 to bury a loved one, but u are eager for 2007!

YOU DESERVE A GALA!

HAPPY 2007!

In the increasingly challenging economic context, jokes suggested that the real heroes were not those who fought in the liberation war or participated in the *Third Chimurenga* but instead were ordinary Zimbabweans who were trying to survive in the dire economic circumstances. With inflation skyrocketing, massive shortages of basic commodities and poor availability of water and electricity, the joke accorded hero status to ordinary Zimbabweans as opposed to ZANU-PF elites.

Another joke poked fun at the ‘heroine’s welcome’ which Zimbabwean swimmer Kirsty Coventry received after winning three medals during the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens, Greece. On her return home to Zimbabwe, Coventry was awaited at the airport by around 2,000 Zimbabweans, including the Minister of Education, Sports and Culture, Aeneas Chigwedere. In a press conference, Chigwedere said that he awaited Coventry at the airport in order “to welcome back home one of the greatest ambassadors of Zimbabwe”.¹⁷ Chigwedere even explored offering her a diplomatic passport. Upon arrival in Harare, Coventry also was offered an official reception at State House which was organised by President Mugabe. Soon after the event, the following joke circulated in Zimbabwe:

Chinoz¹⁸ was there at a party hosted for Kirsty. He asked the MC to give his own speech and here it was: “Pamberi nekubatana, Pamberi naKitsi, Pasi nevarungu, Pasi nevasina mabvi. 2day taungana pano tichipemberera kuhwinha kwaKitsi pakubhaguja kumaOlympia. Kitsi aratidza kuti mweya waNehanda Nyakasikana waimutungamirira stereki nokuti zimhandara rakaita zvenjuzu chaiyo. Ini nemamwe ma”O” Vets takagara pasi tikaona zvakakodzera kuti apihwe Mhembaship yeku yeZNLWVA (War Vet Asso). Ikozvino Kitsi ave neAllowed yekupamba ivhu pamwe nesu. VePolitibhuru takagara navo pasi tikavaudza kuti anofanira kupihwa ruremekedzo rwegamba rerusununguko nekuti mwana uyu wakatisunungura kubva 1980 tainge takasungirwa zvinhu tichitadza kubata kana menduru imwe. Iyi yaarwa iForth Chimurenga. Congrachureshenzi Kitsi, Our national Hero, galant Son Of the soil, Mwana wevhu” Mhururu nemuridzo uko “Thengi u where machi”.¹⁹

Translation from chiShona:

¹⁵ ‘Operation Garikai’ (‘live well’ in chiShona) refers to the ambitious housing scheme that government promised those whose houses were demolished in Operation Murambatsvina.

¹⁶ Gono refers to Gideon Gono, the Governor of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe.

¹⁷ Red carpet for Zim’s golden girl, *Independent Online News*, 25 August 2004, available from: http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?sf=628&set_id=6&click_id=628&art_id=qw10934497859680425 (last accessed: 9 January 2009).

¹⁸ Chinoz refers to Joseph Chinotimba, who presented himself as an ex-war veteran and played an important role as leader of the farm occupations in early 2000. Because of his role in the occupations, government heralded him as a loyal ZANU-PF supporter. He later became the National Vice-Chairman of the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans’ Association and embarked on a political career by standing as a ZANU-PF candidate in the March 2003 parliamentary by-elections for Highfield, Harare constituency and in the March 2008 parliamentary elections for Buhera South constituency. On both occasions, he was unsuccessful.

¹⁹ Message posted to ZvaJokes (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ZvaJokes>) on 25 August 2005 by Carlo.

Chinoz was there at a party hosted for Kirsty. He asked the MC to give his own speech and here it was: “Forward with unity. Forward with Kirsty. Down with whites. Down with those without knees.”²⁰ Today we are gathered here to celebrate the achievements of Kirsty in the swimming competitions at the Olympics. Kirsty showed that she was guided by the spirit medium of Nehanda for sure. Kirsty swam like a mermaid. Myself and other war veterans sat down and saw it fit for her to be guaranteed membership to the ZNLWVA (Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans’ Association). Kirsty is now allowed to occupy land with us. We sat down with the Politburo and agreed that Kirsty should be given the honour accorded to a national heroine of the liberation struggle because she liberated us from the burden of having to wait since 1980 for only one Olympic medal. Her fight is the Fourth Chimurenga. Congratulations Kirsty, Our national Hero, gallant son of the soil, son of the soil”. [Ululations and whispers]. “Thank you very much”.

The joke mocks the official welcome granted by the Zimbabwean government to a white Zimbabwean, Kirsty Coventry. While Coventry was of course not officially declared a ‘national hero’, a status only conferred upon death, the joke exposed what it perceived as a temporary rupture in the discourse of state media which had written white Zimbabweans out of the national imaginary. State media generally portrayed white Zimbabweans as ‘unpatriotic’, not belonging to the nation, and even contributing to the destruction of the nation through their support to the opposition MDC. The joke ridicules the seemingly contradictory approach of the Zimbabwean government which suddenly praises a white Zimbabwean. It also caricatures war veteran and ZANU-PF stalwart Joseph Chinotimba (Chinoz) as the ‘fool’ who in front of Kirsty shouts the liberation war slogan “Down with whites. Down with those without knees”. The relevance of skin colour as criteria for membership of the nation is temporarily suspended in the joke, and Kirsty is embraced as ‘one of us’.

The joke not only criticises the politicisation of the conferral of ‘national hero’ status and the appropriation of ‘national heroes’ for party politics but also comments on the widening of the criteria that determine who qualifies for hero status. While initially, this status was conferred to those who had been instrumental in the 1970s liberation war, the joke suggests that in the 2000s anyone useful to the ruling party could be declared a national hero. It hereby fundamentally challenges the national imaginary of the ‘party nation’ as articulated through the state media. Through the state-controlled media, Zimbabweans experienced the state on an everyday basis in their living rooms. However, by no means were they passive victims in the face of the stringent controls on the public sphere. Through popular humour and rumour, they actively defied limitations on freedom of expression imposed by the Zimbabwe government. While the Bratton research team concluded that state propaganda had been successful, an analysis of popular humour shows the multiple ways in which Zimbabweans interpreted state media texts.

The implications for power

As Haynes and Prakash have argued, power and resistance are intricately entangled with each other. Resistance is not only shaped by the constraints imposed by those in power but also continuously provokes power to respond. Many scholars assume that only mass street protests can force a government out of power and that everyday forms of resistance are unable to bring about a change in power relations. Some have even argued that these forms of resistance can actually contribute to the maintenance of the political status quo. For example, in the context of Spain under Franco, Brandes (1977, p. 345-346) has argued that jokes did not have “any positive

²⁰ The expression ‘those without knees’ originates from early encounters between white settlers and Africans. Because white settlers wore trousers, Africans began to refer to them as ‘those without knees’ because their knees were made invisible by the trousers.

effect on actual political life in the country. Political humour in Spain has operated as a safety valve for anti-regime sentiment, and in this sense has had a conservative influence. Laughter creates at least a temporary sense of well-being and satisfaction, and to this extent political jokes may be perceived as a means by which Spaniards trick themselves into the acceptance of unpleasant realities". For Brandes (1977, p. 346), "political humour dissipates energy or deflects it away from direct political action". Under communist rule, Romanians even had a joke which also held the view that humour dissuaded people from standing up against their leaders: "Do you know what they say? The Hungarians, they make revolutions. The Poles, they make strikes. The Romanians, they make jokes" (Cochran, 1989, p. 272). In this perspective, jokes are thus believed to relieve stress and anxieties, thereby reducing the need to resist in a more organised manner. Instead of spreading dissent, jokes are thus thought to sustain the political status quo. However, others such as George Orwell believe that "every joke is a tiny revolution" (1969, p. 184, quoted in Oring, 2004, p. 218). Similarly, Haynes and Prakash have argued that "struggles in everyday life can grow into large-scale and conscious challenges to the political or social order" (1991, p. 4).

In the case of popular humour and rumour in Zimbabwe, there are some indications that these forms of everyday resistance contributed to some changes in the relationship between the rulers and the ruled. Zimbabwe's lively oral culture was clearly of concern to those in power and provoked several responses. While government to the knowledge of this author did not explicitly comment on jokes, it did speak out against rumours on a number of occasions. Since 2000, numerous rumours have circulated about the possible death of Mugabe or the incidence of various illnesses. Often, these rumours did not only circulate via word of mouth but were also carried in local private newspapers, global media and on Zimbabwean news websites. They would often emerge if Mugabe had not appeared on state television for some time. Given the prominent role of the Head of State on ZBC, Mugabe's temporary absence from the screen often raised suspicion among Zimbabweans and frequently produced rumours. For example, in June 2005, a rumour circulated that Mugabe had died after he was seen visiting a private clinic. In order to dispel rumours, government would normally issue a statement in state media or the national broadcaster ZBC would ensure to provide evidence of Mugabe's good health on television. For instance, in response to the June 2005 rumour, the state-controlled newspaper *The Herald* published the following rebuttal:

PRESIDENT Mugabe yesterday scoffed at rumours doing rounds in Harare that he died last week after a heart failure. Senior Government officials who attended a briefing with the President and Vice Presidents Joseph Msika and Joice Mujuru at Zimbabwe House yesterday morning said Cde Mugabe laughed off the rumours. "I told the President that he is reportedly dead from last week as a result of heart failure. He laughed and said: 'when did I die and where?'" Secretary for Information and Publicity Cde George Charamba told *The Herald*. Cde Charamba said Cde Mujuru told the President that she had also heard that he died and phoned his residence only to be told that Cde Mugabe and the First Lady Cde Grace Mugabe had gone to church. He said Vice President Msika then said he wondered how a dead person could go to church, to which the President replied that a dead person is taken to church for prayers and service before burial. Cde Charamba said he received two calls yesterday from the South African media chasing the rumour of the President's supposed ill health. "I had a briefing with the President this morning. He is as fit as a teenager. He is in the best of health and is at work. Those doubting can check on Thursday when he addresses Parliament," he said. Rumours have been doing the rounds in Harare that President Mugabe died last week of heart

failure. The rumours were being spread through short messages on cellphones. But such rumours have become synonymous with plans by the opposition MDC to hold mass actions.²¹

The newspaper article shows that public speech such as rumours do reach those in power and provoke them to respond. It also demonstrates that in dispelling the rumour, government elites responded in a manner that was comparable to the way in which ordinary Zimbabweans replied to repetitive state discourse: through laughter. While Bakhtin saw laughter primarily as the means of ordinary people to undermine officialdom, Mbembe considers laughter not only as the domain of the ruled but also as a practice which those in power engage in. As Mbembe argues, “[i]n its desire for majesty, the popular world borrows the ideological repertoire of officialdom, along with its idioms and forms” (2001, p. 110). But as Mbembe points out, it is not only a strategy used by the ruled but similarly, “the official world mimics popular vulgarity, inserting it at the core of the procedures by which it takes on grandeur” (2001, p. 110). This is demonstrated through the way in which Mugabe was reported to have ‘laughed off’ the rumours about his death.

Despite Mugabe’s mockery of the rumours, these did manage to change the relationship between the rulers and the ruled in a modest way because the rumours forced the powerful to respond. The inability to control public speech challenged those in power and hereby temporarily empowered those subject to government control. With regard to the power of rumour, Nyamnjoh, hereby drawing from Kapferer (1987), has conceptualised rumour as “the public’s attempt to dialogue with the authorities, for, by revealing secrets and suggesting hypotheses, rumour forces the authorities to speak. It challenges the status of government or the conventional media as the only authorised voice or channel of communication” (2005, p 217). The very fact that government responds to rumours or jokes thus implies that the relationship between the ruler and the ruled has changed.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the absence of physical protests in the streets of Zimbabwe should not be equated to a lack of resistance against the Harare regime on the part of Zimbabweans. By adopting a narrow focus on the forms of resistance associated with dramatic revolutions and grand rebellions, journalists and scholars neglected the everyday forms of resistance through which Zimbabweans sought to challenge the state such as popular humour and rumour. While, as the article demonstrated, these forms of resistance were not able to bring about a significant change in power relations in Zimbabwe, Haynes and Prakash (1991, p. 4) have pointed out that these struggles can potentially grow into large-scale challenges to the political order. In the run-up to the 2005 parliamentary elections, the underground group of anti-government activists, Zvakwana (‘enough is enough’ in ChiShona), initiated a number of ludic actions that drew from everyday forms of resistance. For example, they modified street signs that read as ‘give way’ to ‘Mugabe give way’, distributed condoms with messages that read ‘Stand up! Get up!’ and stamped slogans on bank notes.²²

While Zvakwana did not succeed in catalysing resistance, formal opposition groups such as the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and civil society organisations could have made more efforts to draw upon everyday forms of resistance in their strategies to organise and

²¹ President scoffs at rumours of his death, *The Herald*, 7 June 2005.

²² Zvakwana gears up underground protests, *The Independent*, 11 March 2005; Wines, Michael, Declaring ‘enough’ in Zimbabwe, *New York Times*, 28 March 2008.

catalyse opposition against the ZANU-PF regime. While the MDC had a strong base in the trade union movement as well as in the growing civil society, the base of the MDC was subsequently broadened to include other interest groups such as urban elites, white farmers and industrialists who began to offer their political and financial support to the MDC (Alexander, 2000). These changes in its supporter base were also reflected in the campaigns of the opposition party which were increasingly phrased in abstract human rights discourse unlikely to be very meaningful to its original key constituency of peasants and workers. A more sustained effort to engage with the oppositional forms of resistance among ordinary Zimbabweans could have offered the MDC a more solid grassroots base. The same holds for Zimbabwe's civil society organisations which have often failed to connect with the lifeworlds of ordinary Zimbabweans. Instead, NGO employees emerged as Zimbabwe's new urban elites, also known as the 'Pajero brigade', spreading the liberal discourse of human rights while being paid plush salaries in foreign currency.

An example from Zambia may serve to illustrate how popular speech can effectively be incorporated into oppositional politics (Spitulnik, 2002, p. 196-197). The slogan of Zambia's ruling party United National Independence Party (UNIP), led by Kenneth Kaunda, had always been 'One Zambia, One Nation'. In the run-up to the 1991 multi-party elections, Zambians began to hijack this slogan during UNIP rallies. When the crowds were addressed with the slogan 'One Zambia', they were supposed to respond with 'One Nation'. However, instead, Zambians responded with 'One Hour', hereby indicating that according to them the UNIP government would only be allowed into power one more hour. Subsequently, the opposition Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD) drew inspiration from this creative subversion and introduced its party slogan as 'The Hour has Come'. Similar strategies of incorporating of popular culture into political communication could have been adopted by Zimbabwean opposition groups in order to strengthen the grassroots base of their political constituencies and to catalyse already existing forms of resistance.

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