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Political jokes in Zimbabwe

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In the early 2000s, the Zimbabwe government increasingly began to restrict the operation of foreign and local privately-owned news media. These media often published critical reports on government's role in the growing economic and political crisis and mediated the discontent expressed by emerging civil society organisations and a new opposition party Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), established in 1999.

Furthermore, rejecting demands from civil society organisations to liberalise the airwaves, the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) government retained a monopoly through the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC). Because of the dire economic situation in the 2000s, few Zimbabweans were able to afford access to alternative news sources such as satellite television, private newspapers or the internet. Hence, most became dependent on the ZBC which mainly represented ZANU-PF views.

In this context, political jokes and rumour emerged as important social movement media, challenging state-controlled media interpretations of the crisis. In the numerous queues for fuel, cooking oil and sugar which grew in length over the 2000s, Zimbabweans actively debated the state of the country regardless of their fears of openly discussing it. In 'francophone' Africa, these informal media have often been referred to as *radio trottoir* [sidewalk radio].

Jokes were not only transmitted in queues, public transport, beer halls and hair salons but increasingly began to be shared through special joke sections in private newspapers, on cellphones, via email newsgroups like ZvaJokes and websites such as *Nyambo* [joke, in chiShona]. Cellphones, in particular, were important because these media were relatively accessible to Zimbabweans as compared to satellite television, internet and privately owned newspapers. In 2007, 9 out of every 100 Zimbabweans owned a cellphone.

Jokes should be understood both as a response to an environment in which public talk and oral culture are common and as a reaction to the strenuous attempt to crush dissent. Because of their particular mode of dissemination, jokes were virtually beyond government control. Jokes responded to government's efforts to promulgate a racialised 'party-nation' and mocked the declining credibility of the ZBC. The disillusionment with the ZBC is well-captured in the following joke which narrates a visit by a travelling Zimbabwean to an electronics shop in the UK.

"In the United Kingdom last year I was shopping for things to take home to Zimbabwe when I came into this shop selling television sets. The shop attendant was showing me this latest TV which obeys spoken commands. He said 'CNN' and we flipped into CNN, then 'BBC' and we had it on the screen at once. I asked how much it was and he told me 300 pounds. I was shocked by the price, and I replied, 'Nonsense!', but then to my amazement there was Judesi Makwanyana on ZBC News Harare."

This joke dismissed ZBC's television content as 'nonsense' and counter-posed the ZBC to the BBC and CNN. But it reversed the contrast often invoked by the Zimbabwean government, which claimed the ZBC to be patriotic, as opposed to the BBC and CNN, defined as foreign governments' tools to promote regime change.

Whereas state-sponsored music jingles and television programmes sought to draw Zimbabweans into supporting the ruling party's project of the *Third Chimurenga* (the third liberation struggle), ordinary Zimbabweans balked at being addressed as willing 'patriotic' subjects, i.e. loyal party supporters. Jokes engaged with the particular style, language and mode in which ZANU-PF politicians presented themselves on the ZBC, and commented on the way in which the ZBC gave the government elites free rein.

Popular humour mocked ruling party politicians such as President Robert Mugabe and Vice-President Simon Muzenda as well as controversial supporters of the land occupations like war veteran Joseph Chinotimba. For example, after Pope John Paul II died in April 2005, the following joke circulated in Harare by SMS: "Dear Lord, you have misunderstood me, I said: 'Please take BOB not POPE'". This joke suggested that Robert Mugabe ('Bob') should have died instead of the Pope. The joke was not only a comment on the heavily mass-mediated death of the Pope in global media (and Mugabe's widely publicised handshake with Prince Charles during the Pope's funeral in Rome) but also came in response to remarks made by the Roman Catholic Archbishop Pius Ncube who was a fervent critic of Mugabe. In news reports, Ncube was quoted as having said that all Zimbabweans were praying that the Lord would soon take Mugabe away.

The practice of joking defied government's efforts to monopolise the public sphere. The technologically mediated practice of joking through email and SMS, reverberating in countless retellings on the street and in homes, contributed to the dissemination of alternative imaginaries to those of the state. Hence, jokes and rumours should not strictly be seen as 'counter-texts' but as interventions that constituted alternative media in their own right.

However, while rumours and jokes were able to temporarily challenge those in power, the Zimbabwean government introduced a range of measures to gain control over public speech. The 2002 Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and the 2006 Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act 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. In the wake of the introduction of these new laws, a number of Zimbabweans were arrested and some charged for uttering statements deemed to insult or undermine the President.

Cross-references

Barbie Liberation Organization [USA]; parodies of dominant discourse [Zambia]; political graffiti [Greece]; popular music and protest [Ethiopia]; resistance through ridicule [Africa]; The Yes Men [USA].

Further reading

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Websites

Nyambo: <http://www.nyambo.com>

ZvaJokes: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ZvaJokes>