



Waiting for Robbo: the media and Mugabe

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In its desire to see the back of Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, much of the [British media](#) has been misreporting what is happening. From the [BBC](#) to the [Telegraph](#), liberal and conservative journalists are united in their wish for an end to Mugabe's disastrous regime in Harare.  But since the [vote](#) last weekend, their eagerness to relate a narrative of regime change has led to over-optimistic headlines. It is now clear that Mugabe is not on his way out any time soon and is clinging on to power with the strength that only decades-old dictators can manage.

Last week broadcasters and newspapers hailed the election as one of those set-piece moments when history takes a new course. Then it became obvious that as the vote had gone against Mugabe, Zanu-PF were going to keep the results quiet. At this point most journalists took their cues from the opposition MDC. They accepted the informal polling figures handed out by the MDC. More seriously they started relaying lines out of the MDC about what Mugabe and Zanu-PF were going to do. There was talk of Mugabe making a deal and stepping down.

Within hours on one day the BBC went from headlines saying "Mugabe Negotiates Exit" to "Mugabe In Poll Re-Run". This was interspersed with the spectacle of old Africa hand  [George Aligiah](#) presenting news bulletins from a no-mans-land on the border with nothing to add except some theatrically-placed lighting. Meanwhile [John Simpson](#) was on a secret tour within Zimbabwe where his main discovery seemed to be how brave he was to be there.

This lack of real facts and the confusion over the reality of Zimbabwean politics is partly a reflection of reality. Reporters are banned from Zimbabwe. The opposition is divided and disorganised. The situation is unpredictable because Mugabe is in an unprecedented position. The place is a mess. Zimbabwe does not necessarily fit the neat democratisation pattern of Ukraine or South Africa after apartheid.

But in the hurly-burly of 24 hour non-stop news it is even more important that news organisations keep adding caveats and context. When the BBC's [Ian Pannell](#) breathlessly told radio listeners of new moves that suggested Mugabe was on his way out he was careful to source his insights to three MDC sources. But by the time it hit BBC Online the same story had a more definite feel. Hours later it was being denied and the line changed leaving the public somewhat confused.

[Andrew Meldrum](#) reported on Zimbabwe for The Guardian for 23 years before he was expelled in 2003. He has not returned during the present crisis but  continues to monitor events through his network of contacts from a distance. [Speaking](#) this morning he said that not being there in the thick of things might actually make things clearer. He believes Mugabe could be there for months yet.

We all want reporters on the ground and I admire the skill, courage and persistence they are showing in their efforts to cover this very difficult, dangerous and complex story. But it just shows how clarity often only comes with time and distance.

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