
The African Paradigm: The Coverage of the Zimbabwean Crisis in the Norwegian Media

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Abstract

This article examines the problematic associated with the coverage of the Zimbabwean crisis in the Norwegian mainstream media. It examines the underlying messages and assesses whether the Norwegian media have an unconscious social, cultural or political bias, as manifested through the selection of sources, angling and in the narrative devices of frames used in the stories. The conclusions from the analysis are that the Norwegian media reduced the complex Zimbabwean issue into a 'typical' African story of tragedy and despair. This conclusion is microcosmic of the 'stereotyped frames' associated with the Western media and their tendency to portray the African continent as an unrelenting series of disasters.

Introduction

African countries are generally given scanty coverage in the daily news of the mainstream Western media, except when there is a big event going on, a pending catastrophe, or disaster. Since 2000 major international media networks have devoted more time and space to the coverage of the political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe. The constitutional referendum in February 2000, the controversial seizure of white-owned farms and the disputed parliamentary and presidential elections are events that have placed Zimbabwe into the international media limelight.

This paper analyses the problematic associated with the coverage of the Zimbabwean crisis in the Norwegian mainstream media between 2000 and 2004. The analysis is limited to representations of the controversial land reforms and the disputed elections in three major newspapers, *Aftenposten*, *VG* and *Dagbladet*. These newspapers represent the mainstream news flow in the country reaching thousands

of readers daily. In order to examine the articles in these newspapers, I used a critical discourse analysis approach, a particular type of qualitative methodology that tries to understand the processes whereby reality comes into being (Phillips and Hardy 2002). Discourse analysis has proven to have a particular relevance for media studies as it offers insights into the way in which newspaper articles become meaningful to their readers by examining the textual patterns that serve as the vehicle for communication (Jensen 1987). While discourse analysis may be concerned with various aspects of language use, such as syntax or semantics, this paper is concerned with language use in social contexts, whereby discourses are assumed to be functional with respect to various aspects of the social context. This approach assumes that language does not reveal or reflect a pre-existing reality, but rather, constitutes it. The production and meanings of media texts are understood as reflections on the characteristics and orientation of the writer (Dijk 1983). Several works in media studies have shown that news production is part of complex professional routines for the management of possible sources, the interaction among journalists, and the possible 'formulations' of reality (ibid.). News text should thus be seen as manifestations of this journalistic process. Through discourse analysis of articles, I sought to examine how the Zimbabwean crisis is represented and interpreted, who are the main sources used or referred to, what is the orientation of these sources, are they primary or secondary sources. For a critique of sources within Zimbabwe I relied on my previous research (Ndlela 2004), studies by other researchers notably Waldahl (2004) as well as reports by the Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe. One fundamental element in which all these studies agree to is the polarised nature of the media in Zimbabwe. Like in any other conflict situation, there are many players trying to influence the outcome and it makes an important issue to take note of the characteristics of these sources of information and their inherent biases. A critique of the local sources is used as the background of my analysis of the representation of Zimbabwean crisis in the Norwegian media.

At the end, the paper assesses whether the Norwegian media have an unconscious social, cultural, or political biases, as manifested in the narrative devices or frames used in stories. It asks whether the coverage provided any meaningful insights into the political and historical forces in Zimbabwe and their geopolitical consequences.

Representations and the reflection of reality

Analysing media coverage of Africa in the Western media, involves many of the same issues –the concepts of framing and representation. Framing is the manner in which an issue is presented and this influences the way in which issues or problems can be understood. The media do not merely reflect the reality in Africa, they also recreate and reshape it through signifying practices and representation.

As Hall has argued, representation does not entail a straightforward presentation of the world and the relationships in it. For Hall (1997) 'Representation is a very different notion from that of reflection. It implies the active work of selecting, and presenting, of structuring and shaping; not merely the transmitting of already existing meaning, but the more active labour of making things mean' (in Briggs & Copley 2002, 307). One way of making things mean is through stereotyping: a process of selection, magnification and reduction. Media representations reduce, shrink, condense, and select/ reject aspects of intricate social relations in order to represent them as fixed, natural, obvious and ready to consume. What the media do therefore is to choose one aspect (selection), inflates it into the defining characteristics (magnification), then establish it as the most easily recognizable image (reduction).

The prime device through which representations of Africa have been circulated through the Western media is through stereotyping. Stereotyping functions as shorthand through which the media simplifies issues. As Medhurst has noted, 'since there is never enough time or space to describe people in all the rich complexity that their individuality deserves, short-cuts have to be taken, comparisons made, generalisation risked, labels attached (Medhurst 2002, 315).

The very process of selection serves not only to stereotype but also to exclude many features and ways of understanding the issues in Africa. It has been mainly through this selection and condensation that negative images of Africa are too often packed in the Western media. Negativity is one of the main features or dimensions of events which are likely to be reported in news media. Negative events in Africa increase the chances of those events being reported while positive events rarely attract the attention of the Western media. There has thus been a tendency in the Western media to represent Africa as a continent ravaged by diseases, tribal conflicts, despair and depression. Negative developments or events in Africa easily fit into these stereotyped categories.

A number of studies have questioned these representations and prevalent misconceptions about the continent as a whole. Questioning the media images of Africa raises the related issue of global media structures and imbalances in the news flow. The United Nations Education and Scientific Organisation (UNESCO) sponsored studies in 1953 and 1980, for example, produced evidence to support the charge that international flow of information has been dominated by a handful of Western global media monopolies, whose financial and technological wealth has created a situation whereby Africans and non-Africans learn about African realities through the filtered lens of news agencies based outside Africa, mainly Reuters and AFP which control 93 percent of the news flows into Africa. As Boyd-Barret (2002, 57) has argued, these agencies, while they operate globally, gathering news independently from most countries of the world, and selling it to clients in most

countries, they have a strong European identity. These agencies disseminate news scripts that have been subjected to rewriting by the editors who control the channels through which the news are disseminated.

While the new technologies have opened up opportunities for anyone in Africa to be a producer of news and information circulated worldwide via the Internet, there is still the major question of credibility of the new news sources or the reluctance of Western editors to use them. The audiences of Western media also typically prefer to access news on Africa through secondary sources rather than direct from the African media. It is only those individuals strongly interested in the African affairs who will go direct to the websites of African newspapers and broadcasting stations. The majority thus still receive edited versions through their national newspapers. These edited versions do not necessarily reflect the full story due to selection processes. News agencies driven primarily by the desire to retail their stories are only keen to disseminate that which can easily be bought. On the issue of Zimbabwe, the dominance of the Western media such as Reuters, BBC and CNN in the global arena far much overshadow the small Internet sites and media outlets providing alternative viewpoints. The dominant images of the crisis in Zimbabwe entered through the mainstream Western media, mostly through these organisations. The analysis of the Norwegian media should be done in the background of dominant images of Africa in the mainstream Western media.

Contextual Background

Since 2000, Zimbabwe has been reeling under the escalation of politically motivated violence, food shortages, economic stagnation, and a general breakdown in law and order. While several factors have contributed to the Zimbabwean crisis, two most central factors appear to be the controversial land reforms and the disputed elections. These two factors border on the problematic associated with the country's constitutional framework. A major area of discontent in Zimbabwe has been the structure and applicability of the constitution. The constitution that paved way to Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, and the subsequent changes made to it in the course of the first decade, has been viewed as a great impediment to a pluralistic democracy. Questions surrounding the entrenchment of civil liberties, the division of powers, the regulation of elections and freedom of the press have been subjects of extensive discussions. Attempts to institute democratic constitutional reforms have not been fruitful. Another contentious constitutional issue has been the provisions pertaining to land ownership and land reform.

Since independence, the question of land ownership has been a contentious issue, as it touches on the racial imbalances in land ownership. The agricultural land has since the colonial times been dominated by large commercial farms owned mainly

by white people whilst black communal farmers lived in crowded and non-productive land. Thus there have been demands for land redistribution and also disagreements on the manner in which the land reform process could be carried out. The question of land has many elements and complexities in that it touches on the constitutional rights to private ownership and draws in the former colonial power, Britain, as well as other international donors. The international donors had maintained that there were willing to finance the land reforms in Zimbabwe provided that they were done within certain parameters and principles such as transparency, respect of law and general poverty reduction in consistency with the country's economic interests. The land reform could not be done without triggering a reaction from key domestic and international stakeholders. Thus when the government decided to compulsorily acquire commercial farms in the late 1990s and early 2000 it sent shockwaves throughout the farming community and brought international spotlight on Zimbabwe. The violent nature in which the farms were taken from their owners attracted bad publicity as the international media showed images of destruction of property, torture, injury and dead bodies of white farmers.

Also linked to the land reforms are the Parliamentary elections in 2000 and Presidential elections in 2002. Different stakeholders had a strong interest in the outcomes of both elections as these were likely to influence the land reforms. Propaganda and counter propaganda prevailed throughout the election periods, as opposing parties tried to canvass for international support. With the opposition party MDC seemingly enjoying international support, the ruling party ZANU-PF went on a defensive position, claiming that the British wanted to effect regime change in the country, in order to reverse its land reform programme. This claim brought in the security organs in the country on the side of the ruling party. The army and police publicly expressed their unwillingness to accept the opposition party should it win the elections. The war veterans also unequivocally stated that they would not allow ZANU (PF) to lose power to opposition parties 'sponsored by Britain' and white Zimbabweans (*The Daily News*, August 8, 2000). These statements echoed President Mugabe's claims that the British were conspiring with the white farmers and the opposition to topple the government.

Predictably, both elections were marred by violence, intimidation of opposition supporters, human rights violations, torture, and displacement of the electorate. The government also created legal obstacles by passing new amendments to electoral laws and restricting freedom of the press. Security legislation severely curtailed political activities. Both elections were thus flawed from the onset and hence their fairness and legitimacy was questioned. Given that the international community remained divided on its views on the land crisis in Zimbabwe, there were also different conclusions on whether these elections could be deemed free or not. The western nations vehemently denounced both elections as unfair, whilst

some African countries argued that the elections were free and fair. The Zimbabwean crisis has thus been very much polarised, cutting across racial and regional boundaries.

Polarisation of the media and the question of credibility

The complexity of the crisis and the intertwining of problematic issues such as democracy, free and fair elections, human rights and property rights imply that objective coverage becomes difficult, not just for the media within Zimbabwe but also for the international media due to polarisation of interpretations. Within the Zimbabwean media polarisation of interpretations of the crisis is clearly evident as pointed out in my previous research on press freedom and in Waldahl's analysis of the media coverage of 2000 parliamentary elections, as well as in the Media Monitoring Project reports.

On the one hand, there are the government controlled media outlets such as the Zimbabwe Newspapers Group, and the country's only broadcaster, Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings. On the other hand, are the independent media such as *The Zimbabwe Independent*, *The Zimbabwe Standard*, *The Daily News* and *The Financial Gazette*. The polarisation of the media led to a justifiable and in some instances, unjustifiable classification of information outlets as anti-government or pro-government. This left little room for neutrality and objectivity. Systematic reading of those newspapers which claimed to be neutral, such as *The Zimbabwe Mirror*, shows that they were in fact not. The biggest challenges with these sources as shown in my previous research are the fundamental differences between the anti-government information sources and the pro-government information sources, with respect to their views on land reforms and elections.

As Waldahl (2004, 48) points out, in the eyes of the pro-government media, the farm occupations were a completely understandable reaction to an intolerable situation for the people. According to this view it was the poor conditions in the rural areas which made the farm occupations possible in such a large scale. The media viewed the farm invasions as a struggle between the landless blacks and the white commercial farmers. They regarded the struggle as a third liberation war, 'the *Third Chimurenga*'. In so doing the pro-government media paid little attention to the legal, economic, and social consequences of the chaotic land reform. They classified all white farmers as beneficiaries of an unjust colonial system.

The pro-government media, echoing the government's line of thinking thus presents the land issue in historic terms, whereby the injustices of the colonial era and Britain's obligations are highlighted. In the government's view, the British reneged on their obligations to finance the land reforms in line with the 1979 constitutional negotiations. In these negotiations, the British conservative

government had insisted on the guarantees for property rights in return for introducing majority rule. These negotiations resulted in an agreement on a ten-year guarantee for property rights, which to some stakeholders translated to guaranteed privileges for white people. The Constitution thus hindered the government from carrying out comprehensive land reforms. The result of this delay is evidenced by the inequalities in access to arable land, growing overpopulation, landlessness, land deterioration in overpopulated areas and the increasing levels of poverty. According to the government's view, it did not have any alternative other than to proceed with the compulsory appropriation of the white owned farms.

With regard to elections, the state owned media expectedly pushes forward the government's propaganda claims that the main opposition party MDC is a British creation, seeking to perpetuate imperialism. Thus elections are projected as a determination by an African country to defend its sovereignty, which is being threatened by the white imperialist. The ruling party are also projected as patriotic, nationalist citizens while the opposition leaders and their supporters are portrayed as sell-outs. Violence meted against the opposition is condoned. The government has, through its media, unleashed propaganda about the crisis. It has relentlessly claimed that the economic stagnation, food shortages are a result of sanctions by the Western nations, not happy with the government's policy of taking land from the white farmers and distributing it to homeless blacks. This race card has helped the government in gaining support from sections of the electorate, some African countries, the Middle East and Asia and the Caribbean. Through the government media, the land reforms are a resounding success, likely to be emulated by other African countries in similar situations. The government media have portrayed the Zimbabwean leader as a champion for African people, deeply concerned with their welfare.

The state media are, however, silent on a number of issues. They do not tell us why the government resorted to violence in taking the farms when it had the legal means to do so, given that the government is predominantly black. They do not give reasons why the government's first resettlement programmes failed to achieve their purpose, nor do they explain why senior government officials have allocated themselves the best commercial farms.

The media also do not explain the excessive use of violence in both the parliamentary and presidential elections. The state media are silent on identifying the real perpetrators of violence, the ruling party's contribution to the destruction of the economy through corruption, bad economic planning and creation of a hostile environment for foreign investment. Also missing in the state owned media is the proliferation of laws that curtail fundamental rights of the Zimbabwean citizens. We do not get a criticism of draconian laws which curtail political

freedoms of opposition parties and restrict political participation to ruling party supporters. According to the government anyone who criticises the state sponsored violence and torture is seen as an anti-African campaigner. Attempts by the Western nations to help solve the situation have been interpreted as an attempt to prescribe Western sponsored solutions to an African problem.

The state owned media thus could not be regarded as reliable, credible, and objective sources of information. Instead, they stood clearly as government propaganda mouthpieces. There is wide belief, both in and outside Zimbabwe, that the pro-government media were biased in their coverage of the land reforms and the elections. In the absence of truth, propaganda reigns and at the end becomes the truth.

On the other extreme, the independent media tended to focus too much on the extremes to an extent that they didn't even acknowledge any positive achievements by the government. In normal circumstances the media should criticise where it is appropriate and give credit where it is due. The independent media seem to have taken a permanent position as adversaries of the government. Every event is capitalised on and politicised in order to gain political mileage. With regard to the controversial land reforms, the independent media viewed the land invasions as unlawful acts that threatened to do irreparable harm to an important fundament of Zimbabwean society (Waldahl 2004, 48). They viewed the whole land reform exercise as a political exercise used by the ruling party to regain support in the parliamentary and presidential elections, rather than a genuine need to redistribute land. They questioned the lawfulness of the invasion, sighting that some of the farmers losing their land had actually bought it after independence.

The independent media have down played the historical forces leading to the final compulsory acquisition of farms. The independent media have repeatedly pointed out the shortcomings of this controversial land reform, how the reforms have benefited Mugabe's closest allies at the expense of the needy peasants. They further highlighted the peasants' lack of financial and technical resources and therefore doubting their competence to engage in farming activities. There is seemingly a wholesome presentation of black people as incapable of managing farms and producing food. This reinforces stereotypes that Africans in general cannot produce their own food, without help from the white farmers. The white farmers who resettled in Zambia are further portrayed as having contributed to Zambia's excess food production, to such an extent that Zimbabwe is even importing food from Zambia. The two-year drought that struck Zimbabwe also presented the independent media an opportunity to blame the government and the black farmers' lack of farming skills for food shortages. With their focus on the extremes, the independent media overlooked the importance of objectivity.

The same pattern extends to the coverage of elections, both the parliamentary and presidential elections. The independent media displayed bias towards the opposition party. There is therefore less critical analysis of the party's strategies, policies and the qualities of its leadership.

While the independent media worked tirelessly in exposing human rights violations by government under very difficult working conditions, they cannot securely be referred to as credible, fair and objective sources of information. Besides their being biased, there is the question of sources. One indicator of the credibility of media outlets is the credibility of their identifiable sources. The independent media relied too much on anonymous sources of information, to an extent that it is almost impossible to verify the authenticity of the statements or information (Ndlela 2003). They did not make efforts to identify and describe the position or credibility of these 'anonymous sources.' In such instances fictitious stories have made it into the international media, only to be retracted back home. However, the independent media have a valid excuse that given the repressive legal framework and violence, there was a genuine need to protect their sources. Protection of sources is indeed a basic principle of journalism, but the dangers of relying too much on anonymous sources should be pointed out (ibid.)

On the basis of the background of the crisis given above and the polarisation of potential media sources of information, this paper sought to examine how the Norwegian media represented and interpreted the crisis. What discourses prevail and what do they tell us?

Zimbabwe in the Norwegian media

The major distributor of foreign news in the Norwegian media is the Norsk Telegrambyrå (NTB), an independent national news agency owned by the Norwegian media. NTB serves more than 40 newspapers, as well as all the major radio and TV stations and Internet sites. NTB also has close cooperation with other Scandinavian news agencies through which they exchange information and news from foreign correspondences. A quick search in the archives of the studied newspapers and the Norwegian news agency (NTB) reveals how much Zimbabwe in general features in the Norwegian media. In the NTB there are 1489 articles (in which the name Zimbabwe is mentioned), registered between January 2000 and December 2004, *Aftenposten* 409 and *Dagbladet* 263. Statistics from *VG* were not easily available, as the newspaper does not appear in the Atekst database. However a quick search in the *VG* website shows that Zimbabwe was widely covered. The majority of the articles in the newspapers are accredited to NTB. The NTB articles are in turn credited to Reuters and AFP, thus reflecting a news chain through which the Zimbabwean crisis filtered into the Norwegian media.

It was not easy to ascertain how many Norwegian journalists actually operated inside the country during this period. What is clear though is that the expulsion of foreign reporters from Zimbabwe, refusal of accreditations, and hostility towards foreign media, made it difficult for the few remaining foreign journalists to interview primary sources in government. Consequently, news of the Zimbabwean crisis filtered into the Norwegian mainstream media mainly through secondary sources, such as few remaining international news correspondents, freelancers, non-governmental organisations and the independent media.

The expulsion of the majority of foreign correspondents, and denial of working permits, left a gap that was soon filled by local journalists, especially those working for the independent media. Independent journalists found an incentive for earning extra cash through submitting their articles or doubling as correspondents for the international media. The voices of the local journalists also gave credibility to the international media, which are often accused of bias and negative reporting. This time negative reporting came from the local stringers and not just from foreign correspondents. Local journalists were kept busy on the look out for the negative, for it is the negative that the Western media were interested in. They thus had to find something which *illustrates* the depth of crisis in Zimbabwe. Submitting local stories to the international media has its own problems, the strong appetite for the negative, distortion and the manipulation of statements.

Representations of the crisis

The background to the crisis outlined above show that they are many interpretations to the crisis in Zimbabwe. Analysing the representations of the controversial land reforms and the disputed elections in the Norwegian media inevitable involves the very process of selecting sources of information, selecting events to report or ignore, angling and editing of the stories. All events reported in the media have to go through some kind of gate keeping process, whereby editors and journalists decide whether a story is reported and followed up against other competing stories. Also linked to this is the flow of news through global media houses and national news agencies.

It is much easier to ascertain why the Norwegian media had a strong interest in the Zimbabwean crisis, than other competing conflicts in Africa. Zimbabwe has been a priority recipient of Norwegian development assistance since independence. From a development aid perspectives the Norwegians had every reason to be concerned given the extensiveness of the government-to-government agreements and education and research co-operation. Therefore the media reports in 2000 and 2001 reveal this concern about the situation in Zimbabwe and calls for cancellation of aid to the regime. In an article, 'Norske krav til Mugabe' (Norwegian demands

to Mugabe', in *Aftenposten*, 19 April 2000), the writer points out that Norway has been contributing a lot of money to Zimbabwe, but recent developments mean that the Norwegian authorities should work together with other donor countries with a view of taking strong actions against Zimbabwe. In the first place there should be a strong warning to Mugabe and a clear demand that he does not misuse the land reform in the election campaign. The writer further says that in the long run Norway should consider stopping all development aid and introduce sanctions against Zimbabwe. The writer also quoting a senior civil servant in the development ministry, asks why donor countries should give hundreds of millions to a dictatorial regime. This question is dominant in the media discourses from 2000 until 2002 when Norway terminated all government-to-government agreements due the political situation in the country.

From the journalistic perspective, the crisis fits into the theory developed by Galtung and Ruge (1965), on factors which determine news coverage. Besides the element of negativity, the crisis has a high threshold in that it affected the entire white-dominated commercial farming sector, thousands of farm workers and consequently threatened the food security of the entire country whose economy is based on agriculture. The Norwegian audience could also easily relate to other Norwegian or other European nationals caught up in the controversial land seizures. Articles like 'Svensk familie rammet av volden i Zimbabwe' ('Swedish family hit by violence in Zimbabwe', *VG* April 17, 2002) and 'Norsk farmerfamilie vurderer å rømme Zimbabwe' ('Norwegian farmer consider leaving Zimbabwe', in *VG*, April 19, 2000), illustrate the closeness of the white farmers in Zimbabwe to the Norwegian audience. The coverage of the Zimbabwean crisis is therefore not entirely unbiased and apolitical. There are sympathies extended towards kinsmen affected by the violence.

Representations of land reforms

While there are many sides to the story of land reforms in Zimbabwe, there has been consensus that the land question needs to be addressed. However, there have been deep divisions on the method as already noted above. A recurrent question dominant in the discourses is on where the blame should lie for the land crisis in Zimbabwe and how the Norwegian media could reconcile the polarised views. On one hand there are those who would like to blame the former colonial power, Britain for not fulfilling its mandate to finance the first phase of the land reforms from 1980-1997. This group argues that Britain reneged on its promises made during the Lancaster House negotiation to finance the land reform program. On the other hand, there are those who would like to blame the government of Zimbabwe for failing to adequately carry out reforms in a transparent manner. In this view, even though the skewed nature of land ownership is sometimes alluded to, attention is directed mainly to how the post-independence leaders failed to

carry out land reforms in a sustainable manner due to corruption and poor governance. The blame for the current crisis lies squarely on Zimbabwe's post independence leaders, who misappropriated the finances provided by Britain and other donor nations in the first decade. Britain has argued that after independence it spent £44 million on land resettlement in Zimbabwe through grants and budgetary support (DFID, March 2000). The land reforms in Zimbabwe therefore have many complexities, and the challenge to the Norwegian media was how to represent these.

Reporting on the land issue, the Norwegian media clearly stated that the land reform was necessary in Zimbabwe but definitely not in the manner in which the government was carrying it. The article, 'Et lands forfall' ('A country's downfall' in *Aftenposten*, August 10, 2002), captures this discourse of accepting the need for land reform in Zimbabwe but criticising the manner in which it is done. The reporter notes that like other African countries, Zimbabwe bears a colonial injustice in landownership, but unlike other countries it has chosen a destructive manner. However, through selective reporting, the Norwegian media in general does not reconcile the different arguments for and against violent seizures, choosing instead to put more emphasis on criticising the 'war-like method' adopted by the government in the appropriation of farms. A general picture one gets through reading these newspapers is the apportionment of blame on President Mugabe and less attention on the British government's role and other domestic stakeholders such as the Commercial Farmers Union. This representation of the crisis ignores the historical context and there is much focus on the present manifestations (representations) of the problems rather than on the causes of the Zimbabwean crisis.

While *VG* and *Dagbladet*, reported these events extensively, the articles are very brief and ignore the root causes of the crisis, preferring instead to focus on isolated events. This is due to the fact that these two newspapers have strong focus on news stories with strong headlines, rather than elaborate feature stories. News reports are made out of context thus obscuring important details and arguments. An example of these event-centred articles are; 'Enda en landeier skutt i Zimbabwe' ('One more landowner shot in Zimbabwe', in *VG*, April 18, 2000); 'Zimbabwe: - Hvite fiender' ('Zimbabwe: - White enemies', in *VG* 19 April 2000), 'De hvite er våre fiender' ('Whites are our enemies', in *Dagbladet*, 19 April 2000), 'Norsk farmerfamilie vurderer å rømme Zimbabwe' (*VG*, April 19 2000). In the article 'Ikke reise til Zimbabwe' ('Don't travel to Zimbabwe', in *VG*, 21 April 2000) the Norwegian ambassador in Harare advises Norwegians not to travel to Zimbabwe unless it is really necessary. At the same time the ambassador says that the situation for Norwegians in Zimbabwe is 'acceptable'. These articles in *VG* and *Dagbladet* on the April 19, 2000, sighted above give a strong impression that it was dangerous to

be white in Zimbabwe, whereas the real speech they refer to was when Mugabe said white farmers were the real enemies of Zimbabwe. Whites in urban centres were not directly affected by the violence.

In *Aftenposten* the angling of reports and emphasis is similar to *VG* and *Dagbladet*. However, *Aftenposten* also includes in-depth commentaries on the land issue, not just short pieces of stories. In general, the articles in *Aftenposten*, have more focus on the faults of government and the negative consequences of its land reform, than any other stakeholders such as the Commercial Farmers Union, Britain, the World Bank and IMF. This approach is illustrated by the article entitled, 'Arbeidløs, blakk, og uten stort håp' ('Unemployed, broke and without hope'), where the writer illustrates the grave status of the economy and the poverty that has resulted from farm occupations. The article also implies that the opposition party is the only hope out of the crisis (*Aftenposten*, 23 June 2000). This article ignores other causes of poverty in Zimbabwe, such as the effects of the IMF structural adjustment programmes.

In general the Norwegian media continuously highlighted the plight of the white farmers, their black workers, who had lost their homes and source of livelihood. Certain elements are emphasized while others are downplayed. For example, while the conflict in Zimbabwe claimed more black lives than white farmers, the Norwegian media gave considerable coverage to the plight of white farmers, often identified by names. This empathic framing of the land crisis is probably because Norwegian citizens as well as other Scandinavians were also caught up in the crisis. The coverage of the murder of David Stevens is framed in such a manner in which it evokes strong emotions and resentment. In an article in *Dagbladet* (26 April 2000) 'Gråter for Zimbabwe' ('Crying for Zimbabwe'), the writer describes the brutal murder of David Stevens and how a small family has lost its father and husband. It describes the emotional reactions during a memorial service by David's surviving children especially the two-year old twins, and his Swedish widow, Maria Stevens. The white victims and their survivors are identified by names. In the same article there is awareness by the writer that the international media have focused mainly on the plight of white farmers whilst many blacks supporters of the opposition party MDC, face the same dangerous situation as the white commercial farmers. Nevertheless the Norwegian media downplays the black victims and go on to present the conflict in racial terms. In an *Aftenposten* (26 April 2000) article on David's memorial service, 'Gripende sørgestund for David Stevens' ('Emotional memorial service for David Stevens'), the writer mentions that there were around 1000 mourners, mostly whites and just a handful blacks attended, even though David Stevens had 250 black labourers in his farm and had a 'good relationship' with them. The first impression one gets is that the blacks are unsympathetic to a family that had been good to them. Contrary to this negative connotation created by the first section of the article, the writer mentions further down that most of

Stevens' workers were in hiding and would not dare come out following the incident in the farm, to the extent that they could not even be present in the burial of the farm workers' foreman who was also killed. What the writer consciously or unconsciously does is to prioritise the Stevens family, who are identified by names whilst the workers' foreman's name is not mentioned at all. The writer is eager to tell the readers how many whites attended Stevens' burial ceremony but does not tell how many whites attended the burial of the black workers' foreman.

The killing of white commercial farmers and the occupation of commercial farms owned by war veterans, is presented as a classical race conflict as evidenced in the headline 'Zimbabwe: - Hvite fiender' in *VG* (19 April 2000); 'De hvite er våre fiender' (*Dagbladet*, 19 April 2000). The crisis is presented in the newspaper as a race conflict even though there is evidence to the contrary. In the NTB text published in *VG* the same day, there is a clear comment from Eduardt Mordt, a Norwegian farmer in Zimbabwe, that the conflict 'is not a race conflict, but rather pure politics carried by the government in connection with the forthcoming elections' (*VG*, April 19, 2000). No attempts are made to reconcile these fundamental differences and the fact that there were more black than white victims.

As one commentator asked, in an article '<<Negeren>> slik vi elsker å se ham' ('The Nigger- we like to see him like this'), that in the Norwegian media you only see white faces, hear their names, hear them speak and hear their sorrows, whilst we just see the black victims or perpetrators but we don't know their names and we don't hear them speak. The writer asks how many blacks should die such that they would be of interest to the Norwegian media (*Aftenposten*, 16 May 2000).

Another issue noted in the newspapers is the economic dimension side of the land reform. The media portray commercial farmers as an indispensable part of the economy and warn that the economy would be grossly affected if farmers left the country. A general picture one gets in all the newspapers studied is the immense contributions of the white farmers to the food security in Southern Africa in general and the Zimbabwean economy specifically. White farmers are portrayed as benevolent, hard workers and the source of food and foreign currency for Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe has been Africa's food basket primarily because of them. The farmers are portrayed as the backbone of the Zimbabwean economy. These assertions are only partially true. It cannot be denied that white farmers contributed immensely towards the economy through the production of cash crops, such as tobacco, but the role of the communal black farmers should not be undervalued, as they have been producing around 70 per cent of Zimbabwe's staple, maize.

What is missing in the Norwegian media is a description of the favourable conditions which enabled the white commercial farmers to attain such importance. Since the colonial era the commercial farmers have enjoyed such benefits as state subsidies, easy access to capital, markets, and unregulated labour. They had comparative advantages over their black counterparts, the communal farmers. It is also known that before the invasions began farm workers in Zimbabwe had generally been living under semi-slavery conditions. There was little, if any, mechanism which protected the welfare of the farm workers. For years, the white farmers benefited from the criminally oppressive and exploitative labour. This negative side is absent in the Norwegian media. Thus when the Norwegian media emphasizes the rule of law and democracy, it does not examine who the real beneficiaries of such rule of law were. As Malusi Gigaba, a member of the ANC National Executive Committee, comments:

‘... in Zimbabwe, the rule of law and democracy means the unfettered right of the propertied classes that are almost wholly white to property ownership and economic domination. If the ZANU (PF) or even the MDC could threaten this, then they would have transformed themselves into eternal enemies of the propertied classes, which, because they have lost domestic power in Zimbabwe, would call upon their governments in Britain and the United States to fight their battles for them’ (Gigaba 2004, online article).

A human rights dimension is prominent in the media coverage during the early phases of the farm invasions. Therefore between 30 May 2001 and 27 May 2002, there are 17 articles altogether grouped under the category human rights. 13 of these articles are credited to Reuters and AFP. Only three articles are written specifically by the reporters of the Norwegian news agency, NTB. This indicates that the discourse of human rights in the Norwegian media, builds up from the discourse in the main international news agencies. The human rights discourses also reflect a divide between the western countries and the non-western countries. In an article ‘Afrikanere slår ring om Zimbabwe’ (‘Africans build a protective barrier around Zimbabwe’) (*VG/NTB* April 19, 2000) the reporter describes how African nations blocked a bid by Western nations, Britain, Australia and Canada, to expel Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth. He/she attributes this to a general attitude in the region to defend fellow Africans from criticism.

In another article ‘Ikke flertal for Zimbabwe-gransking’ (‘No majority for investigation of Zimbabwe’) (*NTB*, April 19, 2002) this division is made evident in that majority of African countries together with Cuba and China blocked an EU proposal to have Zimbabwe investigated for possible human rights abuses by the UN Human Rights Commission. The human rights discourses are quite striking because they tend to limit the violations to property rights to the current farms invasions, and ignore evictions of black people from their lands in the 1950s. These discourses seem to be selective especially regarding Mugabe’s human rights

records. The media seem to question what has gone wrong with President Mugabe who had started very well in the first and second decades after independence, but now is becoming more dictatorial. This selection down plays the atrocities committed by the army in the south western regime of Zimbabwe where it is documented that more than 20000 civilians lost their lives or disappeared. It does not say why the world kept quite when these atrocities were committed.

Also linked to the land issue is the consequential economic collapse in Zimbabwe. The Norwegian media have argued that Mugabe's Zimbabwe is a classic example of how a man can destroy an economy, resulting in 60% of the population facing starvation, hyper inflation, 70% unemployment and general high cost of living. To a great extent, the government's economic policies have not been sustainable; rampant corruption, nepotism and mismanagement has slowed down, if not reversed, economic growth. The type of framing one encounters in the Norwegian media seem to attribute responsibility for the problem in Zimbabwe to President Mugabe. In turn the Norwegian media is silent on the role of Western nations and their policies towards African countries in general. As noted in the United Nations Index of growth, Africa is the only continent which registered negative growth in the year 2004. Therefore what happened in Zimbabwe is microcosmic of the trend in the region and the general trade imbalances which favour the Western nations. What is left out in the Norwegian media are the general policies of the international financial institutions like the World Bank and IMF who have been prescribing unworkable economic policies on African countries. International trade imbalances make development unsustainable and have wrecked the economies of a majority of African countries. Also it cannot be denied that there have been sustained attempts by some Western interests to sabotage the Zimbabwean economy and thereby trigger social unrests and consequently regime change. Zimbabwe's economic problems therefore go beyond Mugabe's controversial land reforms.

Another issue which emerges in the coverage of the land crisis, is the use of comparisons. Since Mandela took over as South Africa's first democratically elected president, the international media has consistently used him as a measure of what a good president should be like. Even Thabo Mbeki has had his performance measured through the Mandela scale. One of the biggest concerns raised in the Norwegian media has been the possible effects of the Zimbabwe's land reforms on South Africa. The chaos that is developing in Zimbabwe has a contagion effect on neighbouring countries, especially South Africa (*VG*, April 19, 2000; *Aftenposten*, September 27, 2004). The media thus also express disappointment over the South African president's quiet diplomacy on Zimbabwe. The question why the neighbouring countries are not putting pressure on Mugabe, given that his policies are also affecting them.

Representations of elections

Since the end of the cold war, democracy has emerged as the best political system regardless of political and social circumstances. Elections have become the most central element from which governments derive their legitimacy. Modern elections are governed by international norms and standards. There is a growing global consensus on the need for election observers. However the problem has been on who can serve as a monitor and observer. While NGOs have enough financial and human resources and often claim to be neutral, they are not detached from regional or national politics. Observers are also not entirely independent, as they often have ties to those entities that sent them, be they foreign governments or organisations that finance their operations. Another problem with election observers is that some often lack the local knowledge, language, politics, and social dynamics. These shortcomings impede their evaluation process. In the Sub-Saharan Africa conducting elections is a mammoth task given the high levels of political intolerance, infrastructural weaknesses and the skewed legal frameworks.

The parliamentary elections of 2000 and the presidential elections in 2002 were held within the context of violent land seizures, the deteriorating human rights situation, economic decline and international displeasure on the conduct of the Zimbabwean government. These two elections attracted the biggest coverage from the European press in general, partly because they presented a major hope for a change of government in Zimbabwe.

Since the government lost the 1999 constitutional referendum, predictions in the Norwegian media, and European media in general, were that the ruling party was going to lose the forthcoming parliamentary elections. With regard to the elections coverage, the Norwegian media openly sympathised with the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). This is not surprising given MDC's popular endorsement by the EU, USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Thus through the choice of sources and main perspectives in the Norwegian media one notes a consistent pattern of bias against the ruling party. This translates to that if the preferred political party does not win the elections it would be a result of rigging, hence those elections would not be free and fair. Indeed there were many factors that made conducting free and fair elections difficult.

In an article 'Nordmenn overvåker viktig valg i Zimbabwe' ('Norwegian monitor important elections in Zimbabwe', *Aftenposten*, June 7, 2000), the writer argues that elections are very important and the manner in which these are conducted would determine Zimbabwe's future relationship with the EU. In another article published on the first day of the parliamentary elections, entitled, 'Farlig å være imot Mugabe' ('Dangerous to oppose Mugabe', *Aftenposten*, June 24, 2000), the writer says that 'when the election centres open today, it is the opposition leader, Morgan Tsvangirai who is in a position to stop Robert Mugabe's 20-year long iron-

grip on Zimbabwe'. These articles preceding the parliamentary elections were thus expressing hope that the electorate would remove the government of Mugabe.

The popular sentiments expressed in the Norwegian media are that Zimbabwe's political and economic woes can be solved through regime change. Political freedom is presented as meaning that ZANU (PF) must be removed and the opposition party must govern. The eagerness to have a regime change with MDC as the ruling party gives little evaluation of the calibre of MDC's leadership, policies and programs. The ZANU (PF) leadership is collectively branded as villains while the MDC leadership is collectively embraced. This type of reporting does not show the inherent weaknesses and strengths of the two parties. The reporting ignored all the other opposition parties in Zimbabwe. These were rendered insignificant in the democratic process even before the race started, yet democracy goes beyond the two main political parties. The media presented Robert Mugabe as a loser whatever the outcome of the elections was. In an article, 'Mugabes valg' ('Mugabe's election', *Aftenposten*, June 24, 2000) the writer argues that even before the parliamentary election have began, Mugabe stands to lose even if his party wins the elections. In another article in *Dagbladet* just after the elections, 'Vinneren som tapte' ('The winner as a loser', June 28, 2000) the article describes how seldom it is for a winner to be a loser as Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, because the USA, EU, IMF and World Bank had frozen all loans, aid or contributions to the country.

When it came to Presidential elections, the pattern was the same. The Norwegian media sympathised with the opposition candidate Morgan Tsvangirai. Thus Tsvangirai is elevated as the only candidate who could take Zimbabwe out of the stalemate while Mugabe is projected as a villain, comparable to the likes of Uganda's former dictator, Idi Amin. Comparisons are made in articles such as, 'Like ille som Idi Amin' ('As awful as Idi Amin', *VG*, May 19, 2000) and 'Afrikas Mao-Kopi' ('Africa's copy of Mao', *VG*, April 19, 2000). Mugabe's mental stability has also been questioned. When Tsvangirai failed to win a majority in the Presidential elections, the conclusions were that the elections were rigged. Consequently, there is a dictatorship and a human rights crisis.

While the Norwegian media gave extensive coverage of the pre-election and post-election violence, they were too much leaned in favour of the opposition party, to the extent that no critical work was done to unearth the real qualities of the personalities in MDC. The media were bent on change of government because the opposition party represented 'democratic values'. However, change should not be for change's sake. It has happened before in other African countries where people blindly voted for the opposition parties in anger against the ruling parties without necessarily examining the calibre of the opposition candidates. Ideally, objective

coverage should try to expose the strengths and weaknesses of all the contesting parties.

Conclusion

The land reforms and elections are presented within the general context of human rights, struggles for democracy, the rule of law, freedom of the press and economic development. The nexus of these issues is complex as it involves many elements and relationships. The observations from the coverage of the Zimbabwean crisis lead to the conclusion that the representations of the land reforms and elections in the Norwegian media are profoundly asymmetrical. Representations have revolved around the usual framing associated with Western media. Representations of victimized farmers, dead white farmers and victimised black labourers reinforce deeply entrenched imageries of 'disaster' generally associated with Africa. Images, sometimes accompanied by alarming photographs reinforce the discourse of disasters. It can be argued that the Norwegian media reduced the complex Zimbabwean issue into a 'typical' African story of tragedy and despair. This conclusion is microcosmic of 'stereotyped frames' associated with Western media and their tendency to portray the African continent as an unrelenting series of disasters. Systematic reading of the Norwegian media leaves no doubt that the selection of the events, the angles taken and the comments are influenced by the interpretations and stance of the international community in relation to the conditions in the country. The presentation and interpretation of the events in Zimbabwe cast a pale shadow on the neutrality and objectivity of the Norwegian media. The media do not present a comprehensive and balanced account of the crisis, but rather fits into the dominant paradigms associated with the representations of Africa in the Western media.

The Norwegian media failed to reconcile the polarised interpretations given to the elections and land reforms, thereby missing opportunities for more informed and subtle coverage of the Zimbabwean crisis. The selection of sources does not reflect the different positions on key issues such as land and elections.

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