



ZIMBABWE :

The Daily News, a dissenting voice



The independent newspaper *The Daily News* was founded in 1999 in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital city. Before the authorities closed it down in October 2003, it was the country's top circulating daily with an estimated readership of around 900,000. *The Daily News* is known for its independent editorial line, free of the official propaganda broadcast on the state media.

Its journalists do all they can in their investigations to steer clear of support for any interest group, commercial or political, rigorously and carefully handling sensitive issues. Ever since its launch, the newspaper has been targeted by President Robert Mugabe and his information minister, Jonathan Moyo.

In 2002, police arrested 15 *Daily News* journalists, following publication of articles viewed by the authorities as defamatory. In the same year, the newspaper's offices and its staff were frequently threatened or attacked. In 2003, a journalist was imprisoned for four days, six others were arrested and questioned and three were physically attacked or threatened.



Since the passing in 2002 of the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), a battle of wills has pitted *The Daily News* against the government of Robert Mugabe. This law allows the authorities to deem every criticism of government actions as "publishing false news" or an "abuse of journalistic privilege", abuses liable to mean two-year prison sentences. In addition, licences that media must obtain can be revoked on a simple governmental decision. *The Daily News*, the only independent daily distributed nationally, was shut down in October 2003 as a result of this law. Five of the newspaper's nine-member management team fled to South Africa to escape legal action. The four directors who stayed in Zimbabwe are facing legal action for illegally publishing an issue of the daily newspaper after its suspension. Despite this crackdown the editors in exile continue to publish news on *The Daily News* Internet site hosted in South Africa.

The government's goal: is to gag the press



The government of Robert Mugabe has won. *The Daily News*, sole independent daily, has had to close after losing its battle against a particularly draconian press law. The newspaper had sought to defy a law that it had termed anti-constitutional. But despite a variety of legal initiatives and the support of some local judges, the State ended up getting what it wanted: to silence this dissenting voice. The few privately-owned weekly newspapers that continue to appear are far from having the same clout in the country that *The Daily News* had when it appeared.

The media commission, set up in 2002, controls everything in the small world of the Zimbabwean press. It alone can give the now essential accreditation that gives a media the right to keep people informed.

Foreign journalists have left the country. Those who have not been expelled, have left, sickened at the obstacles thrown in their way by the government to stop them doing their job. The international press does still operate with the help of local journalists.

Meanwhile the State media continue to peddle propaganda for President Mugabe and his government, regularly pouring oil on the fire and proving only too happy to denounce the actions of the opposition press that it accuses of playing into the hands of "foreign forces". Any glimmer of independence within these media is immediately crushed. Even claims for pay rises are not permitted. In January, *Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation* suspended 135 staff in its television and radio services for joining an illegal strike and calling for a salary increase.

Even Zimbabwe's neighbour South Africa, normally tolerant of the Mugabe regime, called in February for an improvement in press freedom. Information minister Jonathan Moyo refused to comment on the statement from South African President Thabo Mbeki, but did announce some easing of the press law.

Zimbabwe was not invited to the Commonwealth summit in Nigeria in December 2003. The country had been suspended from the organisation over the controversial re-election of Mugabe as president in March 2002.

Pour tout renseignement complémentaire :

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