
COMMENTARY

Radio as a Recruiting Medium in Zimbabwe's Liberation Struggle

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Revolutionaries have long embraced the potential of radio as a tool for ideation and emancipation. As Ndlovu (2014) indicates radio has the power to win the hearts and minds of the people, even establish a mandate to govern them. Radio can transcend geographical and political boundaries, making it a vital tool with which to penetrate restricted environments and reach out even to illiterate people, through a language they understand, in order to propagate ideologies that are pivotal in establishing a desired political order. This commentary brings together a few of the key witnesses to this process in pre-liberation Zimbabwe when radio broadcasted from outside the tightly controlled colonial system that was Rhodesia was able to engage the populace in an unsanctioned dialogue that was ultimately to lead to the successful overthrow of the status quo.

Keywords: Zimbabwe; Rhodesia; radio; liberation struggle; Voice of the Revolution Radio; colonialism

Introduction

Not to discount scholarship on the role of revolutionary radio stations in the liberation of Zimbabwe (see Mosia et al, 1994) further awareness of the actions and opinions of people directly involved in these radio stations or influenced by them, particularly from the southern part of the country is, and will continue to be, valuable. This commentary, part of an on-going inquiry, draws on interviews with the former broadcasters of the Lusaka based Voice of the Revolution Radio (VOR) in order to apprehend what their philosophy was as they broadcast into Zimbabwe. In addition this paper utilizes interviews with people who were directly inspired by these radio messages to understand what impact these messages had on the revolution. It seeks to establish the extent to which revolutionary radio stations facilitated the recruitment of freedom fighters, countered the Rhodesian regime's propaganda and galvanised support for the revolution particularly in Matabeleland during the protracted fifteen year war of liberation that led to Zimbabwe's independence in 1980.

The revolutionary power of voice

According to Soul Ndlovu, one of the main broadcasters on VOR, revolutionary radio stations were instrumental in recruiting young Zimbabweans to join the liberation struggle especially when the likes of activist Jane Ngwenya were on air:

Radio was a crucial means of communication through which the progress of the struggle could be communicated to the masses to give them the morale to support the revolution. It was the most effective means of countering the propaganda by the Smith Regime by assuring the people that victory was certain and there was no going back on the fight for the African liberation.

(Interviewed 04/12/16)

Whilst soldiers were fighting with guns and were being deployed into the country, others were fighting in another wing of the struggle (Lyons, 2002: 313). Communication was another very important wing of the struggle as it helped educate young people about the abnormality of the political situation in what was then Rhodesia where white supremacists were exploiting the majority black population for their own personal gain. It was the role of women to spread political ideology of the freedom fighters to encourage people to resist white domination (Lyons, 2002: 314). It is not surprising therefore that women like Jane Ngwenya who had first-hand experience of suffering under the Smith regime were better positioned to take to the airwaves to conscientise the masses about a need for black emancipation. Jane Ngwenya was one of the most influential female cadres who had joined the liberation struggle at a young age after spending years in Grey Prison, *Wha Wha* Prison, *Chikurubi* Maximum Security Prison and *Gonakudzingwa* Detention Centre for acting as what the government of Ian Smith called a 'rabble rouser' because of her political convictions. According to Ngwenya, when she was growing up black people feared the white supremacists who had stripped the African majority of all their human rights; no one would dare challenge this oppression, which made her angry.

Due to radio's ability to transcend geographical and political boundaries, radio was the mass medium of choice through which the likes of Ngwenya could reach the masses and tell them how shameful it was to die a slave in one's own country. Taking good advantage of Zambia's proximity to the Southern and Western parts of the country, the VOR worked hard to realise its potential to recruit young people to join existing liberation fighters based in Zambia. It was through radio that the liberation movement ZAPU 'engaged in a massive recruitment program of guerrilla trainees, especially among the *AmaKalanga*, *abeVenda*, *AbeSotho* and *AmaNdebele* from Matabeleland'. The Francistown ZAPU Office only 15 miles from the border with the then Rhodesia carried out 'most of the recruitment' (Sibanda, 2005: 185). Through radio ZAPU appealed directly to able-bodied Zimbabweans from the Southern region to abandon all they were doing, as the country then had no future for them. Through VOR, ZAPU enticed them to cross the border to Zambia to train as freedom fighters so that they could liberate the country in which they would live with full honour and dignity. It was radio that made many revolutionaries understand that there was no dignity in gaining education to be a slave of the colonial master in the land of their birth. The revolutionaries used radio broadcasting to advance the argument that education under colonial rule was merely designed to make blacks employable in the colonial economy as skilled and unskilled labour.

Inspiring students

Another prominent broadcaster to hail from the southern part of the country was Joseph Masuku. Masuku was well known for using his inspirational vibrating baritone poetic voice, which would be punctuated by revolutionary songs from ZIPRA (Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army) forces. He would invite the youth to cross into Zambia to take up arms against the stubborn Rhodesian government. He is remembered for saying:

Wozani bantwana benhlabathi!
Wozani! Izikhalizisemsamo!

Zililindile! Wozani!

[Come children of the soil! Come! The weapons are waiting for you! They are stocked here at the back of this very hamlet I am in! Come!]

(Ndlovu, E., 2014)

Themba Ncube, a former Cadre who left a boarding school in Plumtree aged 15 to cross into Zambia explained how they used to smuggle portable transistor radio sets into dormitories to listen to these broadcasts at night:

We became aware of how whites were the beneficiaries of our birthright. Our teachers were even too blind, or not willing to accept that they were treated differently to even the white priests who worked in our mission school, the people who preached that we were all equal before God. It was through these broadcasts that we were able to link up with freedom fighters who escorted us into Botswana where we boarded a chartered plane to Lusaka. From Lusaka we were taken by trucks to Nampundwe Transit Camp where we were later transferred to Victory Camp about 12 miles from Lusaka. The rest is history.

(Interviewed 2010)

The exodus of students from high schools and teacher training colleges was such a phenomenon that ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People's Union) had to charter planes to ferry the recruits to Zambia three times a day. The Manama Mission case was one incident that got overly dramatised. As Sibanda (2005) explains, over 500 students and staff were alleged by the Rhodesian government to have been taken at gunpoint by just three cadres who marched them to Botswana under the cover of darkness. This raises questions as to how three cadres could forcibly frogmarch 500 people in the dark if they were not willing participants. There is a counter narrative to this version that says that the departure had been meticulously organised by the students and the freedom fighters over a lengthy period. The Botswana government challenged the Smith regime's account saying the students and teachers like all before them had come of their own accord. The United Nations had to get involved and asked ZAPU to allow parents to talk to their children before they were flown to Zambia for training so as to make a determination whether the students had gone there voluntarily. The Rhodesian government chartered buses for 140 parents to go to Botswana to talk to their children. Only 55 students, mainly small girls were persuaded back, mainly because of their age. The rest joined the struggle amidst speculation by the Rhodesian government that they had been indoctrinated on their arrival and short stay in Botswana. Freedom fighters insisted that their desire for freedom and their experience of suffering under the Smith regime led them to want to join the struggle. ZIPRA saw this as a morale booster for ZAPU which needed the input of members of the intelligentsia to run its psychological warfare as well as to operate sophisticated artillery against the settler regime.

Criminalising radio

During the liberation struggle the Zimbabwean revolutionary movements had organised themselves into structures all over the regions of the country. In the ZAPU stronghold of Matabeleland, particularly in various townships in the city of Bulawayo the movement had organised itself into provinces, districts and cells through which information about the struggle was disseminated to the people. The Rhodesian government had by then taken some serious steps to prevent the majority population from receiving nationalist broadcasts from outside the country by criminalising the accessing of such broadcasts. Laws had been put in

place to make sure blacks did not access any other forms of broadcasts that could influence them politically. The 1965 Emergency Regulations Act prohibited turning on a radio in a public place 'if it picked up broadcasts that could [allegedly] endanger public safety or interfere with public order' (Moyo, 2005: 15). According to Zaffiro (2002) anyone found guilty of making it possible for others to hear an objectionable broadcast or speech, statement, poem or song could be jailed for up to two years and fined the equivalent of \$1,400. As a result, ZAPU youth wings used to gather secretly in the evening where they listened to the VOR featuring broadcasts of revolutionary messages and songs as well as addresses by revolutionary leaders:

The voice on (VOR) punctuated by songs from the ZIPRA forces would make you stand up and walk all the way to cross the Plumtree border into Botswana to join the struggle. The indignity we were subjected to in the land of our forefathers by this settler regime as narrated on the radio would make you feel an urge to restore your dignity by confronting the regime. The hope the VOR gave us was inspirational. Most of us were inspired by the likes of Joseph Masuku and some voices of the people we knew who had crossed before us to also cross into Botswana on route to Zambia for training.

(Max Dube Interviewed (2010))

Youths evaded being raided by the police by rotating their venues, posting sentinels strategically and tying a red flag at the gate as if there was a funeral wake in the house. In case of a possible raid they would burst into a religious song and eulogies of the putative dead relative. This is the only way they could get to hear a counter narrative to that peddled by the Rhodesia Broadcasting Corporation, a propagandist machine for the Smith Regime.

Radio rituals

Bayethe Khumalo who was once in 1976 in the Mayihlome Youth Wing in Lobengula, explained how daily youth meetings used to be held in various houses where listening to radio was part of these groups' daily routines:

This was at the peak of the struggle and it was important for us to stay abreast with what was happening in the frontline. RBC was bombarding us with propaganda telling the country that the freedom fighters were losing the battle. Hearing of the successes of the boys in the bush such as the downing of enemy planes and the burning of oil depots was a morale booster. We all felt like crossing the border to take up arms to fight the regime. VOR emphasised that it was better to die a fighter than die a slave.

As a result, most youths left Bulawayo and crossed the border through Plumtree on route to Zambia to join the liberation struggle. Those who remained in the country continued supporting the struggle financially with \$0.25 monthly donations, a lot of money in those days. Such finance also assisted in buying boots and uniforms for the fighters in the bush. A retired soldier and former freedom fighter (once based at Mbalabala Barracks in Matabeleland South) said in an interview that when he was in Grade 7 his father who worked in the city was one of the lucky civilians to own a radio set. When he was home over most weekends some influential members of the community would come to listen to the clandestine broadcasts in the evenings with him. They would later discuss the progress of the liberation struggle and like to envisage on the day how their country would be liberated from this regime that was also making their people pay hefty taxes used to buy weapons with which to oppress black men, women and children:

This made me grow up an angry man. I used to tell my friend when we were herding cattle that I was never going to pay taxes to Smith in my life. They thought I was crazy. By the time I completed grade seven, I had already made up my mind. I was going to fight to liberate my country.

(Interviewed 2010)

The voices of the leaders of the revolution were a morale booster to the hopeful and supportive masses on the ground who were directly experiencing the brunt of oppression by the government of Ian Smith. Radio was the only way they could counter the propaganda communicated by the settlers in occupied land. Radio directly appealed to the emotions of the masses in order to mobilise them against the colonial powers by exposing the evils of domination which had stripped the people of their human rights in the land of their birth.

VOR as a platform

VOR's broadcast content consisted of news, commentary, listeners' letters and requests for revolutionary songs. It broadcast bulletins which gave a special place to statements by revolutionary leaders most of whom were in exile coordinating the military struggle. Through radio, the leaders of the revolution were able to address the people and inform them about the objectives and progress of their armed opposition. Through radio the revolutionary leaders were able to lead the people into supporting the liberation struggle in all ways that they could, including guiding liberation fighters to their potential targets. As Dzimbahete (2013) points out, the role of the rural population during the liberation struggle was supporting the fighters with food, clothing, intelligence and ongoing logistics. VOR was a platform that linked the people, the fighters, the revolutionary leaders and the masses through unsanctioned engagement. Most significant was the voice of the ZIPRA commander in chief and leader of ZAPU Cde Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo whose addresses and announcements were very inspirational to both the forces and his loyal masses in the country. According to Bayethe Khumalo hearing the Cde Joshua Nkomo on the radio was sensational. 'That man had a magic voice. You would not sleep that night when he had been on air' (Interviewed 2010).

Radios smuggled into detention camps

During the liberation struggle the Rhodesian authorities detained hundreds of nationalists who they considered to be too influential to be left free in the country. The government's intention was not merely removing these political activists from their communities, but to also render them politically impotent and socially dead and broken down beyond resurrection. The government intended to break them down by completely cutting them off from the outside political world and keeping them in total political darkness. It tried to ensure that these detainees had no access to information sources such as radios and newspapers. As Joshua Nkomo, himself one of Rhodesia's long-time detainees once noted, "The objective [of detention] was to cut us off from the world, to make the world forget us and us forget it" (Munochiveyi, 2013). The government overlooked the sophistication of the African people. There was no way they could be totally shut out and broken down. The detainees became even more influential from behind the detention walls.

Inspired by their 'survival instincts' as Jane Ngwenya once put it, detainees were able to obtain contraband news through smuggled radios, most of which were put into loaves of bread together with spare batteries. They would be passed on to the detainees during visitation times. Because visits per detainee were limited, the visitors organised themselves in a way that whoever was visiting had to smuggle in either a radio or batteries or newspaper cuttings. The wardens in the detention camps were also members of the community who when they

were out also experienced the suffering of the black people. Some were sympathetic to the liberation cause. They also played a crucial role in facilitating the trafficking of information in and out of the detention camps. That way, detainees were kept informed about what was happening outside the prison through this clandestine activity.

The detainees listened to revolutionary radio stations and international radio stations to get narratives of what was going on in the liberation front from multiple angles. According to Jane Ngwenya, one of the prominent female detainees, they had to do all this to stay alive and abreast of the political developments outside. Some of the prominent detainees, particularly those in the leadership were able to smuggle out political critiques of the colonial regime and even directed some outside anti-colonial activities. The detainees were therefore able to maintain their identity and influence beyond the detention camps. Detaining these activists to isolate them was the Rhodesian government's objective making them politically irrelevant and breaking them down. Radio broke this isolation.

Conclusion

Ultimately the power of revolutionary radio galvanised support and in the end proved that military might alone could not win the war. This was acknowledged by one senior officer at the Rhodesia Combined Operations in Salisbury who admitted, 'We relied 90 per cent on force and 10 per cent on psychology and half of that went off half-cock. The guerrillas relied 90 per cent on psychology and only 10 per cent on force' (Moorcraft, 1990). Most importantly, radio was able to win the minds and heart of the Zimbabwean people despite a massive propaganda campaign by the settler regime. The war to liberate Zimbabwe was therefore won through ideation, persuasion and negotiation rather than on military might and was one in which radio played an important part.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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