Old wine in new bottles

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Two new radio stations in Zimbabwe meant to give hope, have ended up merely competing to please the ruling elite.

The more things change the more they stay the same - at least in Zimbabwe - and especially with regard to broadcast liberalisation.

It’s been more than four years since the Global Political Agreement (GPA) was formed. This was meant to usher in a transition for greater democratisation. Still everything remains in half measures like old wine in new bottles.

One sector which more or less is still rooted in the past is the media, where half measures are the order of the day and real reforms which advances the freedom of expression and the media have remained elusive.

In recent months the country witnessed the entry of two radio stations, ZIFM and Star FM with hopes that the broadcast sector had been liberalised. However, no sooner had they began broadcasting that the people realised that it was but just old wine in new bottles.

“Comrade President Robert Mugabe, the Commander in Chief of the Zimbabwe defence forces and head of government and state” news readers of Star FM and ZIFM relay the template that the state broadcaster, Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation use to address President Mugabe. Same old, same old.

As Zimbabweans interfaced more with the stations, it became apparent that the so-called broadcasting reforms which gave birth to these media outlets were a smoke screen meant to hoodwink them into believing that broadcasting reforms as demanded by the GPA had been implemented.
To understand and grasp the dynamics behind the two radios I will in short posit the geopolitical situation which gave rise to their birth.

The GPA which gave birth to the unity government categorically states that Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ) and the Zimbabwe Media Commission (ZMC) should immediately process application for broadcasting and newspaper licenses.

The ZMC licensed about five new newspapers which included the *Daily News* and *Newsday* as partial fulfilment to the requirement of the GPA.

In turn, the broadcast authority, BAZ licensed ZIFM and Star FM as private commercial radio stations which broke the state broadcaster’s monopoly that it enjoyed for more than three decades.

There was a general belief that the “waves” had been opened up and individuals and political establishment who had been symbolically annihilated in the state broadcaster were going to access coverage.

But, this largely has not been the case and the supposedly new radio stations are now just carbon copies of ZBC which is the official Zanu PF propaganda machine.

Firstly, the ownership of both the stations is highly attached to the power bloc - Zanu PF.

ZIFM’s owner is Zanu PF Manicaland province treasurer Supa Mandiwanzira who is said to be eyeing a parliamentary seat currently held by the MDC-T and Star FM is owned by Zimpapers who are the printers of the notorious propaganda newspapers (*Herald*, *Sunday Mail Chronicle* for example).

It therefore follows that the political economy of the two stations is premised on a symbiotic relationship with the power bloc.
Apparently, the awarding of Zanu PF aligned broadcasters can be traced to the fact that the ruling 'regime' highly thinks that broadcasting, especially TV is more powerful than the print.

Liberalization sweeping across the typology of the print in Zimbabwe is a contrast to the shrinking taking place in the broadcast media despite the entry of the two radio stations. Putting these challenges in their proper perspective demands that we draw theoretical lens Antonio Gramsci has provided in his theory of hegemony.

Hegemony is a continuous process in which alliances of institutions across different knowledge systems reinvent ideological control of the knowledge system of which according to Foucault; the media is one such powerful institution. The media being an alliance of knowledge systems, the awarding of these licenses to Star FM and ZIFM should not come as a surprise. The contribution of the new players to democracy is neither here nor there but the regime has used this to validate that it has opened the airwaves. Whilst in reality it has recruited more ideological cannons to further its dominance and control - to condition society to accept the current status quo as normal and as legal and constitutional.

By contrast, Kenya liberalised its media in 2002 when the dictatorial Kanu regime was thrown out of power. This short-circuited the domination of the airwaves by the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) as more than 20 private radio stations including community radio stations were licensed.

Of particular note, the news sources of the two radio stations are the propaganda newspapers from Zimbabwe papers. Herald is the main supplier of news for the stations and the paper has a reputation of being a Zanu PF propaganda tool.

To that end both Star FM and ZIFM are an extension of the state media systemic biases towards Zanu PF and its leader Mugabe.

In point of fact, the two stations are fighting ZBC radio stations to outdo each other in appeasing the power bloc, albeit the “new kids on the block” use catchy and groovy music to make their propaganda palatable.
Noteworthy, the structural problem underlying the broadcast half measures lies with the fact that BAZ is illegally constituted.

The unity government needs to restructure the BAZ board so that other broadcast players such as SW radio, Radio VOP, Kiss FM, Studio 7 and Community radio station such as Radio dialogue may be considered.

More importantly, as the country is a signatory of the African Charter on Broadcasting it is imperative that the airwaves should be opened up in a three-tier broadcasting system as envisaged by the charter.

In essence, the three-tier system—comprising of public broadcasting, private commercial broadcasting and establishment of community radio stations—is the much needed system in Zimbabwe and any other country in Africa as it promotes the freedom of speech and media.

It remains a priority that the unity government fully liberates the waves which would advance democracy.

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