# Rumour and the Politician's Public Image: The Case of Zimbabwe

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## Abstract

This article is a critical examination of the role played by rumour generated through various means ranging from social media platforms and by word of mouth in Zimbabwe during the period of economic and political turmoil that reached unprecedented levels in 2008. Rumour was maliciously used by politicians in smear campaigns to sway the opinion of the masses against one's political enemies. In turn, rumour was also used by the masses as a way to catalogue the behaviour of leaders, and it also served as a means to settle scores with politicians whom they detested, as the rumours carried the people's wishes and desires to see certain leaders harmed or killed. The article analyses the behaviour, emotions and attitudes of the masses in a tense political crisis. The study argues that rumour plays an important role in shaping and understanding political attitudes of the masses towards their leaders. Rumour, we argue, also alter the boundaries of political interaction, and bring into existence new forms of language, resistance and conceptual systems. This study is important to academics, politicians and policy makers as it provides important literature on the behaviour of the masses, which is essential information for the development of a stable civil society in Zimbabwe.

## Introduction

Often-times people talk of rumour as just baseless statements that seek to discredit the correct information. However, more often than not, almost all rumours have an element of truth in them and some even turn out to be true. In a country like Zimbabwe where information on what is happening on the political-economic sphere is not readily available, rumours seem to play the role of filling the gaps. Originating mostly from anonymous sources who happen to be close to the information at hand, rumours play the part of updating the general population on what is deemed to the true case of what will be happening in the state. Being spread by both the elite and the common person alike, rumour also plays the role of either expressing implicitly (or even explicitly) love or hatred towards one's political enemies. This paper seeks to explore the concept of rumour, bringing to the fore its importance in the Zimbabwean political and economic context, paying particular attention to the rumours that are spread on political figures such as the president, Robert Mugabe, his family and other major political figures.

## Rumour

The term "rumour," as Fine and Ellis (2010) note, is a one that has been used in a variety of ways in popular discourse. Indeed the "conceptual murkiness" surrounding the term – and its relationship to other forms of informal communication, such as gossip and urban legend – are longstanding concerns among social scientists (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007). What distinguishes rumour from gossip, speculation and early articulations of 'news'? While gossip is socially and culturally important, it generally concerns information about the personal lives of individuals and circulates in small communities. Rumours, on the other hand, might circulate on a national or international scale and often relate to collective hopes and fears that reach beyond the moral behaviour of individuals. While news generally denotes information that has been confirmed or generally accepted as true, rumour refers to uncertain or unverified information.

Among scholars, however, a rough consensus regarding the meaning of "rumour" has emerged. Fine and Ellis argue that for social scientists, "rumour is an expression of belief about a specific event that is supposed to have happened or is about to happen. This claim may pique our interest, but lacks what the larger political system considers secure standards of evidence" (2010, 4). Sunstein takes the term to refer to "claims of fact – about people, groups, events, and institutions – that have not been shown to be true, but that move from one person to another and hence have credibility not because direct evidence is known to support them, but because other people seem to believe them" (2009, 6). Finally, DiFanzo and Bordia define the content of rumours as "Instrumentally relevant information statements that are unverified" (2007, 14). Rumours are known to arise in the context of ambiguity, when the meaning of a situation is not readily apparent or when people feel an acute need for security. Rumours hence are a powerful, pervasive, and persistent force affecting people and groups.

Rumour according to anthropologists can be defined as news that one later learned was false. Falsehood, it must be noted, is not an absolute characteristic of rumour. What characterised rumours in Zimbabwe was the intensity with which they were spread. Rumour is not necessarily untrue, but it is true in a special sense in that it has truth for a great many people and this general belief gives it contemporary validity. T Shibutani (2005) argued that the more a rumour story was widespread and widely told, the more it had to conform to plausibility. What made a rumour powerful was that people believed it. Rumours give a glimpse of the world as seen by the people who tell/spread the rumour. In this paper, we argue that rumours can be historicised. To simply dismiss them as false strips them of their intensity and detail. We take rumours as descriptions of extraordinary occurrences.

The anonymity (no one knows where they begin, known one generally wants to be known as a rumourmonger) has often been seen to be guaranteed by the word of mouth medium. Communicating rumours using a medium that could help identify the source was not considered likely. It might be thought that technological developments such as emails (with signatures) and information systems with logins and an audit trail of transactions might have supported continuation of this perspective. However, new forms of technology have been utilised in rumour activity. Though studies on the area are sparse, there is evidence that rumour transmission has been successfully adapted to the virtual age. Professional Pilot's Rumour Network http://www.pprune.org/ uses a website with anonymous forums while the use of internet email has become a prime medium for rumour transmission (Frost: 2000). From these points of view, rumours are a particular form of misinformation characterized by two features. First, rumours are statements that lack specific standards of evidence. As a result, rumours can be told and transmitted in the absence of a clear standard of proof (Fine and Ellis 2010; Allport and Postman 1947). Under such circumstances, the line between true information and misinformation becomes blurred. Second, rumours are not mere fringe beliefs. They acquire their power through widespread social transmission and repetition. Rumours, then, are more than just frivolous statements of questionable veracity; they can have serious political consequences. What is of importance to note is that rumours often emerge during times of crisis and uncertainty and, because they can spread quickly in such times, rumours can be politically powerful forces.

In earlier decades, the medium for the spread of rumour was primarily word of mouth. However, in the 21st century this has changed. With the coming of the internet, with its various social media platforms, as well as the invention of smartphones, anyone can publish on the web, instantly acquiring a degree of credibility regardless of the quality of information they provide. This characteristic is important because the some rumours are quite divorced from the real world of politics. On the continuum of politically relevant facts ranging from "certain truth" to "certain falsehood", these rumours lie toward the "certain falsehood" end of the spectrum. Given the speed with which information can disseminate through the Web, the potential for the spread of fallacious information through rumours has increased greatly.

As Sunstein argues, "In the era of the Internet it has become easy to spread false or misleading rumours about almost anyone. Material on the Internet has considerable longevity. For all practical purposes, it may even be permanent" (2009, 4). In short, in the Internet age, unsubstantiated rumours may materialize suddenly and then never disappear.

By their very nature, then, rumours are anonymous but often-times contain a high probability for truth. Such are the rumours that this paper will be focusing on. When we come to the Zimbabwean situation, we notice a country where, since the early 21st century, accurate and official information on what will be happening in the country has become scarce. With the emergence of threatening opposition political parties in the country such as the MDC T, Mavambo, MDC 99 and so on, the government has become a miserly distributor of political information and the affairs of the country on such media a such as the print, television or radio media. It is the conviction of this paper that it ought to be the duty of the state to distribute accurate and comprehensive information to its citizens rather than a people relying for information about its own country from privately-owned or foreign media, or worse still, on rumour. The next section seeks to characterise the relationship between rumour and politics, which is necessary to the objectives of this paper.

## Rumour and Politics in History

The study of rumour offers a means to examine popular politics, mentalities and behaviours, allowing us to re-insert those without a voice into the historical narrative. While historians once believed that the common people knew little about politics, records of rumours, libels and other seditious speech indicated that the early modern 'public sphere' included those beyond the traditional political elite. Jonathan C. Scott (1985; 1990) has argued that rumours are part of a 'hidden transcript' that allows subordinate people to express views that differed markedly from those of their superiors. This 'hidden transcript' or alternative account of social events constructs a dissident worldview among the oppressed. This 'hidden transcript' is kept alive in concealed spaces, in ambiguous and contestable public performances which are decontested 'off-stage,' as well as in rumours, which do not have an apparent source. Hidden transcripts require spaces outside the control of the elite power, which are deterritorialised and become distinct existential territories (Scott, 1985:328). Scott suggests that the common person prefers to disguise resistance (in this case in the form of rumours), resorting to dramatic measures only when the disguised ones fail or when subsistence is threatened (Scott, 1990:86). Insurrections happen when either the 'dam wall' is weakened or the force of popular pressure increases (1990:219); it also requires overcoming a sense of inevitability of the dominant system (1990:220). Scott's work has been largely confirmed by other accounts of the activities of the oppressed. Patha Chatterjee, for instance, has argued that peasant action is the opposite of systematic or bourgeois politics:

> These solidarities do not grow because individuals feel they can come together with others on the basis of their common individual interests; on the contrary, individuals are enjoined to act within a collectivity because, it is believed, bonds of solidarity that tie them together already exist (Chatterjee, 1993:163)

The common person does not appeal to contracts or interests but to brotherhood (1993:165). Peasant politics is a matter of networks of kinships (real or imagined), solidarity and love (1993:225). The circulation of political rumours demonstrates that even relatively humble people in late mediaeval and early modern England were sufficiently well informed to engage in political discussion, even if their views were sometimes inaccurate. Similar conclusions have been drawn about rumours circulating in France during the latter half of the 18th century. Far from being hapless victims and unwitting conduits for rumour, the common people emerge from the historiography as active agents, with the ability to mobilise rumour for their own ends. As Natalie Davis showed in her study of pardon requests in 16th century France, ordinary people confronted by the law would attempt to put the best face on their actions, giving accounts that often little resemble the facts on the ground. Through such anecdotes, the ordinary person inevitably minimises their roles in the spread of certain information or even violence. It now becomes imperative for the modern scholar to peel away the fictive elements of such narratives so that he real picture can be drawn.

Historians of the modern period have similarly invested the masses with a new significance and agency, challenging previous political orthodoxies. This had particular resonance in repressive or 'restrictive' environments. Where subversive talk was dangerous, rumour offered the opportunity to express collective opinions while avoiding individual responsibility. According to Steven Hahn, rumour is, by its very 'nature' 'cloaked in anonymity', proving appealing to 'subalterns' in search of fluid, transient and untraceable forms of communication. Hahn argues that for African Americans in the antebellum South rumours of emancipation and the redistribution of plantation land represented a '[safe] way… to introduce themselves as political actors'. Plantation owners went to considerable lengths to hermetically seal their slaves within the South, so as not to expose them to 'seditious' whispers of the Free North. The 'grapevine' – a series of underground 'networks of communication' between captives – binds a disparate community together in which sharing informal news became a form of power, breaking the enforced isolation imposed by the slave owners and providing a means of speculating on the meaning, progress and consequences of the Civil War.

Although rumours reveal that ordinary people often had extensive knowledge about current affairs and were quite capable of engaging in political debate, rumours were also spread by elites. Historians who have relied on the court records of individuals prosecuted for spreading false reports in early modern England have tended to present rumour as an essentially plebeian mode of discourse and have underestimated the involvement of elites in spreading and exploiting misinformation.

Taking their cue from Shibutani, some historians have tended to represent rumour as an uncontrollable popular force. Ethan Shagan has argued that rumours circulating during the reign of Henry VIII were 'free from government control, or indeed from any control at all'. Inventing a rumour' was therefore 'the most insignificant of acts'. The emphasis on the protean and collective aspect of rumours only tells part of the story, however. While individuals may have had little control over the ways in which rumours were spread and were interpreted, they were certainly capable of providing the initial spark, without which specific rumours may have lain dormant. Despite the outward fear and disdain elites expressed for 'vulgar rumours', in practice, they were often willing to spread and exploit them for their own political purposes. There are numerous occasions when individuals appear to have spread false reports deliberately for political purposes, such as in 1470 when Robert Welles, the son of a nobleman, spread the report that Edward IV was coming to Lincolnshire to destroy the commons. Members of the social elite who were in a position of authority, who might have access to reliable information or connections with the court, could also lend popular rumours far greater credibility than they would otherwise have had.

This was the case, for instance, with reports about the death of Henry VIII that were spread in the 1530s. Rulers from early modern monarchs to 20th-century politicians and dictators could be just as susceptible to rumours as the people they ruled. Rumours that circulated throughout the country often originated at the centre of the government, which was itself a site for rumours about the 'who's in and who's out' of factional politics. False reports about foreign invasions and conspiracies against the government could be spread at the court by relatively humble people who expected some reward or wanted to influence policy. Rumours were therefore the result of a dialogue between elite and popular politics.

## The Zimbabwean Situation

During the period of the 2008 elections in Zimbabwe, the mobile phone became the main vehicle for filling in information gaps especially through the circulation of rumour relating to politicians and the elections (Chiumbu & Nyamanhindi :63). This was true in the backdrop of a muzzled private media in the country. Zimbabweans adapted the mobile phone to the social, political, cultural and economic realities of the country. Rumour was an essential instrument that transmitted ideas and created public opinion about influential politicians, especially President Robert Mugabe, and of course the state of the socio-economic and political affairs in the crisis ridden country. Politicians in Zimbabwe were very much aware of how damaging a rumour could be to the personal reputation of a political figure. As a result, they tried to exercise institutional controls to counter the effects of rumour.

The rumours pertaining to president, Robert Mugabe, during this era to the present, are especially important for they expressed a people's desires and aspirations for what they wish would happen. Mugabe is typically expressed by opposition political commentators as the cause of Zimbabwe's political-economic demise.

He is portrayed as a dictator who would engage any and every political strategy to remain in power and suppressing information from the public is one of them. It is a common conception in the minds of the ordinary Zimbabwean, that the absence of Mugabe would mean a return to an idealistic past where Zimbabwe was deemed to be a land of milk and honey. In the current political environment in Zimbabwe, it is almost inconceivable to imagine Mugabe to be removed from political power through electoral means or stepping down from power himself. As a result rumours have surfaced that have to do with his treatment of political opponents, how he manages/ mismanages state funds, his deteriorating health as well as his death. Some of these rumours have turned out to be true, while some remain in mystery.

## Rumours on Mugabe

Rumours about Mugabe's deteriorating health are the most common rumours concerning the political figure. In 2011, WikiLeaks released a 2008 US diplomatic cable saying that Mugabe was reported to have prostate cancer and had less than five years to live. Numerous death rumours have surfaced on the internet and various social media reporting that Mugabe has died. Every January as Mugabe takes his yearly vacation usually on the Asian continent, rumours about his death surface. His absence, coupled with the fact that most Zimbabweans would be in the dark as to his whereabouts, fuels speculations on Mugabe's health condition. In January of 2016, for example, it was reported that Mugabe had collapsed and died in Asia. His wife, Grace, was also reported to have suffered a heart attack while on Mugabe's annual leave in the Far East.

The media itself also fuels rumours on Mugabe. On the 4th of February 2015, Mugabe fell at the airport while returning from a trip to Ethiopia. Mugabe was assisted to stand up by some ministers and appeared unhurt by the fall (http://nehandaradio.com/2015/02/04/mugabe-trips-falls-airport/). The President continued to greet the service chiefs and government officials who had come to see him, before he boarded his official vehicle and left. This mishap only worsened people's rumours about Mugabe's health if not serving to confirm earlier rumours. This incidence also led to a host of other rumours to do with Mugabe's personal family life. Rumours about his wife's ill-health were also linked with this incidence. According to Newsday, "the First Lady, Grace Mugabe, who normally supports the president to walk is still in the Far East allegedly recovering from an operation."

Religious movements also make matters worse. In an era where prophetic ministries are taking centre stage, every year self-proclaimed prophets from various religious denominations proclaim the death of a major political figure in the Southern African region. Numerous prophetic figures have made similar remarks over the past few years. For example, a Malawian prophet Austin Liabunya, founder and president of BSI Winning Life Ministries, also prophesied the same for the nonagenarian. In early 2015, the prophet claimed that Mugabe would not live through the year 2015. "Mugabe's biological clock will not tick beyond this year," the prophet claimed.

From this, the prophet claimed that Zimbabwe would be restored and would find itself in the top five of the richest countries in Africa. A few weeks before the close of 2015 the prophet still maintained his prophecy, claiming that Mugabe had no less than 60 days to live. His time Mugabe will certainly die as proclaimed by this oracle of God and I will be vindicated as God's humble messenger," the prophet claimed.

Anytime such prophecies are told all eyes fall on Mugabe and rumours of his death start to circulate. And when he disappears from public appearances without any official statement from the government or state media, he is already considered dead in the minds of his opponents and the general public alike. Although the rumours on Mugabe's death have all turned out to be hoaxes thus far, they still have a significant role in our analysis. Such messages by prophets on the impending death of Mugabe signify an underlying understanding that portrays Mugabe as the source of Zimbabwe's demise. Rumours based on these so called 'prophecies' express such an overtone. That Zimbabwe will once again rise from its quagmire that Mugabe has put it in is always a recurring component of Mugabe death rumours.

On the other hand, rumours of Mugabe's ill-health also play a positive role. Ordinary Zimbabweans are not privy to official information regarding the state of health of the president. Official word from the government is usually scarce or deemed not important to be given to the public. The president's health is at best, kept a secret from the masses. This is not surprising when one understands the Zimbabwean cultural context. In Zimbabwean culture, it is common practice to hide details of the health of a king from the public. Only those very close to the king and his immediate family are privy to such information. When the king dies, this is not made public immediately. It may take a week or more for the news to be announced to the general masses. Apart from the belief that the king occupied a spiritual role as leader and his death was supposed to be inquired into thoroughly, this was also done to ensure that the succession process is completed before the news is made public.

The affairs of the state were supposed to appear normal after the king died so that any attempts at fighting for the throne would not occur. The successor would be chosen during this secrecy period and be announced once the news of the incumbent king's demise was made public. This culture of making the death of a king secret has permeated into modern Zimbabwe and people are very sceptical as to whether the president is still alive during those times that he will be absent from public space, worse, without any official explanation. Hence, the combination of rumours to do with the president's health and this cultural practice, it becomes inevitable that people may spread rumours about the president's death. In this sense, rumours also express people's cultural beliefs for in their minds, once a presidential figure is absent from public space for a prolonged period of time and no official explanation is readily available, then the most plausible conclusion is that the president is dead.

Rumours spread over the various social media platforms reveal a desire, among the people who possibly generated the messages and their fellow recipients, to assume the role of a 'liberator'. These "liberators", most of them youths, seemed to have been very encouraging of civil disobedience. In the thick of beatings and killings, victims of political violence in Zimbabwe have had to resort to these strategies to survive, escape or also to exercise some form of 'revenge'. Revenge came in the way of ridicule, scorn and cursing of political authorities believed to have been behind the people's misery. Rumour stories provide opportunities for civilians who are anti-Mugabe to 'deal' with him. Some even take Mugabe to the examination room and diagnose him with cancer and even gave him a few more months to live before his death. Where the general masses cannot have an audience with Mugabe to express their grievances, they unleash their frustrations in rumour anecdotes. They override the security at the president's house and directly vent their opinions to the leader.

Apart from the rumours concerning Mugabe's death, there also exists rumours concerning how the leader handles political opponents. Anytime any opposition member or independent media journalist who has publicly declared their dislike of the Mugabe regime explicitly or implicitly disappears, the first suspect is usually Mugabe. Rumours surface over missing political activists that they were 'silenced' by Mugabe through his security operatives. Those who never resurface are just deemed to be dead at the hands of Mugabe's operatives. A case in perspective is that of Itai Dzamara, a political activist who vanished in 2015. It was reported that while he was getting a haircut at a local barbershop, five armed men seized him, shoved him into an unmarked truck and sped off and was never seen again. Dzamara, 35, is a journalist and opposition supporter who spearheaded a pro-democracy movement called "Occupy Africa Unity Square" that was demanding President Mugabe to resign. In an Al Jazeera report, the barber - who declined to give his name fearing reprisals - said that Dzamara's captors accused him of cattle theft, handcuffed him, and drove off at high speed.

His abductors were earlier spotted cruising around the neighbourhood in two vehicles, he said. Speculations over his disappearance turned into rumours about Mugabe's silencing of the political activist. These rumours filled the gap left when no information had come from the police or the state as to the whereabouts of the activist. Rumours of his body being found also began to surface, with some even claiming that photographs of the body had been taken (http://www.zimeye.net/breaking-news-itai-dzamara-dead-body-look-alike-found-in-goromonzi/).

In our analysis, such narratives, although sometimes false, play a pivotal role in expressing people's fears and concerns towards the state, or more specifically, the president. They express an implicit 'warning' that although the information is unavailable to the general population, they 'know' what actually happened and the culprit, in this case Mugabe, should stop 'silencing' such political activists. To paint a clearer picture of this notion an analogy might suffice. Imagine a hypothetical scenario where there are many witnesses to a murder.

These witnesses have the power to take the murderer to court so that they could be brought to justice. Armed with such knowledge, the witnesses become strong over the perpetrator and the perpetrator in turn may decide that it is in their best interests to stop their murderous ways, lest they be exposed for their past crimes. This is the same with this situation.

Rumours do not only attack ruling party elites, but opposition leaders too. In 2011 there circulated a rumour attributed to three of Morgan Tsvangirai's trusted lieutenants quoted on the whistle-blower website WikiLeaks describing him as "weak and indecisive." The rumour alleged that MDC-T officials, including the party's national organising secretary Nelson Chamisa and the then Deputy Minister of Justice Obert Gutu, said Tsvangirai was weak and indecisive. But Chamisa and Gutu denied ever saying that. Tsvangirai told journalists he had confidence in his "lieutenants" and would not run the country from rumour mills. "Our party regards WikiLeaks with suspicion. We can't follow rumours and we cannot run a country on gossip. We can't," Tsvangirai said. "We are not doing anything about that and that's where it ends. I enjoy the support of 12 provinces. That was confirmed at our Bulawayo congress and that is the yardstick of my support. I don't go about asking people if they support me or not. I don't see WikiLeaks as a true reflection of the situation in the party. I have confidence in my lieutenants." Such rumours perhaps also serve to show that even opposition political leaders have their own shortcomings that the public should be aware of before making a blind vote.

## Rumours Spread by Elites

It was earlier on noted that rumours are not only spread by the voiceless masses but also by elites for their own personal gain or to get political leverage. Zimbabwean politics is no different. Rumours abound about political elites who indulge in shady activities and these rumours are often spread by other political elites to advance their own agenda. To give a very good example of this, the president's wife, Grace Mugabe and state-owned media went on record accusing the then Vice President Joyce Mujuru, a battle-hardened guerrilla nicknamed *Teurai ropa* (literally spill blood), of corruption and plotting to kill Mugabe in what analysts say was a smear campaign to end her immediate political career. This word spread fast via rumour and very rapidly the political career of Joyce Mujuru came to a sudden halt.

The so-called factions that exist within ZANU PF today also rely on such rumours spread by political elites. Rumours are spread by political elites, for example, that the first lady was leading a ZANU PF group commonly known as G40 or Generation 40 made up of young Zanu PF politicians that are angling to take over from President Mugabe once he leaves office. However, the first lady has since distanced herself from such a position. This information can only be privy to political elites. The first lady often criticizes some un-named senior government officials for grabbing multiple farms that she says are laying idle, saying this impacts negatively the country's agro-based economy. Such rumours seek to expose political opponents and strip them of their political standing, at the same time advancing the political agenda of whoever will be spreading the rumours.

## Positive Rumours

All rumours are not negative, however. There are certain rumours that express a people's wish to have the country running again. In mid-2015, there surfaced an anonymous rumour to the effect that the two major political parties in Zimbabwe, that is ZANU PF and MDC T were having talks to have another Government of National Unity (GNU). With growing concern over Mugabe and his ZANU PF party's failure to turn around the economy, rumours for a unity government were breathing a fresh life to people's hopes for a better day. The MDC T party was quick to dismiss the rumours saying "As MDC, the last thing we would want to do is to betray the millions of people who support us by entering into a treacherous and nicodemus association with the crumbling ZANU PF regime," (https://www.dailynews.co.zw/articles/2015/09/21/mdc-rules-out-gnu-deal). The significance of such rumours is that they express a hope on the part of the masses, to have the country running again based on the successes of the Government of National Unity of 2009 which saw the country rising out of its decade-long political and economic quagmire. They express a wish that the two rival political parties would work together and put political differences aside so that the country can prosper. Making every aspect of the country political and political rivalries is seen as the major reason why the country has fallen. Such rumours, then, express a desire on the part of the masses to have such politicking coming to an end and having the country move forward.

## Conclusion

From classical to contemporary times, the spread of political rumour is ubiquitous political behaviour, especially where information from the government on the state of affairs in the country is not readily available. These traits of human behaviour arise out of local conditions and are not necessarily inspired by experiences of any particular context or situation. From our analysis, it is clear that the spread of rumour goes beyond the mere spreading of falsehoods but rather serves multiple purposes. These include expressing people's wishes and desires over their leaders as well as keeping their leaders in check.

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