

Zimbabwean Diaspora politics and the Power of Laughter: Humour as a Tool for Political Communication, Criticism and Protest

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During the past decade an estimated third of the Zimbabwean population has left the country mainly to neighbouring and Western countries. This happened largely in response to the unstable economic situation with one of the world's highest inflations and a political climate characterised by a shrinking space for divergent opinions, democratic participation and political pluralism. Democratic rights and freedoms such as the freedom of speech, press, information and assembly have been severely restricted for the political opposition, the non-state media and civil society with the help of new and amended legislation as well as security forces. Pushed out of the country and denied external voting rights - and thus to participate in the most basic political decision-making process of their country - Zimbabweans abroad searched for other ways of participation in the political life of their home country. Using the alternative democratic space in their receiving countries such as the United Kingdom, politically active Zimbabweans in the diaspora as well as (self-)exiled journalists and human rights activists have still tried to shape domestic political processes in their country of origin through other, non-electoral means. By operating beyond the borders of the Zimbabwean state and its authority these actors have circumvented state control and attempted to challenge the Mugabe government's legitimacy. While many Zimbabweans now in diaspora have lost a lot in the process of leaving their home, they have retained one important weapon: their sense of humour. As a UK-based Zimbabwean human rights activist in an interview in early 2008 stressed: 'Zimbabweans laughed a lot. They always laughed. Even now they can laugh...Even now there's a capacity for laughter, a capacity to make jokes.' In their struggle for political change back home Zimbabwean diasporans have regularly resorted to humour in its various forms as a tool of political communication, criticism and protest. Cartoons, caricatures and jokes have offered Zimbabweans in diaspora a medium to convey their political messages to a broader public - Zimbabwean and non-Zimbabwean. This paper will explore how diaspora Zimbabweans have made use of new media such as online newspapers, websites and SMS to express their dissatisfaction with their home country's political elite via satire, caricatures, cartoons and jokes.