

# Negative Advertising as a Strategy of Persuasion in the 2002 Presidential Election Campaign in Zimbabwe<sup>1</sup>

Jairos Kangira  
University of Zimbabwe

## Abstract

Zimbabwe's 2002 presidential election shall remain a fertile field of study for scholars in various areas of enquiry including rhetoric, the art of persuasive communication. The main reason for this is that the election generated so much controversy and interest, both locally and internationally. It is also true to say that this election attracted much more attention than ever before because of the emergence of a vibrant opposition party that offered the stiffest challenge to the incumbent president since the attainment of independence in 1980. The attention of scholars in rhetoric is drawn by the huge volume of rhetorical discourse produced in this election whose aim was to persuade voters to vote for a particular presidential candidate. It is the aim of this paper to examine the role negative advertising or persuasive attack played during the campaign period leading to the March 2002 presidential election. It provides a qualitative rhetorical analysis of major negative advertisements that were frequently used by the main contending parties, the ruling ZANU (PF) party and the opposition party, the MDC, in order to discredit the opponent. The researcher used mainly the print media as sources of the adverts that are analysed in this paper. The study shows that both negative candidate theme and issue (policy) theme advertisements were meant to induce negative images of the presidential candidates in the voters' minds. The central theme in the ruling party's negative advertising was that the opposition party leader was a sell-out or a stooge of imperialists who wanted to reverse the gains of the liberation war. On the other hand, the opposition party's negative advertising held the incumbent responsible for the socio-economic and political quagmire the country was in. The article argues that the sponsors of these advertisements believed that attack advertising played a significant role in influencing candidate choice.

## Introduction

This is a study of the rhetorical use of language in negative advertising in the 2002 presidential election campaign in Zimbabwe. The 2002 presidential election campaign mainly featured the incumbent president, Robert Mugabe as the candidate of the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party, and the challenger, Morgan Tsvangirai, candidate of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). This campaign is of particular interest in the field of rhetoric since it generated a huge volume of political campaign communication whose goals were threefold: to reinforce the parties' already existing support, to persuade leaning voters to cross the divide and to convert new voters to support the parties (Shea 1996). The 2002 election campaign is also of much interest because for the first time since the attainment of independence in 1980 and with Zimbabwe having been *de facto* a one-party state, a trend supported by the elections of 1985, 1990 and 1995, the sitting president could not take victory for granted when the MDC's strong showing in the 2000 parliamentary elections was considered. This time around, Mugabe, the 'easy' winner of the preceding four elections, was facing his strongest ever challenge from an opposition party presidential

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was first presented at the 2004 ARCSA International Conference which was held at the Centre for Rhetoric Studies at the University of Cape Town from 6-11 June 2004. The conference, whose theme was **About An African Athens: Rhetoric And Democracy**, was held to celebrate 10 years of democracy in South Africa at that time.

candidate, Tsvangirai. Predictably, the resultant election campaign was characterised by an abundance of political advertisements and other forms of persuasion from the rival parties. Subsequently, and in consequence, both ZANU-PF and the MDC embarked upon a vicious propaganda trail against each other, with ZANU-PF making use of state-controlled media and the MDC being 'adopted' by the private and independent media.

It is the purpose of this paper to analyse the negative political advertisements that were used by both parties, showing the extent to which this kind of advertising persuaded the electorate to vote for or against either party. In other words, the paper is intended to show how negative semantic framing was used in campaign advertisements in order to present the opponent as an unsuitable candidate for the presidency.

This presidential election campaign exhibited a pattern that was characterised by serious polarisation between the two major contending parties. Generally and consistently, negative political advertisements produced by ZANU-PF insinuated that voting for Tsvangirai was similar to selling the country to Britain, the former coloniser<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, negative political campaign communication from the MDC was meant to generate distrust of Mugabe among the voters by alleging that his bad governance was responsible for the political and economic meltdown in the country. These two hypotheses guide this paper's analysis of the advertisements that were collected largely from the print media.

### **Defining Negative Advertising and Democracy**

As a starting point, the terms "negative political advertising" or "negative political advertisement/s" and "democracy" are defined in order to situate the discussion. Gronbeck (1994:62) defines a negative political advertisement as "one that creates unattractive or undesirable images of one's political opponents". He further notes that the function of negative advertisements in political campaign communication

... is to destabilise the voter support for the other, either by increasing the undecideds (who presumably can be won by one's own candidate) or ...even driving voters out of the electorate arena altogether in circumstances when one's candidate might be helped by a lower turnout (p.77).

While this definition on its own would suffice for the purposes of this study, it is important to juxtapose it against perspectives of other scholars so as to provide a broader understanding of negative political campaign advertising.

One other way of describing negative political advertising is calling it mudslinging. Stewart (1975 as cited by Gronbeck 1994:62) says a mudslinger is a "person guilty of rumours, making insinuations, perpetuating, telling lies and calling names." Not all the characteristics mentioned by Stewart may manifest themselves in a single negative political advertisement. The bottom line is that as long as an advert exhibits one or more of these features, its aim is to deflate the image of the opponent and is, therefore, negative. Mudslinging can also be described as the use of "smear tactics and political hatch" (Trent and Friedenbergs 2000), or "name-calling, direct personal attacks, man-on-

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<sup>2</sup> The Herald, March 5 2002

the street, symbolic attacks ...to discredit the opponent ...most frequently delivered by surrogate speakers”(Payne and Baukus 1985:5). A surrogate speaker is often used to attack the opponent in a negative advertisement in order to avoid a backlash<sup>3</sup> or to take advantage of the surrogate’s ethos (Sheckels 2002). This sense of a negative political advertisement concurs with what Diamond and Bates (1984) call an “attack ad”. Benoit and Williams (1996) identify two aspects of political communication, that is “persuasive attack” and “persuasive defence”. They explain the two concepts as follows:

Persuasive attack means messages that attempt to damage the image (reputation, face, identity) of a person, group, or organization (these attacks may address the character and/or the policies associated with that person, group, or organization). Persuasive defence on the other hand, attempts to repair an image after persuasive attack (p.20).

To a great extent the negative advertisements that are analysed in this study conform with the explanation of “persuasive attack” that Benoit and Williams give. The negative messages in the political advertisements attacked the images and parties of the two major presidential candidates under study.

On the same issue Gronbeck (1994) identifies three basic types of negative political advertisements: the implicative advertisement, the comparative advertisement and the assault advertisement. He explains that “in implicative, comparative, and assault negative ads, we have three different foci: the implicative ad focuses on self, the assault, on other, and the comparative, on both (p.69).” Accordingly, the analysis of the rhetorical structures of negative campaign advertisements in this study entails showing which types of advertisements each political party used and why they were used. It is the ‘assault advertisement’ that Gronbeck calls a true negative advertisement since it is completely centred on the opponent. This is the definition of negative advertisement that is used in the analyses of advertisements in this study. Some researches reveal that negative messages are rhetorically effective against the opponent if they are well managed (Kaid and Boydston 1987 and Merritt 1984).

Since the rhetoric and democracy are twin concepts<sup>4</sup>, it is also imperative that a working definition of the term “democracy” be given. Defining democracy as a system of government for the people, with the people and by the people does not clearly give the nuances or tenets of this system of governing. In most cases politicians parrot this without actually understanding or practising the fundamentals of a democratic system or process. For the purposes of this study I adopt the definition of democracy made in the

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<sup>3</sup> A backlash occurs when the negative political advertisements impact negatively on their sponsor rather than on opponents. When this happens, the advertisement is self-defeating (Roberts 1995). See also Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991) and Garramone (1988) for a detailed discussion on how negative advertisements can backfire.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed illustration of how rhetoric being at the centre of democracy, see Philippe-Joseph Salazar’s, *An African Athens: Rhetoric and the Shaping of Democracy in South Africa*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers. (2002). Salazar demonstrates the role of rhetorical democracy in post-apartheid South Africa.

deliberations of the International Panel on Democracy and Development (IPDD)<sup>5</sup>. The panel defines democracy as

...a system whereby the whole society can participate, at every level, in the decision making process and keep control over it. Its foundation is the full observance of human rights, as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Vienna Pacts and Declaration of 1993. And the promotion of those rights and the respect of differences and freedom of speech and thought are indispensable preconditions for democracy. There can be no democracy without an independent judicial system and without institutions that guarantee freedom of expression and the existence of free media. The power to legislate must be exercised by representatives of the people who have been elected by the people. Laws must be implemented by legally responsible individuals, and the administrative apparatus must be accountable to the elected representatives. That is why a parliament that is truly representative of the people in all its diversity is indispensable for the democratic process. In this respect, the holding of free and fair elections by universal suffrage is a necessary, though not in itself sufficient, precondition for the existence of a democratic regime. ...democracy can be defined as a political system that is capable of correcting its own dysfunctions (Boutros-Ghali 2003: 7-8).

This definition suffices for the concerns raised in this study as it lays down the fundamental principles for the execution of a democratic process in a comprehensive way. For instance, in a democratic society there is respect for other people as sovereign power lies with the people, there exists rule of law because there is a reliable and independent judicial system and individuals have the right "...to express their opinion [freely] within society to which they belong and [have] the right to be heard..."(Boutros-Ghali, 9). In addition, the political environment must be conducive to the free expression by civil society both locally and internationally, as the world is increasingly becoming a global village. A free press is also another precondition for democracy. There is a need to discuss negative advertising as a strategy for political influence with this definition of democracy in mind since it is apparent that during the 2002 presidential election campaign in Zimbabwe, there were gross violations<sup>6</sup> of some of the basic principles of democracy as the campaign was characterised by politically motivated violence which claimed the lives of many people, most of them supporters of the opposition MDC party (Feltoe 2002)<sup>7</sup>. This political violence definitely infringed on the rights of the victims to express themselves freely and elect a candidate of their choice. The intimidation and harassment of voters that was characteristic of the campaign was a breach of the principles of a free and fair election campaign.

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<sup>5</sup> The IPDD was set by the UNESCO Director-General in 1998 to work out the principles of democracy and development. The panel, chaired by Boutros Boutros-Ghali, produced a verbatim record of the deliberations entitled *The Interaction between Democracy and Development*.

<sup>6</sup> Some details of the human rights developments during this campaign period are contained in the March 2002 issue of the *Zimbabwe Human Rights Bulletin*, No.6.

<sup>7</sup> See also Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, *Are they accountable? Examining alleged violators and their violations – pre and post Presidential Election March 2002*: A report by the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, December 2002

It should also be noted that the state controlled television station and four radio stations did not allow political advertisements, whether positive or negative, from the MDC. The scenario was that the state-controlled media churned out negative propaganda campaign using advertisements and stories against the MDC. The following analysis made by the Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe (MMPZ)<sup>8</sup> shows, to a large extent, that the election campaign field was uneven:

ZBC carried a total of 402 election campaign stories in its news bulletins monitored between 1 December 2001 and 7 March 2002, the penultimate day of the election campaign. Of these, 339 of the bulletins (84%) favoured Zanu-PF's presidential candidate. Only 38 (9%) covered MDC activities, but virtually all of them were used to discredit the opposition party and its candidate. Radio Zimbabwe, ZBC's most popular station, carried a total of 275 campaign related stories. A total of 237 of them (86%) were promotional stories in favour of Zanu-PF, while 20 (7.3%) were all negative stories about the MDC. ... Out of a total of 14 hours 25 minutes that ZBC devoted to the presidential election campaign, Zanu-PF's candidate was granted a total of 13 hours and 34 minutes, or a little more than 94%. This compares to the national broadcaster's coverage of the MDC and its candidate, of just 31 minutes and 30 seconds, a paltry 4%. But even this was subverted by ZBC which used the time to attack, denigrate and discredit the MDC (MMPZ 14 March 2002).

The above analysis of how the electronic media conducted their business during the election campaign period is one example of the many violations of the tenets of democracy as given in the IPDD definition of democracy. The MDC presidential candidate could not use the national broadcaster to elaborate the policies of his party to the electorate, neither could he use it for the purpose of persuasive defence.

#### **“Conspirator-traitor” rhetoric**

On 13 February 2002 ZTV produced a story from Australian Television alleging that Tsvangirai had plotted to assassinate Mugabe before the elections.<sup>9</sup> According to a specialised edition of “Dateline”, a programme on the Australian Special Broadcasting Services (SBS), Tsvangirai had contracted Dickens and Madison, a Canadian Political and Public Relations Consultancy Company, to carry out the assassination of Mugabe. The documentary, entitled “Killing Mugabe-The Tsvangirai Conspiracy”, showed Tsvangirai discussing the alleged plot with executives of Dickens and Madison among them Ari Ben-Menashe, the head of the organisation who later ‘spilt the beans’, so to speak, to the Zimbabwean government. The MDC leader denied the assassination plot arguing that the MDC had approached Dickens and Madison to help them with a public relations thrust in North America and that “...this whole thing was contrived to damage me politically and to eliminate me from the presidential race.”<sup>10</sup> The state-controlled

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<sup>8</sup> Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe is a Non-Governmental Organisation that analyses media issues independently in the country.

<sup>9</sup> The Sunday Mail, February 17 2002 gives the full text of Tsvangirai's alleged conspiracy against Mugabe. See also The Daily News issues of 21, 22, 23 and 25 February 2002. The alleged plot received wide media coverage both locally and internationally.

<sup>10</sup> The Daily News, February 22 2002.

media argued that Tsvangirai had committed a treasonous crime and that it would not be easy for him to get away with it. The following comment from *The Herald* was characteristic of how the state-controlled media viewed the case: “He [Tsvangirai] will not wriggle out of this one with a mere denial because everything is on [video and] tape for all to see and hear<sup>11</sup>”. The use of the word “wriggle” and the expression “mere denial” suggest that it was not easy for Tsvangirai to get out of this case with a simple excuse. It seems the paper had already convicted him before trial. The aim of this study is not to go into the details of the arguments for and against this case. This was left to the courts of law which were better qualified to handle it. The purpose of referring briefly to the alleged conspiracy to assassinate Mugabe is to show how it was used in negative advertisements that portrayed Tsvangirai as an unscrupulous politician who would do anything to ascend to power, including the assassination of a sitting president.

The negative advertisements also portrayed the MDC as a terrorist organisation. Although there were arguments channelled through the private press that the video had been externally edited or doctored, the fact that voters could see and hear Tsvangirai discussing the “plot” was detrimental to his image as a presidential candidate. In the circumstances, many viewers were likely to believe this conspiracy story word for word because of the power of television. Talking about the power of television, Shea (1996:208) says “because voters remember these images for ... a long period of time, paid political ads often are retained as independent news accounts-which is another reason why television is so powerful<sup>12</sup>.” In order to bolster the impression that Tsvangirai had actually plotted to kill Mugabe, ZTV repeatedly re-screened the old footage in which Tsvangirai addressed a rally in Harare in September 2001 where he said: “If you (Mugabe) don’t go peacefully, we will remove you violently”<sup>13</sup>. This was screened alongside the conspiracy video to buttress the impression that Tsvangirai advocated violence. The logic or enthymeme used here was meant to make the voters conclude that Tsvangirai was a violent man. The effectiveness of electronic media in its propaganda war against Tsvangirai lay in the fact that the state controlled TV and radio stations did not accord him ample time to defend himself from the allegations levelled against him. According to the MMPZ,

ZTV devoted a total of 35 minutes 25 seconds to the assassination conspiracy in the news section of the five Newshour bulletins that featured the story between Wednesday (13/2/02) and Sunday [17/2/02]. ...The MDC official denial was afforded 15 seconds on ZTV (14/2/02 8pm). A further 55 seconds was given to footage of Tsvangirai addressing a rally in Chitungwiza (17/2/02) in which he again denied the allegations (MPPZ 2002:82).

Given these circumstances, it is difficult to avoid concluding that the use of the conspiracy video-tape in ZANU-PF’s negative commercials had a negative rhetorical

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<sup>11</sup> The Herald, February 19 2002

<sup>12</sup> See also Theodore F. Sheckles, “Negative Coherence And Antecedent Ethos In The Rhetoric Of Attack Advertising: A Case Study Of The Glendening VS. Sauerbrey” in *Campaign in Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, Vol.5, No.3, pp. 459-477

<sup>13</sup> MMPZ, *Media Under Siege: Report on the media coverage of the 2002 Presidential and Mayoral elections in Zimbabwe*, p.82

impact in some the voters' minds as far as Tsvangirai's image was concerned. These negative advertisements were also aired on all the four state-controlled radio stations, reaching the voters in the remote rural areas and those without television sets in urban and peri-urban areas. According to Trent and Friedenbergr (2000) radio advertising is advantageous and much better than other types of advertising as it can be used to reach targeted audiences. It is most likely that some people believed the conspiracy story word for word just because it came out on radio and television. Trent and Friedenbergr note that "[television] lends a sense of credibility to candidates and [also] allows for some degree of targeting" (Trent and Friedenbergr 2000:339). Other people, most of them probably MDC supporters, might have interpreted the alleged plot as a dirty tactic to smear campaign the MDC leader. It is highly possible that most people felt impatient with Tsvangirai for allowing himself to be trapped under surveillance cameras by Dickens and Madison. This feeling might have been because ZANU-PF's electronic advertisements portrayed Tsvangirai as a vulnerable political novice who lacked shrewdness and maturity, the prerequisite qualities of astute presidential candidates. The message the advertisements sent to the electorate was simply that Tsvangirai was unsuitable for the presidency.

Even the 'conspirator-traitor' advertisements that were flighted in the state-controlled newspapers attacked Tsvangirai's image as a presidential candidate. In one typical advertisement, ZANU-PF asks the voters two rhetorical questions: "WHAT WOULD YOU VOTE FOR? PLOTS TO KILL OR PLOTS TO TILL?"<sup>14</sup> The punning or word play on the word "plots" displays a high degree of ingenuity of the ZANU-PF's Information and Publicity department in designing the advertisement. The rhetorical captions have an epigrammatic appeal, as they are concise, memorable and rendering like aphorisms. The use of visuals in this advertisement is worth commenting on. The picture of a man holding a gun is in sharp contrast to the picture of a man holding a plough in the advertisement. The MDC leader was presented to the voter as a dangerous man who plotted to kill a president while the ZANU-PF candidate was portrayed as a benevolent leader who provided people with plots to till. The rhetorical function of this advertisement lies in persuading the voters to vote for good and not for evil. In other words, the personal foci here are 'Vote for Mugabe' and 'Vote against Tsvangirai'. The broadsheet advertisement refers to Tsvangirai's assassination plot and the Land Redistribution Programme that Mugabe and his government embarked on in July 2000 (ZANU-PF Election Manifesto 2002). While the violence that accompanied the Land Reform Programme must be strongly condemned, there was no question for the need for government to embark on a large-scale land reform exercise that would restore land to the indigenous people<sup>15</sup>. While ZANU-PF's policy on the land question was clear and attractive to the black people, the MDC seemed wishy-washy on this issue. In a related advertisement ZANU-PF argues that Tsvangirai has sold the land to the British and racist Rhodesians and, therefore, people should not vote for him. This argument is clearly presented in the following advertisement:

*Sliding from 6 points to 5 points and still going down...*

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<sup>14</sup> The Herald, March 5 2002

<sup>15</sup> Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, December 2002, *Are they accountable? Examining alleged violators and their violations pre and post the Presidential Election March 2002*, p.16

*WHERE HAS THE LAND GONE?*

*Zimbabwe Independent January 18, 2002*

*MDC'S 6 Point Plan for a Better Future*

- *PEACE- Fairness, Justice, Security, Law and Order*
- *FOOD- Available and Affordable Prices*
- *JOBS- New industries and Opportunities*
- *LAND- Orderly, Equitable and Economically Sound*
- *EDUCATION- Affordable Fees and Funding of Tertiary Education*
- *HEALTH-Medication and Basic Health Care*

*Parade February 2002*

*MDC'S 5 Point Plan for a Better Future*

- *PEACE- Fairness, Justice, Security, Law and Order*
  - *FOOD- Available and Affordable Prices*
  - *JOBS- New industries and Opportunities*
  - *EDUCATION- Affordable Fees and Funding of Tertiary Education*
  - *HEALTH-Medication and Basic Health Care*
- *(Picture of Tsvangirai receiving money from white farmers)*

*Why have they removed land from their 6 Point Plan?*

*BECAUSE TSVANGIRAI has already SOLD the LAND to the British and racist Rhodesians. Don't let them short change you, again!*

*ON MARCH 9 AND 10 VOTE FOR THE PEOPLE: VOTE FOR MATURITY, EXPERIENCE AND WISDOM<sup>16</sup>*

The omission of the land issue by the MDC in the advertisement that appeared in the February 2002 issue of the *Parade* monthly magazine was used in ZANU-PF attack rhetoric as clear testimony that the MDC did not want to take land from the white commercial farmers. If voted into power, the rhetoric said, Tsvangirai would reverse the gains of the liberation struggle and the Third Chimurenga by returning the farms that had already been compulsorily acquired to the white farmers<sup>17</sup>. This was equal to selling the country to the "British and racist Rhodesians." In an attempt to convince the voters that Tsvangirai was indeed a sell-out, a picture of him with a group of white farmers<sup>18</sup> giving his party cheque donations was juxtaposed to the negative message in the advertisement. He was seen clapping hands, a gesture of expressing gratitude and appreciation. While the denotative meaning of this is that Tsvangirai was simply shown thanking the white farmers for donating money to his party, the connotative meaning was disastrous. He was depicted as accepting the white men's money in exchange with the land that Mugabe had taken from them. This whole act was tantamount to selling the land to the white farmers, the advertisement exhorts the voters to believe. This is depictive rhetoric which Osborn (1986:79) defines as "strategic pictures, verbal and nonverbal visualizations, that linger in

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<sup>16</sup> The Herald, February 1 2002

<sup>17</sup> For instance, Fidelis Mhashu, an MDC MP was quoted in the BBC's Hard Talk Programme as saying the MDC would return the land that had been acquired by government to white farmers if voted into power.

<sup>18</sup> For the first time since 1980, the white populace became politically active, supporting the MDC openly, thus fuelling certain conclusions such as that they feared loss of land. The source of this picture was CNN which normally is anti-Mugabe.

the collective memory of audiences as representative of their subjects when rhetoric has been successful.” Tsvangirai’s image in the picture functioned as a visual *topos* of a sell-out, a traitor and, therefore, an unpatriotic Zimbabwean.

In order to understand the nature of the rhetoric of ZANU-PF’s negative advertisements following the “Killing Mugabe-The Tsvangirai Conspiracy” documentary, it is necessary to view this with reference to the 1988 presidential election campaign in America. The focus is on George Bush (Republican) and Michael Dukakis (Democrat) as presidential candidates. In this election campaign, Bush used the Horton saga in a negative advertisement to attack Dukakis (Jamieson 1992; Diamond and Bates 1992; Iyengar 1991; Pratkanis and Aronson 1991). The advertisement told the story of William Horton a convicted murderer who was sent to prison in Massachusetts. Horton committed rape and assault while he was on furlough from a prison when Dukakis was governor of Massachusetts. The advertisement structured the information in such a way that made people infer that it was Dukakis’ responsibility that Horton committed the rape and assault crimes while on furlough, yet Dukakis neither pardoned Horton nor Horton killed anyone. According to Jamieson (1992:24) Bush even commented that the Horton case “had come to symbolize, and represent – accurately, I believe – the misguided outlook of my opponent when it comes to crime.” The Horton case was used to support the widely held opinion that Democrats are “soft on crime” (Jamieson 1992; Pratkanis and Aronson 1991). So, this advertisement was aimed at making the voters form a bad image of Michael Dukakis since it attributed responsibility of the Horton case to him. It depicted Dukakis as a man who let out of prison prisoners charged with the crime of first-degree murder to go and commit other crimes. He was, therefore, not fit to vote for as president. The Horton saga makes an interesting analogy to the Tsvangirai alleged coup plot.

The “Killing Mugabe-The Tsvangirai Conspiracy” and the Horton cases to a large extent demonstrate that, as Jamieson puts it,

...in politics as in life, what is known is not necessarily what is believed, what is shown is not necessarily what is seen, and what is said is not necessarily what is heard. ...in [these cases] consultants exploited the psychological quirks that characterize humans (p.24).

The *topos of a traitor* is also found in the advertisement that equates Tsvangirai to the biblical Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. The full text of the advertisement is as follows:

*DON'T SELL YOUR COUNTRY, QUIT THE MDC AND RETURN TO THE PEOPLE*

*(Picture of Tsvangirai with a group of white farmers donating money to his party)*

*“This is how JUDAS ISCARIOT- the traitor of traitors- sold out.”*

- *Some white people, the British Government and all traitors say: “If the MDC had not been formed, the land would not have been returned to the people.” What they are saying is similar to what JUDAS ISCARIOT, the traitor of traitors said, “If I had not betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver he would not have died for you!”*

*DON'T BE A SELLOUT, RETURN TO THE PEOPLE*

*ON MARCH 9 AND 10 VOTE FOR THE PEOPLE: VOTE FOR MATURITY,  
EXPERIENCE AND WISDOM<sup>19</sup>*

The *logos* in the above advertisement is interesting. By referring to the betrayal of Jesus Christ by his disciple Judas Iscariot, the advertisement is appealing to people's emotions to hate Tsvangirai. Tsvangirai is, again, seen with the same group of white farmers<sup>20</sup> donating money to his party as in the previous advertisement. Below the picture is the sentence "This is how JUDAS ISCARIOT-the traitor of traitors-sold out." The *topos* of land is central to the argument being presented to the voters. Tsvangirai's picture with the white commercial farmers has since become a symbol of selling out in ZANU-PF's advertisements against the MDC leader. In one advertisement the same picture appears with the Shona caption "Tsvangirai achitengesa nyika kumabhunu emumapurazi"<sup>21</sup> ("Tsvangirai while selling the land/country to white farmers").

In yet another negative advertisement Tsvangirai is presented as a tea-boy who is serving the Prime Minister of Britain, Tony Blair<sup>22</sup> (sic) with tea (map of Zimbabwe put in a cup of tea). In the humorous cartoon Tsvangirai asks Blair (sic) "Is this what you want to have on March 9 & 10, Baas?" and Blair answers "Yes, yes, my boy Morgan." The connotation of this cartoon is that Tsvangirai was a Blair stooge. The advertisement goes on to say that:

*TSVANGISON<sup>23</sup> AND HIS SELLOUTS THINK ZIMBABWE IS TEA*  
*-DON'T LET HIM SELL YOUR BIRTHRIGHT*  
*- DON'T LET HIM SELL YOUR HERITAGE*  
*- DON'T LET HIM SELL YOUR SOUL*  
*- DON'T LET HIM SELL YOUR COUNTRY*  
*DON'T LET HIM SELL YOUR LAND*  
*ZIMBABWE WILL NEVER BE A COLONY AGAIN*  
*ON MARCH 9 AND 10 FOR THE PEOPLE: VOTE FOR MATURITY,*  
*EXPERIENCE AND WISDOM<sup>24</sup>*

Voters are warned not to let Tsvangirai sell their "birthright" "heritage", "soul", "country" and "land". The use of repetition in this advertisement has a rhetorical impact on the voters as they are being given reasons for not voting for Tsvangirai. The repetition sounds formulaic and inherently demands adherence to the DON'TS. In addition, the DON'TS are compelling and were designed to have a hypnotic effect on the voters. The vow that ZIMBABWE WILL NEVER BE A COLONY AGAIN was meant to instill a sense of guilt or shame in whoever would want to vote for Tsvangirai, who wanted to sell the country to the British, the former colonizers. By using the derogatory anglicised name

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<sup>19</sup> The Herald, 5 March 2002

<sup>20</sup> This is repeated use of the same picture found in the preceding advertisement.

<sup>21</sup> The Sunday Mail, February 10 2002

<sup>22</sup> The deliberate wrong spelling of Tony Blair statement is to present a negative image about him suggesting that he is a liar.

<sup>23</sup> ZANU-PF coined the name Tsvangison after Tsvangirai had made reference to whites as "our cousins" at a rally, suggesting that he had anglicised himself.

<sup>24</sup> The Herald, February 2 2002.

“Tsvangison”, the advertisement gave the impression that Tsvangirai had already sold his soul to the British and it followed that he would in turn sell the country to them if voted into the presidency. This advertisement is both satirical and sarcastic.

### **MDC attack advertising**

As stated earlier, both parties used negative advertising or the persuasive attack strategy in their campaigns. The MDC’s campaign theme or *topos* was calling for change, one of the widely used challenger’s strategies in political campaign communication (Trent and Friedenbergs 2000). The issues that featured in the MDC’s negative advertising included, among others, Mugabe’s age, political violence, the land issue, unemployment, inflation and the general suffering of people due to the economic crisis in the country. Selected negative adverts on these five topics are discussed in this paper. It is important to note that these issues are interrelated and are discussed separately only for convenience. It is also necessary to bear in mind that most of these issues emanated from the MDC manifesto of 1999.

On the issue of Mugabe’s age, the MDC, in one of its advertisements, presented an impression that voting for Mugabe at the age of 78 was the same as voting for old thinking. The advertisement asked the rhetorical question “THE OLDEST PRESIDENT IN HISTORY?”<sup>25</sup> The narrative went on to say that if Mugabe were elected he would be the oldest man in history to be sworn in for a six-year presidential term. The message ended by saying, “This election is your chance to vote for new ideas instead of old thinking. It’s your chance to vote the MDC and its leader Morgan Tsvangirai.” A related negative advertisement suggested that if elected to the presidency at 78, Mugabe would be incompetent to run the affairs of government. It suggested that other people would be doing the day-to-day business of governing the country. Mugabe’s envisaged ineptitude is implied in the following rhetorical questions and narrative:

IF MUGABE WINS, WHO’LL REALLY BE RUNNING ZIMBABWE?  
EMERSON MUNANGAGWA? CHARLES UTETE? PROFESSOR JONATHAN  
MOYO? GRACE MUGABE?

When you vote for a man of 78 for another term of office, your guess is as good as ours as to who will really be running the show. This election is to vote for a better future. It’s your chance to vote MDC and its leader Morgan Tsvangirai.<sup>26</sup>

By suggesting that someone or other people would “be running the show”, the advertisement attacked Mugabe’s image as a potential candidate for the presidency. According to the above message, he was no longer worth voting for at this advanced age. The independent press peddled rumours about Mugabe’s health, claiming that he was ailing. Consequently the MDC argued that, “what Zimbabwe need[ed] [was] new blood, not spilled blood.”<sup>27</sup> The mention of “spilled blood” brings us to the rhetoric of political violence.

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<sup>25</sup> The Daily News, January 16 2002

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*

<sup>27</sup> The Daily News, February 2 2002

Perhaps the most touching of all MDC's negative advertisements against ZANU-PF was the one in which they published the victims of political violence and alleged that these were MDC supporters that were killed by ZANU-PF supporters. The following message, quoted verbatim summarises the purpose of the advertisement-to appeal to the emotions and feelings (*pathos*) of the voters:

*WE REMEMBER THEM, WE MOURN THEM, WE SALUTE THEM.  
This is the roll of honour of some of the gallant sons and daughters of Zimbabwe who died in political violence. They were killed in cold blood by Zanu PF for daring to stand up for their rights and your rights to be free. This roll does not neglect the women who have been raped, the people who have been beaten up, their homes burnt. Throughout Zimbabwe, the spirit of democratic resistance is rising. We pay tribute to the proud spirit of the Zimbabwean people. They did not die in vain.*<sup>28</sup>

This message appeals to voters' *pathos* in a number of ways. It was intended to portray a bad picture of ZANU-PF. The publication of the one hundred names of people who died in alleged political violence is a solemn matter in itself. One cannot help feeling sympathetic for these victims and their families and relatives. The message used the endearing phrase "gallant sons and daughters". This invoked the feeling of anger and hatred against those responsible for killing these people. The epigram WE REMEMBER THEM, WE MOURN, WE SALUTE THEM told the reader straight away that what was contained in the message was something of a grave nature. The repetition in this saluting message is a rhetorical device that made the idea of the deaths of these victims ring or stick in the mind of the voter. By using the phrase "roll of honour" the reader was given a feeling that these people were killed doing an honourable thing, that of "daring to stand up for their rights and your [voters'] rights to be free." The fact that the message said these heroes also died for the voters' rights draws much more sympathy from the voters because they (the victims) are portrayed as being unselfish – they were martyrs. They were also portrayed as a new breed of heroes who were "killed in cold blood by ZANU-PF" in an independent country fighting for democracy.

The implication of the advertisement was that since these heroes were "killed by ZANU-PF", voters were not supposed to vote for its presidential candidate, Mugabe. In other words, the MDC, by using the deaths of its supporters in the negative advertisement, was saying that the political system was undemocratic and that Mugabe had condoned the mayhem in the country. This was used as a justification for the need for political change and the restoration of the rule of law under the MDC government.

The MDC also attacked ZANU-PF for the high rate of unemployment. The voters were given the impression that it was due to the government's inefficiency that the country was experiencing the worst economic crisis ever, resulting in rampant unemployment. In order to appeal to the voters, some of the advertisements were presented in Shona and Ndebele, the two major indigenous languages in Zimbabwe. In this study the researcher uses some examples from Shona for two reasons. First, Shona is the researcher's mother

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<sup>28</sup> THE CHANGING TIMES Supplement publication, 3-10 March 2002

tongue. Second, most of the examples given here were literally the same in Ndebele. So both the Shona and Ndebele meanings are captured in the English translations given here.

One of the advertisements read: “KUTARISIRA KUZANU-PF UCHIDA BASA KUGARIRA GUYO SEMBWA”<sup>29</sup> (It is pointless to expect ZANU-PF to help with employment). The use of the Shona proverb in which a dog waits in vain for the whole day expecting its master to give it peanut butter is quite telling. By using the proverb, the MDC painted a hopeless picture for the unemployed. Still on the same subject, another advertisement said: “NEZANU-PF NYIKA YAZARA MAROVHA”<sup>30</sup> (ZANU-PF has caused a lot of unemployment). In yet another advertisement the MDC urged people to desert ZANU-PF. It said “TIZA KUZANU-PF UTIZE UROVHA”<sup>31</sup> (If you don’t want unemployment, run away from ZANU-PF). These negative advertisements were meant to entice the young voters who were facing hardships due to unemployment. The advertisements levelled the responsibility for unemployment on the ZANU-PF government and Mugabe. Mugabe was, therefore, presented as being incapable of solving the unemployment problem. The adverts implied that it was only the MDC and its leader Tsvangirai who would end the problem of unemployment if voted into power. In the wake of company closures and the big numbers of unemployed youths, there is no doubt that the rhetoric on unemployment appealed to many urban voters. Coupled with unemployment, was the general suffering that the MDC attributed to the bad governance of ZANU-PF and Mugabe.

The MDC messages such as “NEZANU-PF INGA TAYAURA NHAI AMAI”<sup>32</sup> (ZANU-PF has caused us a lot of suffering) and “ZANU-PF YAKAUNZA NHOKO DZEVIRONDA”<sup>33</sup> (ZANU-PF has impoverished the people), were used to buttress the claim that all the suffering that the voters were experiencing was as a result of the mismanagement of the economy by ZANU-PF. As evidence to the claim that ZANU-PF had brought hardships to the people, the MDC used two examples illustrating how the skyrocketing inflation had negatively affected the voters at the time. In the advertisement, “WHAT ZANU-PF DID TO \$10”, it was shown that in 1985, \$10 bought ten loaves of bread but the same amount bought only ten thin slices of bread in 2002<sup>34</sup>. In the other, it was shown that in 1985 \$100 bought a trolley of groceries but the same amount in 2002 bought a loaf of bread and one litre of fresh milk.<sup>35</sup> To make it worse, people were queuing for these and other basic commodities which were in short supply and very expensive.

The MDC used this depictive rhetoric to try and convince the voters that the ZANU-PF presidential candidate was not worth voting for in the election. This negative rhetoric against ZANU-PF gave the impression that voting for the MDC presidential candidate was the only sensible thing to do in those times of economic hardships. It implied that a

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<sup>29</sup> The Daily News, January 23 2002

<sup>30</sup> The Daily News, February 6 2002

<sup>31</sup> The Daily News, January 23 2002

<sup>32</sup> The Daily News, January 22 2002

<sup>33</sup> The Daily News, February 7 2002

<sup>34</sup> The Daily News, February 13 2002

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*

change of leadership and government was a necessity in order to stop the suffering of people brought about by the ZANU-PF government. The inflation issue and Mugabe's age were compared in a satirically rhetorical way in one of MDC's negative advertisements that said, "THE ONLY THING THAT IS AS HIGH AS ZIMBABWE'S INFLATION IS MUGABE'S AGE".<sup>36</sup> Ironically, this was an insult to all old people who still had the vote. On the other hand, ZANU-PF argued that the suffering was being caused by the economic sanctions that had been imposed on the country by most Western countries which it claimed supported and sponsored the MDC. Also the ZANU-PF government produced some advertisements that implied that white companies that were sympathetic to the MDC were hoarding food-stuffs, thereby creating artificial shortages.<sup>37</sup>

The MDC rhetoric on the land issue denounced the manner in which ZANU-PF handled the land reform programme. Tsvangirai was on record as saying that ZANU-PF was encouraging people to occupy farms haphazardly in order to gain political mileage ahead of the election. According to him, people were just mushrooming in the farms without order. Tsvangirai was quoted criticising Mugabe's land policy saying, "Mugabe wants to turn us all into peasants..."<sup>38</sup> This was another unwitting insult against the peasants many of whom, perhaps, felt offended and withheld their votes. The MDC further attacked ZANU-PF by suggesting that in the redistribution of land, only relatives and friends of ZANU-PF stalwarts were benefiting.<sup>39</sup> This meant that there was no transparency as ZANU-PF cronies benefitted more than the majority deserving cases. The MDC claimed that there was clear evidence that some of the big ZANU-PF *chefs* had more than one farm each. The MDC also argued that the land belonged to the country as a whole and was not a monopoly of ZANU-PF and that if the MDC had not been formed, land would not have been distributed to the people.<sup>40</sup> This argument implied that ZANU-PF had no more political agenda besides the land issue to sell to the electorate.

### Synopsis

The negative advertisements rhetorically analysed in this paper demonstrate that persuasive attack was a strategy that both political parties and their candidates used in the election campaign communication in 2002. Negative candidate theme advertising was used to present the images of the candidates running for the presidency as unfavourable as possible in the minds of the voters. Similarly, negative issue advertisement attacked the candidates as far as the policies of their parties were concerned. The goal of both themes, which are inseparable in most cases, was to influence voters to form negative images of the candidates in each case and vote accordingly.

That this election campaign conveyed a sense of drama (De Wet 1991), with Mugabe and Tsvangirai as the chief actors cannot be doubted. ZANU-PF campaign rhetoric portrayed

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<sup>36</sup> The Daily News, January 16 2002. According to THE CHANGING TIMES (March 2-10 2002) the hyper-inflation was 116%

<sup>37</sup> The Herald, February 1 2002

<sup>38</sup> ZTV February 4 2002, 8p.m. news bulletin

<sup>39</sup> The Daily News, January 30 2002

<sup>40</sup> The Daily News, March 8 2002

Tsvangirai as a traitor and a protégé or stooge of British imperialists. The rhetoric suggested that if Tsvangirai was voted into power, he would give back the land that Mugabe had compulsorily acquired from the white commercial farmers back to them. This would be tantamount to reversing the gains of the liberation struggle since the land issue was one of the major causes of going to war against the British settlers in Zimbabwe. By suggesting that Tsvangirai was a traitor or sell-out, ZANU-PF negative rhetoric presented the MDC leader as being unpatriotic and, therefore, not worth voting for. This ‘unpatriotism’ was supported by the assertion that Tsvangirai had deserted the liberation struggle in the late 1970s (one that Tsvangirai does not deny). We see Tsvangirai’s antecedent *ethos* being used to project him as a coward who could not bear the heat of the war. In contrast, Mugabe was presented as a true African statesman who stood boldly against local and international pressure and forged ahead with his land reform programme that witnessed thousands of black families being settled in the farms that had hitherto belonged to white commercial farmers. The rhetorical effectiveness of the land issue lay in the contrastive interpretations it induced in the minds of the voters. The contrast it suggested was that, while the patriotic Mugabe was taking the land from the white minority and giving it back to the black majority, Tsvangirai, the traitor, was contemplating selling it to the white people. A good example is found in the advertisement “WHAT WOULD YOU VOTE FOR? PLOTS TO KILL OR PLOTS TO TILL? ZANU-PF” even appealed to the voters’ sense of humour in one comic advertisement which showed Tsvangirai as a “tea-boy” serving the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, with tea in the form of the map of Zimbabwe with the word LAND inscribed on it.

The conspiracy story presented Tsvangirai as an evil man, a person who did not want to use constitutional means to get to the presidency. Killing a sitting president was something sinister and treasonous. This saga was used to demoralise the voters and dampen their spirits. This was because if convicted, Tsvangirai faced either a death sentence or a sentence of life imprisonment. In order to induce a highly negative view of Tsvangirai, the voters were given a daily “dosage” of the Tsvangirai conspiracy story from the state controlled electronic and print media. The importance that was attached to this case by the state mass media was overwhelming. According to McCombs and Shaw (1972:177), “the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, the continuous reference to Tsvangirai’s treason case in these media was designed to make the voters believe that Tsvangirai, indeed, had committed this crime and was, therefore, not suitable to vote for. The rhetorical effect of such an interpretation is supported by Schenck-Hamlin et al. (2000:57) who argue that “people apparently do not conduct a systematic and exhaustive search for all informational elements relevant to an issue as it is broached.” In short the voters were to see Tsvangirai as “...a sick man with dangerous political ambitions.”<sup>42</sup> When Ben Menashe arrived in Zimbabwe to give evidence on the alleged plot to assassinate Mugabe, he described Tsvangirai as “a fool,”<sup>43</sup> adding that: “He is not presidential material. It is a disgrace to have such a guy. He is a puppet but not

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<sup>41</sup> See also David Weaver et al., *Media agenda-setting a presidential election*. New York: Praeger. (1981)

<sup>42</sup> The Herald, February 19 2002

<sup>43</sup> The Herald, February 22 2002

a smart one because he did not need to come and plan the coup himself.”<sup>44</sup> On one occasion, Mugabe also negatively described Tsvangirai as “stupid...foolish [and] a goblin of Britain.”<sup>45</sup> We see the state press buttressing the idea that Tsvangirai was a dangerous puppet of the British colonialists whom voters were not supposed to vote for as president. It can be concluded that the media handled the whole conspiracy story in such a way that would short-circuit the reasoning of the voters. This is mainly because the alleged plot to assassinate Mugabe appealed to the emotions of fear (as the grainy audio-visual text made Tsvangirai appear threatening), anger and hatred for Tsvangirai. The negative rhetorical power of ZANU-PF advertisements was that Tsvangirai’s *ethos* was the central focus of their attack without any prevarication.

The MDC’s negative advertisements did not focus on Mugabe’s *ethos* with much strength. Where they mentioned Mugabe, they tended to concentrate on the alleged ineptitude due to his age. They suggested that Mugabe was too old to rule the country and, therefore, should not be voted for. Most advertisements personified ZANU-PF and their persuasive attack was not directed on Mugabe’s *ethos*. We begin to see metaphor playing its part in this kind of rhetorical attack. ZANU-PF is used to stand for Mugabe. In other words the MDC’s negative advertising was indirectly saying Mugabe was responsible for all the problems that were affecting the country. On the land issue, the MDC’s negative advertisements lacked the punch that would convince voters that surely ZANU-PF was doing an evil thing in taking the land from the whites and giving it to the landless black people. This is mainly because at the beginning, the MDC treated Mugabe’s action as an *ad hoc* issue, a gimmick to buy votes from the voters. While this assertion cannot be completely dismissed, the MDC failed to realise that in attacking ZANU-PF’s land reform programme, they were invoking the wrath of the landless people, especially the war veterans and the rural people who saw the benefit of this programme. The MDC also failed to realise that the land issue was a sensitive issue that needed careful handling. In his address to the forty-eighth ordinary session of the ZANU (PF) Central Committee meeting, Mugabe declared that “the land issue remains the central national question claiming our energies and attention in order to secure its genuine and lasting resolution.”<sup>46</sup> Although Tsvangirai said that he did not oppose the land reform programme, but was against “villagizing the whole country...killing the productive commercial sector that is supposed to produce for the country,”<sup>47</sup> this did not appeal to voters as it was treated as being against the land reform programme. It appeared to advocate a return to the situation preceding the land reform and one that invariably favoured white farmers. Additionally, the seriousness and speed with which Mugabe intensified his land rhetoric and implementation weakened the MDC’s negative rhetoric on this issue.

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<sup>44</sup> The Herald, February 23 2002

<sup>45</sup> The Herald, March 2 2002. See also Mary E. Stuckey and Frederick J. Antczak, *The Battle of Issues and Images* (1995). They give a detailed analysis of how George Bush and Bill Clinton attacked each other in the 1992 general election campaign. This is similar to how Mugabe was attacking Tsvangirai’s character in the 2002 election campaign.

<sup>46</sup> Robert Gabriel Mugabe, *Inside The Third Chimurenga*, The Department of Information and Publicity, Office of the President and Cabinet, (2001) p.92.

<sup>47</sup> The Daily News, February 4 2002

The MDC's negative rhetoric on issues like inflation and unemployment was meant to win the hearts of voters as it apportioned the blame for these to the alleged inefficiency and corruption in the ZANU-PF government. Since the prices of basic commodities kept on rising literally on a daily basis, there is no doubt that this cost the ruling party considerable votes. This was in the wake of food shortages in the country, shortages which the MDC attributed to the government's poor planning. With the rate of unemployment soaring to 70% during the campaign period, the MDC's attack on ZANU-PF on this issue was rhetorically powerful as it was designed to appeal to the hundreds of thousands of the unemployed and their dependents, especially the youths and the retrenched workers who found themselves adrift because of company closures due to viability problems.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of some of the negative advertisements that were used in the 2002 presidential election campaign in Zimbabwe confirms what scholars in rhetoric generally agree, that negative rhetoric is a common strategy that is used in election campaign communication. The advertisements focused on both candidate theme and issue/policy theme. It has been demonstrated that in most cases the two themes cannot be treated entirely separately as they are interwoven. The study points out that ZANU-PF's negative rhetoric had more wide audience than the MDC's, mainly because ZANU-PF had the advantage of using radio and television to attack Tsvangirai and the MDC. The MDC leader was not accorded the chance to either enunciate his party's policies or to refute the numerous allegations that were levelled against him using the state broadcaster. Instead, the "public" broadcaster served the interests of ZANU-PF only, thereby puncturing the whole concept of democracy, at least according to the definition used in this study. In the main, the MDC's negative rhetoric created and intensified the anti-government mood that induced political cynicism in the voters. The huge volume of negative advertising that characterized the 2002 presidential campaign indicates that both parties were convinced that negative advertisements would actually influence voters' minds and their choice of candidate. Therefore, it can be concluded that negative advertising was the lifeblood of the 2002 presidential election campaign.

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