

Music, communicating dissent

Adapted from a report by Farai Sevenzo
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Music has always played an important role in the political life of Zimbabwe. The country's freedom fighters drew on the country's cultural traditions and used songs as morale boosters and rallying cries.

Jamaican reggae star, Bob Marley, was actively involved in the struggle for independence and performed at the country's independence celebrations in April 1980.

Music is again playing a prominent role in the current struggle for political power as, more than ever, songs from the country's liberation struggle prior to independence in 1980 are being played in many spots around the country.

"They [musicians] are singing the same kind of stuff now against a black government as they sung against a white one," says Keo Hatugari, a music journalist with the Zimbabwe Daily News.

Songs like Mamvemve by Thomas Mapfumo, which means "this house that you are crying for has been turned into rags", have been banned from broadcast on state media.

"People give me such names as the Lion of Zimbabwe, and some call me Gandanga," says Mapfumo, the country's best known and most politically engaged musician. He was considered an inspiration to the cause of liberation during the days of struggle.

The Rhodesian authorities had called the rebel movements, maGandanga, meaning "monsters". But at the time the people of Zimbabwe embraced the word to mean what they thought it meant—freedom fighters.

The conditions that prompted people to write songs during the time of the independence war, according to Leo Hatugari, are almost identical to the conditions that people are finding themselves in now. "Some people think they have to be liberated again."

In contemporary Zimbabwe the mood at concerts is one of defiance and bonding. Oliver Mtukudzi's Friday shows have begun to attract "Tuku Groupies", who wave candles to the music and raise their open palms, a symbol of the opposition.

Fans connect every song played to the country's current plight. "His 1979 track 'Zimbabwe' was immensely popular as a rallying cry. His style of protest song caught on with the African majority," said Oliver Mtukudzi.

While Mtukudzi and Mapfumo are considered veterans of the protest song, other groups are now lending their talents to the cause.

Andy Brown and his group "The Storm" produced a song, Nation of Thieves, that has been banned on state media.

"We are now a nation of thieves," says Brown. "They have been stealing all the money, so as a result the whole infrastructure is beginning to fall apart."

For Leo Hatugari, "there is no way musicians can be shut up. The Smith regime was trying the same things. They were banning songs."

In more urgent terms, Andy Brown explains the role of the musicians: "People are just impatient. They want change and the musicians are putting that through very eloquently-more eloquently than the opposition."

Recent reports from Zimbabwe say, however, that Mapfumo has left the country due to what he describes as "persecution from the government." The Zimbabwe Standard reported last September that Mapfumo had left for the United States with his family.

The popular musician's Chimurenga Explosion album, released a few months before the June parliamentary elections, had some songs, Mamvemve and Disaster, temporarily banned from airplay.

The release of this album was followed by his explosive interview with the British newspaper, The

Sunday Telegraph. Shortly after, three of his cars were impounded on the charge that the musician had bought stolen vehicles.

There is suspicion that this action from the police was politically motivated because politicians had been incensed by the lyrics of his album and his outburst in the Sunday Telegraph, which came at the time the elections were about to be held.

Zimbabwe held its fourth general election in twenty years under the leadership of President Robert Mugabe last June. The event was preceded by unprecedented violence over land issues and between political parties.

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