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Twitter and political discourses: how supporters of Zimbabwe's ruling ZANU PF party use Twitter for political engagement

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ABSTRACT

Social networks such as Twitter are transforming political engagements in contemporary societies. Dominant literature places emphasis on the counter-hegemonic opportunities offered by social media in the Zimbabwean political landscape. However, there is a need to draw scholarly attention to how supporters of the ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU PF), are appropriating and using Twitter for political engagements. Drawing upon the case of *Varakashi* (ZANU PF's social media trolls and supporters), this paper examines how supporters of the ruling party in the post-Robert Mugabe era are increasingly occupying online spaces that were traditionally associated with opposition voices. President Emmerson Mnangagwa's regime has been grappling with legitimacy issues in the wake of the November 2017 coup that toppled Mugabe, the contested July 2018 election, and the shooting of civilians in August 2018. Focusing on four Twitter handles of *Varakashi*, this article employs rhetorical argumentation to analyse how these Twitter propagandists are defending and promoting the interests of the Mnangagwa regime. Findings demonstrate that the *Varakashi* are sanitising and justifying the November 2017 coup, campaigning for Mnangagwa in the July 2018 election, and in justifying the killing of civilians in August 2018.

At the turn of the millennium, global events began to demonstrate that the 'unique communication affordances of social media' could support and empower marginalised communities.[1] The advent of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) was seen as 'heralding a new era for African democracy'.[2] In Zimbabwe, the rise of social media has transformed the processes of democratic engagement.[3] Against the backdrop of a repressive political environment that curtails freedom of speech and constrains civic engagement in Zimbabwe,[4] social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are increasingly expanding the spaces for civic engagement. Thus, the adoption and use of social media has enabled online users to freely express themselves and counter state-

propagated discourses.[5] There are studies on new media as counter-hegemonic spaces in Zimbabwe,[6] but the role of social media in sustaining the ideologies of the power bloc has received considerably less scholarly attention. Focusing on the four selected Twitter handles, this article analyses how a group of ZANU PF's online supporters known as *Varakashi* have used Twitter as part of an online propaganda for the ruling party.

Context of the study

The online spaces in Zimbabwe have historically been dominated by pro-opposition voices. While addressing the ZANU PF youth league in the run-up to the July 2018 elections, President Emmerson Mnangagwa urged the party's youth to use social media to protect and advance the party's values. In his call, Mnangagwa implored the ZANU PF youth to spearhead social media campaigns in order to counter their rivals: *Tambai navo mu social media iyoyo, musakundwa mu social media. Pindai morakasha vanhu mu social media* [play with them on social media, do not be defeated on social media. Get on social media and defeat them].[7] The presence of the *Varakashi* in online spaces predated Mnangagwa's administration. As such, the individuals we have identified as *Varakashi* were active on Twitter prior to March 2018 when Mnangagwa made a call to the ZANU PF youth to be vigilant and defend the ruling party against the oppositional forces. Instead, after March 2018, the online activities of the *Varakashi* became more conspicuous, pronounced and robust.[8] As a result, "ghost accounts" and "anonymous characters" emerged propagating ZANU PF's ideologies.[9] *Varakashi* is a Shona term meaning 'destroyers' or 'thrashing'. *Varakashi* – used as a noun here – is plural for *murakashi.*, literally 'the beater' or 'one who thrashes others'. In the context of the Twitter battles pitting pro-ZANU against pro-MDC-A netizens, *murakashi/varakashi* means ZANU-PF Twitter supporters. The verb from which the noun is derived is *Kurakasha*, meaning 'to trounce or beat up'.[10] Given the fluid and ambiguous nature of the concept of *Varakashi*, it is pertinent to explain how a *Murakashi* is understood in this article.

First, the *Varakashi* denotes the pro-ZANU PF trolling behaviour. These 'destroyers' and cyber-bullies use social media to promote the ideology of the party by launching attacks on perceived rivals such as pro-opposition users.[11] Political trolling, 'troll army' and 'web brigades' are labels used to describe 'state-sponsored anonymous internet political commentators' who post 'inflammatory comments'.[12] In this vein, Moyo views the *Varakashi* as ZANU PF's 'online warriors' that serve to 'manufacture and disseminate party propaganda on Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp.'[13] These 'online warriors' or 'destroyers' are usually pitted against the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) Alliance's *Nerrorists* in the 'unprecedented online propaganda war to discredit each other'.[14] The *Nerrorists* are named after MDC Alliance President Nelson Chamisa's nickname, Nero.

Second, there is a broader understanding of *Varakashi* as ZANU PF supporters who employ social media such as Twitter to promote the interests of the ruling party. Within this understanding, the *Varakashi* are not necessarily political trolls but ZANU PF supporters who use social media to advance the ideology of the ruling party. This article subscribes to this latter understanding as not all *Varakashi* are political trolls or cyber-

bullies. Some ZANU PF supporters employ social media to advance the ideology of the party without exhibiting trolling tendencies.

In this qualitative research, we are mindful of Atton and Mabweazara's argument that there are 'utopian predictions' associated with new media in Africa.[15] The utopian assumption is that new media 'per se will bring about social change and deepen democratic participation.'[16] Given that researchers are critical of the utopian rhetoric about digital technologies and democracy in Africa,[17] this article is embedded within a particular socio-political environment whereby Zimbabwe's ruling elite are employing social media to defend the status quo. President Robert Mugabe was overthrown through a 'military coup' or 'intervention' in November 2017 after 37 years in power.[18] The military takeover was a culmination of the internal succession battles within ZANU PF.[19] The presidential succession struggles pitted the *Lacoste* faction reportedly supported by the then Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa against the *G40* faction supported by Mugabe's wife, Grace Mugabe.[20] Grace Mugabe's use of the ZANU PF Youth Interface rallies in early 2017 to 'relentlessly denounce Mnangagwa and his allies'[21] was one of the significant moments leading to the coup. Mnangagwa's claim that he had been poisoned at a ZANU PF rally further 'widened the rift' between the two factions.[22] On 6 November 2017, Mugabe sacked Mnangagwa as Vice President, allegedly paving way for Grace Mugabe to succeed him. Few days later, Mnangagwa fled the country, allegedly fearing for his life. A week later, on 13 November 2017, the then Commander of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces, General Constantino Chiwenga, held a press conference warning Mugabe that the military would 'step in' if the purging within the party did not cease.[23] The following day, military tanks headed to the capital, Harare before the army released a statement on 15 November indicating that Mugabe and his family were 'safe' and that they were only 'targeting criminals' around him.[24] Protests followed throughout the country demanding Mugabe's resignation. Mugabe resigned on 21 November through a letter read in Parliament.

Mnangagwa was inaugurated as the President of Zimbabwe on 24 November 2017. The first national elections in the post-Mugabe era were held on 30 July 2018. These disputed elections pitted President Mnangagwa against a host of challengers including MDC Alliance's Nelson Chamisa. On 1 August 2018, the army shot six civilians in Harare during a protest in relation to the delay in the announcement of the presidential elections results. Chamisa contested Mnangagwa's election victory and filed a presidential legal challenge to the Constitutional Court of Zimbabwe which was dismissed on the 24 August 2018, resulting in Mnangagwa being declared the winner of the Presidential election. Given these political events such as the 2017 coup, the 2018 disputed elections, the 1 August shootings, and deepening economic problems, Mnangagwa's administration has been grappling with a crisis of legitimacy.[25] It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the discourses propagated by the *Varakashi* on Twitter in light of the legitimacy crisis challenging Mnangagwa and ZANU PF.[26]

Social media and democratic engagements in Zimbabwe

The Zimbabwean crisis, which became more pronounced in the early 2000s, spawned the growth of different forms of journalism – patriotic and oppositional.[27] In such a polarised society, a clampdown on oppositional voices including the media and civil society

became a common feature as the state 'turned against its citizens'.[28] In such a repressive situation, social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and blogs are enabling oppositional forces, civic groups and ordinary people to deliberate on issues that are tabooed in official public spaces.[29] While the Internet tends to be viewed as an emancipatory platform for marginalised communities, a new trend is emerging as government officials and their supporters are embarking on a crusade to dominate the information flow on social media by waging cyber-wars against oppositional forces. This paper investigates the new wave of politics of news dissemination on the internet as the ruling elites and their supporters have appropriated Twitter to entrench their ideologies.

A number of studies have emerged in Zimbabwe that examine the use of social media in representing the country's political situation.[30] Social media play a huge role in widening the democratic space.[31] During the country's 2008 election, citizen journalism became the 'parallel market of information',[32] and social media was used by citizens in 'blogging down the dictator'.[33] In addition, Zimbabwean political parties and candidates appropriated Facebook for campaigning during the 2013 elections. However, there are few studies that specifically explore the role of Twitter in the Zimbabwean context. Given that in Zimbabwe the trend is for researchers to focus on social media as counter-hegemonic spaces and use of mainstream media and music by the ruling elite to support the status quo,[34] this article focuses on Twitter as an arena for sustaining the ruling party's hegemonic political discourses. Karekwaivanane and Mare's study on #ThisFlag protest movement and 'insurgent citizenship' explores the role of social media in promoting political expression, engagement and coordination.[35] Drawing upon #ThisFlag and #ThisGown protest movements, Gukurume argues that social media created a 'virtual community of dissent that actively fostered counter-hegemonic discourses' against Mugabe's authoritarian regime.[36] However, Chitanana and Mutsvairo contend that while social media platforms such as Twitter have enabled citizens to deliberate on a range of issues in Zimbabwe, they are 'yet to create strong enough counterhegemonic force to effectively challenge entrenched and competing authoritarian regimes'.[37]

Social media has played a huge role in challenging authoritarian regimes in Africa. However, Rheingold is critical of the cultures that are emerging on cyberspace as the virtual space is dominated by "flamers, bullies, bigots (and) charlatans."[38] Although there is limited work on the use of Twitter by pro-ZANU actors, there is extensive work on the use of other forms of media such as television, newspapers and radio.[39] This study develops this under researched thought by examining how Twitter is used by members of the ruling party to maintain ZANU PF's hegemony. However, we are also aware of the recent or growing body of work on state driven disinformation in Africa and beyond.[40] Ogola notes that African governments have always relied on state-controlled media to 'invent' the truth.[41] During the 2018 national election in Zimbabwe, the ruling party and the opposition MDC Alliance deployed fake news and cyber-propaganda for political engagements.[42] In the colonial era, fake news was deployed by the state as propaganda.[43] In post-colonial Zimbabwe, the government has been using the state-controlled media to promote its propaganda.[44] In this regard, Mare, Mabweazara and Moyo argue that in Sub-Saharan Africa, the state remains the 'main producer of fake news'.[45] Fake news has been politicized and weaponized by authoritarian governments to clampdown upon dissenting voices. Mare posits that the Zimbabwean

government ordered Internet shutdowns between 2016 and 2019.[46] The state-ordered Internet shutdown constitutes a form of 'digital authoritarianism'.[47]

Foucault's discursive approach

This article draws upon Foucault's discourse theory to examine how language use on Twitter serves to sustain inequalities in society. Discourse is understood as 'language in use', that is, language serves to 'mean something' and 'do something'.[48] Hall defines discourse as a 'group of statements' that produce our objects of knowledge by providing a 'language for talking about a particular topic at a particular historical moment'.[49] In the Foucauldian sense, our conception of the world is produced through discourses.[50] In other words, knowledge is produced through discourses as truth is socially constructed.[51] In this context, the discourses include the 2017 coup and the 2018 elections. In other words, this research explores the discourses that are produced and reproduced by the *Varakashi* on Twitter in order to reinforce and perpetuate the ideologies of the ruling party. The objects of knowledge, or what Hall terms the 'regime of truth',[52] are intertwined with power relations as they serve to reproduce and sustain inequalities, asymmetrical power relations and power abuse.[53] Further, discourses prohibit certain ways of talking about a topic as there are 'procedures of exclusion' that regulate talk and conduct.[54] Subjects are also produced or constituted within discourses,[55] and in this context, the subject may be the 'patriot', 'nationalist' and 'traitor'. It is important to examine how netizens are positioned or interpellated as subjects in the Twitter struggles involving the *Varakashi*. Given that knowledge claims are contested, Foucault regards discourses as diverse and having a 'multiplicity of points of resistance'.[56] Thus, this conceptualisation enables researchers to examine the contestations of the regimes of truth as different social actors attempt to endorse their understanding of the social world.

Methodology

This paper preferred a qualitative approach as it enables researchers to describe content, structure, and functions of the messages contained in a text.[57] Since qualitative inquiry typically focuses on relatively small samples, even single cases, in this research we used purposive sampling for data selection. Purposive sampling was also aided by virtual participant observation where we observed the online activities of ZANU PF supporters. This approach was important because it enabled us to select information rich cases.[58] Firstly, we observed tweets of ZANU PF supporters who were named 'chief' *Varakashi* on Twitter circles, that is, users who were active and consistent in advancing ZANU PF ideology throughout the study period. These are also the users who declared and endorsed themselves as *Varakashi*. In determining their consistency, we looked at the number of tweets they posted per day during the selected periods and these amounted to a minimum of 40 posts including replies. However, in the analysis section, we did not consider replies because we wanted to focus on the original discourses they constructed through their tweets. As such, four users were purposively sampled, namely; Nick Mangwana (@nickmangwana), Jones Musara (@JonesMusara), Kudzai Mutisi (@KMutisi) and Nicole Hondo (@nicolehondo). While this study admits that there are many other *Varakashi* such as the prominent Matigary (before his account was

suspended), through our prolonged sampling, researchers reached data saturation and also discovered that most of the tweets by the other unselected *Varakashi* were similar and buttressing the views of the four selected users. The selected users are consistent in promoting the ideologies of the ruling party, and are also considered on Twitter to be the chief *Varakashi*. Therefore, in this study, we call the selected users Chief *Vakarashi* for two reasons. First, users would call themselves Chief *Varakashi* to signify their supremacy or role in protecting the party ideology online. Second, other Twitter users would call them Chief *Varakashi* because they stood out as the most vocal users.

However, the actual number of *Varakashi* remains unknown. The *Varakashi* consists of "ghost" characters as well as prominent figures such as the Mangwana, who is the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Information, Publicity and Broadcasting Services. Hence, the identity of Jones Musara, Kudzai Mutisi and Nicole Hondo is unknown. However, unverified information claims that Nicole Hondo is a pseudo name which is being used by Nick Mangwana. As a brief background, Nick Mangwana joined Twitter in July 2009, and has more than 428,000 followers and more than 52,000 tweets as of 4 May 2022. He was appointed as the permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Information, Publicity and Broadcasting Services in 2018. On Twitter circles he was regarded as 'Chief *Murakashi*,'[59] connoting the role of leader of *Varakashi*. Another *Murakashi,* Kudzai Mutisi joined Twitter in March 2014, and has been active since then declaring that he is a 'proud *Murakashi*'. As of 4 May 2022, Mutisi had more than 43,000 followers and more than 129,000 tweets. Nicole Hondo joined Twitter in March 2017, and had over 16,000 followers and more than 30,000 tweets as of 5 May 2022. Lastly, Jones Musara joined Twitter in March 2015, has so far accrued 31,000 followers and more than 76,000 tweets. He is a leader of 'ZANU PF patriots', a group of party supporters that are championing ZANU PF ideology and calling for 'patriotism' in the country.

The next step involved the selection of tweets for analysis. The scope of the study is November 2017 to September 2018 as this period covers our four thematic issues. The main events that occurred during the selected period are; the coup that toppled the late President Mugabe in November 2017, the July 2018 general elections, the August 2018 shootings and the Constitutional Court ruling on the 2018 presidential election results. Subsequently, our purposive selection focused on the tweets from the above mentioned *Varakashi* relating to these four events. The main data gathering method used was archival research through advanced Twitter search. The *Varakashi* Twitter accounts do not have private settings, and hence the tweets are publicly available. As such, we purposively selected eight tweets each by the four users posted during the four selected events of the study period. In this instance we chose tweets that generated lot of debate on Twitter, that is, those that stimulated debate around these four mentioned periods. Although purposive sampling is arguably prone to researcher bias, we mitigated against this weakness through prolonged sampling. Researchers spent more than three months reading and rereading the tweets. Researchers also had peer debriefing sessions before agreeing on the final sample. These tweets were subjected to analysis using Aristotle's rhetorical argumentation.[60] Argumentation is used to advance a mental, social or political point of view, defend one's own point of view or attack that of someone else.[61] Aristotle's rhetorical argumentation is compatible with Foucault's discourse theory. First,

Aristotle's rhetoric involves participants using language to advance and defend their standpoints.[62]

Aristotle's rhetoric is divided into three categories: forensic or legal rhetoric; epideictic or ceremonial rhetoric; and deliberative or political rhetoric.[63] Forensic rhetoric (concerned with the past) covers arguments that either defend or condemn someone's past actions.[64] Epideictic rhetoric (concerned with the present) aims at proving that something or someone is worthy of admiration or disapproval.[65] Lastly, deliberative rhetoric (concerned with the future) is used to urge the audience to do or dissuade them from doing something based on the 'expediency or the harmfulness of a proposed course of action'.[66] Aristotle's typology is employed to analyse the selected tweets by focusing on how arguments are advanced and defended by users.

Data analysis and discussion

This section provides an analysis of data, showing how ZANU PF supporters are appropriating and using Twitter to maintain the party's hegemony. In examining the discourses that are propagated by *Varakashi*, data for analysis is categorised along four key thematic trends:

- The sanitisation of the November 2017 coup
- The 30 July elections
- The discursive constructions of the 1 August shootings
- The Constitutional Court (#ConCourt) ruling and its aftermath

The above-mentioned thematic issues were significant political moments in the post-Mugabe era, and were represented on Twitter by *Varakashi*.

The sanitisation of the November 2017 coup

This section focuses on @nickmangwana and @JonesMusara as these two were very active and consistently tweeted during the 'coup' period. No tweets were identified on @KMutisi's Twitter handle. @nicolehondo had two tweets on 28 November after the resignation of Mugabe. Our scope of analysis is 10 November to 30 November 2017.

The army justified its 'intervention' by claiming that it was targeting 'criminals' surrounding Mugabe. The so-called 'criminals' included Grace Mugabe, Jonathan Moyo, Saviour Kasukuwere and Patrick Zhuwao who allegedly belonged to the *G40* faction within the ruling party. @nickmangwana and @JonesMusara were active on Twitter as they sought to persuade the audiences to adopt a particular standpoint pertaining to the 'coup'. In this regard, the *Varakashi* rhetors (arguers) sought: to rationalise and legitimate the coup; to vilify, denigrate and other the *G40* members as enemies of the state; and to celebrate Mnangagwa as a progressive leader destined to restore the country's fortunes.

The coup is sanitised by the *Varakashi* through the politics of naming. Naming is a form of 'identity-making speech act' that serves to 'produce certain viewpoints and thoughts'.[67] @nickmangwana argues that: 'it's not a coup, it's a realignment'.[68] The term 'realignment' is a euphemism meant to conceal and mystify a coup that was

carried out by the military force. @nickmangwana's viewpoint is in tandem with the official narrative on the coup that was propagated through the state media.[69] @nickmangwana adds that, 'it might look like a coup, but it's not a coup. We don't do coups in Zimbabwe, we do interventions'.[70] Within this politics of naming, the term 'interventions' is used to conceal and sanitise the coup. The politics of naming has been central in ZANU PF factional struggles as nicknames and titles such as *Weevils* and *Gamatox* have been used to label and denigrate the 'other'.[71]

Further, the so-called *G40* members are vilified as the *other*. @JonesMusara labels the so-called *G40* members as a 'cabal of dictators', 'Jezebel' and 'poisonous'.[72] A rhetorical analysis of the above tweet demonstrates that an epideictic rhetoric is used to censure and dishonour Mugabe, Grace Mugabe and the G40 members. In invoking 'Jezebel' as a biblical allusion, the rhetor denounces and maligns Grace Mugabe. Zimbabwe's political landscape is characterised by 'verbal violence and harassment against female politicians' on Twitter.[73] Predicational strategies such as 'poisonous' and 'dictators' also serve as part of an epideictic argument that seeks to vilify and *other* the G40 members as enemies of the state. These cyber-debates confirm Mungwari's arguments on the factional politics in the ruling party.[74]

The *Varakashi* further used logos in ways that seek to justify the 'coup' by invoking the constitution. Given that the constitution tends to be viewed as a sacrosanct document, the arguer justifies the coup by persuading the audiences that this military action was not an abrogation of the supreme law. According to the *Varakashi*: 'the army is empowered by the constitution to intervene when politics become a state security threat' (@JonesMusara).[75] The rhetor adds that:

> The Constitution in Section 212 empowers the Army as the supreme protector of Zimbabwe, its people, national security, national interests, sovereignty, territorial integrity and upholding the Constitution. This includes protecting Zimbabwe from you G40 counter-revolutionaries![76]

The theme of 'state security threat' is mobilised to justify the military 'coup' as the rhetor argues that the 'instability' caused by the *G40* 'counter-revolutionaries' warranted the 'army intervention'. The criminonyms used by the *Varakashi* reinforce Ranger's rendition of 'patriotic history' as in the context of the November 2017 coup, the *G40* are labelled as enemies of the state.[77] Ranger posits that ZANU PF's 'patriotic history' demarcates between 'patriots' (ruling party) and 'sell-outs' (opposition parties). In the context of the 2017 'coup', the so-called members of *G40* are maligned as 'sell-outs' and 'traitors'. Given that discourses are socio-historically contingent, in the 2017 coup era, the G40, rather than the MDC, were denigrated as enemies, traitors and counter-revolutionaries. Through the theme of 'state security threat', the coup is legitimised, rationalised and endorsed. Given that within the regional and global communities, a military coup is viewed as an act of treason, the arguer seeks to persuade the readers that what transpired in November 2017 was constitutional and served the national interest as the army was defending Zimbabweans from 'G40 counter-revolutionaries'. The army is, thus, glorified as the 'supreme protector of Zimbabwe', which implies that the coup was meant to protect the people of Zimbabwe.

Further, the rhetors argued that the army had the support of the 'people'. @JonesMusara argues that the 'majority' of 'Zimbabweans' are 'supporting' the army because they

want 'change'.[78] Through strategies of 'universalization', the interests of 'some individuals are represented as serving the interests of all.'[79] Referential strategies such as 'Zimbabweans' are meant to reinforce and cement sentiments of unity and collective will regarding the 'coup'. Although the 'coup' was a culmination of ZANU PF internal struggles, the rhetor projects this military action as a social movement expressing the will of the ordinary Zimbabweans. @nickmangwana projects a symbol of unity by declaring that 'Zimbabweans their Warvets and their Defence Forces in one accord'.[80] Further, @JonesMusara argues that the military intervention was meant to prevent the establishment of a 'dynasty', as Grace Mugabe wanted to take over the reins of power. Thus, the 'coup' is celebrated as the 'crumbling of Mugabe's dynasty project'.[81] Given that Zimbabwe is a republic, the rhetor uses pathos to move the audiences to a state of fear concerning the establishment of a 'dynasty' in ways that rationalise the coup. @JonesMusara asserts that the 'majority of Zimbabweans are supporting the Army against the G40 dynasty' which meant that 'the Army is on the right side of history. Pamberi [Forward] nemawuto [with the army] eZimbabwe!'.[82]

@JonesMusara endorses the coup by asserting that Jacob Zuma (the then President of South Africa) had 'praised' Mnangagwa and the army for 'conducting a bloodless constitutional military operation' which 'ushered in visible stability' in Zimbabwe.[83] Drawing on ethos, the rhetor legitimates the coup by drawing on the views of Zuma, who was then the chairperson of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The coup is sanitised as it is depicted as 'bloodless' and 'constitutional'. Further, the *Varakashi* argue that the army 'intervened' to deal with political impunity and instability challenging the country. Thus, the military action is depicted as a selfless act that expresses the will of Zimbabweans. @JonesMusara celebrated the coup:

> A good precedent has now been set that when political impunity and instability becomes rampant, Masoja (soldiers) step in. It discourages political impunity, instability and incompetence. Thank you Masoja eZimbabwe![84]

Euphemisms such as 'step in' are meant to justify and conceal the military coup as the soldiers are depicted as heroes/heroines who intervened to end 'political impunity, instability and incompetence'. In addition, the interlocutors celebrate the coup as a creation of a 'new dispensation'. @nickmangwana notes that 'Speaker has just read out the resignation letter. He is gone. New Dispensation'.[85] Through the politics of naming, the coup is sanitised and legitimated as a creation of a 'new dispensation'. Given that Mnangagwa was struggling with a legitimacy crisis as he had seized power through a coup, the *Varakashi* sought to endorse and justify his reign. After rationalising and justifying the coup, the *Varakashi* campaigned for Mnangagwa and ZANU PF in the run-up to the 30 July 2018 harmonised elections.

30 July elections: Zimbabwe's decisive moment

Discourses emanating from the party's 'keyboard warriors' depicted the July 30 elections as a watershed moment requiring the electorate to choose between forces of good and evil. Within this binary depiction, Mnangagwa is celebrated as symbolising life and prosperity, whilst the MDC Alliance's Chamisa is maligned as evil, immature and power hungry. Given that discourses denote language use – meaning it's active and meaningful,

the tweets by *Varakashi* seek to defend Mnangagwa and ZANU PF, and at the same time attacking their opponents.[86] The keyboard warriors mainly used binary opposites to hype and praise Mnangagwa, while criticising and ridiculing Chamisa. In one of the tweets, @nicolehondo argues that 'ED preaches peace while the excitable Chamisa calls for demos'.[87] Thus, through this binary construction, Mnangagwa is associated with 'peace' while Chamisa is disparaged for as fermenting demonstrations and anarchy. What is obscured by the interlocutor is that demonstrations are part of the citizens' right to exercise their freedom of assembly and of expression. In addition, @nicolehondo quotes Mnangagwa who at a rally said: 'as we campaign, I urge us all to preach and live in unity, peace and love'.[88] As such, Mnangagwa is represented as a peace-loving leader who advocates unity and would want to create a space for people from different political and social background to co-exist unlike his rival, Chamisa, who is painted as violent and uncouth. The topos of MDC's violence is buttressed by @KMutisi: 'MDC doesn't deserve to rule Zim … Let alone to exist as a Political Party … We deserve better … I will repeat … The MDC is a Cult … Full of Violence'.[89] To augment their arguments, the *Varakashi* brigade used Chamisa's past to soil his image. Forensic arguments are employed to persuade people not to vote for Chamisa who is represented as violent and undemocratic. Chamisa is accused of having violently seized power after the death of party leader Morgan Tsvangirai, and has since then 'bred a culture of violence and sexism' (@nicolehondo).[90] Chamisa is further accused of deploying a militant group known as the Vanguard to unleash violence on some party members that do not toe the line. In propagating a narrative that Chamisa 'terrorises, abuse and torments'[91] his imagined or perceived enemies in the party, the *Varakashi* depicts the MDC Alliance leader as a despot who should not be allowed to govern the country. This 'truth' about Chamisa's rise into the MDC power was appropriated, mobilised and sustained to discourage the electorate from voting for him.

It is important to identify what is foregrounded (remembered) and also backgrounded (forgotten) in these cyber-wars.[92] Mnangagwa's sordid past such as his role in the Gukurahundi genocide and also gaining power through the November 2017 coup are exclusive in the *Varakashi* narrative. However, Mnangagwa's loyalists are using epideictic/ceremonial rhetoric to focus on his 'present actions' and call for his 'admiration' while when describing Chamisa they use the forensic/ legal rhetoric which mainly 'condemns his past.'[93] Chamisa is being referred to as 'Laison' for some of his political statements which were proved not to be true. @nicolehondo reproduced a thread of Chamisa's interview with BBC's Hard Talk anchor, Stephen Sackur, where Chamisa's claim that he met with United States of America President Donald Trump who pledged to give him $15 billion of aid was proved to be false.[94] Chamisa is also depicted as a liar after Rwandan President Paul Kagame disputed his claim on Twitter that he spearheaded the development of information communication technologies in Rwanda. Resultantly, @nickmangwana contends that 'Chamisa is a liar whose account of events or narration of a deed is not only embellished but many a time completely fabricated'[95] while @KMutisi further argues that people 'don't need a habitual liar as president'.[96] The aforementioned cases show that both logos – which is concerned with the use of evidence and reasoning – and the forensic arguments which mainly focuses on someone's past are employed by *Varakashi* as rhetorical strategies to influence and convince the electorate that Chamisa cannot be trusted with their votes.

Given that identities are multiple, positional, constantly shifting and contested,[97] ZANU PF appropriated and reconstructed Robert Mugabe's identity in discursive ways that served their political agenda. The fall of Mugabe from power in November 2017 attracted wild cheers and celebrations across all political divides. Hence, heading to elections, Mugabe symbolised the past which had to be forgotten. In the run-up to the 2018 elections, ZANU PF represented Chamisa as Mugabe's proxy. By deploying argumentation, *Varakashi* argued that Chamisa was working with the Mugabe family and labelled MDC as 'RGM's PETTY PROJECT' (@nickmangwana).[98] The argument pertaining to the Mugabe-Chamisa 'alliance' is captured in tweets such as:

> as elections draw near, it's becoming increasingly clear that Chamisa has always been doing Mugabe's bidding all along. From paternal relationships 2 business relationships, you cannot separate the two, add Dr Amai [Grace Mugabe] into the mix: a vote for Chamisa is a vote for Grace! vote wisely (@nicolehondo).[99]

> 'Marondera has loudly proclaimed: No to the MDC Alliance of Chamisa & Grace Mugabe … ' (@KMutisi).[100]

> ZEC has dismissed the ghostly lies by NewsDay & the losing Chamisa & Grace Mugabe Alliance lying about ghost voters (@JonesMusara).[101]

Given that Chamisa is represented as Mugabe's proxy, voting for Chamisa was seen as sustaining and perpetuating what some scholars term 'Mugabeism'.[102] *Varakashi* were producing more knowledge for people to reject the candidature of Nelson Chamisa. They used pathotic argument with the aim of appealing to the audiences' emotions. Through the use of a pathotic argument, the arguer's aim is to 'move the audience from one emotional state to another' where they move audience to 'anger, fear, pity'. In this case, the aim was to instil anger and disgust in people towards Chamisa whom they projected as working hand in glove with the hated Mugabe. Therefore, the *Varakashi* used deliberative rhetoric which focuses on the future 'when deliberating on the desirability or otherwise of a decision.'[103] In this case, people are made to dread for their future as voting for Chamisa represented a gloomy outlook and a continuity of Mugabe dictatorship tendencies while Mnangagwa was painted as symbolising a bright future that all Zimbabweans wanted.

@JonesMusara frames Chamisa as 'immature' while Mnangagwa is touted as 'experienced, sober' and was working hard by 'putting Economics before Politics'.[104] @nicolehondo echoes a similar narrative by drawing upon a statement by the World Farmers Organisation that stated that Mnangagwa 'has always had a good understanding of agriculture and the economy'.[105] Accordingly, such is 'one of the reasons why millions will put their trust in him come 30 July, as vote for Mnangagwa was a vote for "economic prosperity"'.[106]

In order to persuade people that Mnangagwa was the best person and that ZANU PF was truly reforming, the *Varakashi* appropriated the statements of high profiled figures such as Kofi Annan to advance their arguments. The late Kofi Annan, the former Secretary General of United Nations, was regarded as a man of integrity, high moral standing and well respected. Through the use of ethotic argument, the way that arguers convince their audience rests on the character of the social actors. In this case, @nicolehondo invokes Annan's sentiments that 'parties shouldn't make unreasonable demands

and everyone should seek recourse at the courts' to reinforce ZANU PF's ideology of using the courts to settle their electoral grievances instead of resorting to violence.[107]

The discursive constructions of the August 1 shootings

An analysis of tweets from *Varakashi* provides a sense of the discursive constructions on the 1 August 2018 army shootings. Willig argues that constructions 'make available certain ways-of-seeing the world and certain ways-of-being in the world.'[108] *Varakashi* deployed forensic rhetoric in advancing their blame-shifting and blame-deflection strategies. Although the *Varakashi* casually acknowledged the death of six civilians at the hands of the military, they were quick to place the blame on the MDC Alliance leadership. For instance, @JonesMusara posted: 'It's very unfortunate that some lives were lost today simply because the defeated MDC Alliance is using some citizens as sacrificial lambs'.[109] @nickmangwana shared a similar view: 'I am sorry for the spilt blood in Harare. It's unfortunate that some of our politicians have chosen to import Odinga Book of anarchy into our polity'.[110] Likewise, @nicolehondo said; 'The sad developments that unfolded today were a result of a violent plot hatched by Chamisa a long time ago'.[111] Similarly, @KMutisi tweeted: 'News that 3 people died because of @nelsonchamisa, a 40 year old boy who led his party to a resounding loss, does not accept realty? Zimbabweans you are better than this … Sad!'[112]

A reading of the above tweets shows that all the four individuals ignored the military actions but focused on the MDC alliance and Chamisa's alleged role. ZANU PF's *Varakashi* discursively constructed the 1 August shootings as 'politically incited' and an 'opposition creation'. For @nicolehondo, 'it was a plot hatched by Chamisa a long time ago'.[113] It can be argued that *Varakashi* sought to absolve the military in the killing of six protesting civilians. Thus, the *Varakashi* in their construction of 1 August shootings, tended to sideline the fact that six civilians were killed by the security forces but flagged and foregrounded the assumed role played by MDC Alliance leadership of sacrificing citizens for their selfish gains. The *Varakashi* employed blame-shifting and blame-deflection as the blame for the civilians killed by the army is placed on MDC Alliance top leadership. Thus, *Varakashi* constructed and used Twitter to privilege their 'dominant discourses' over other 'versions of social reality' in a way legitimising 'existing power relations and social structures.'[114]

On this account, *Varakashi* foregrounded the discourse of 'lawful military intervention'. This was mainly achieved through a forensic rhetoric. @JonesMusara blatantly sanitises the military action of killing six civilians as 'lawful and necessary':

> As the MDC Alliance hooligans engaged in violence, vandalism and anarchy they bragged that they have armed people ready to start armed war. That armed war threat on top of violence, vandalism and anarchy to destabilize the state made Military intervention lawful & necessary![115]

> Section 212 of the Zimbabwe Constitution empowers and obliges the Army to protect Zimbabwe. In this case to protect Zimbabwe from the State Security Threat of violence, anarchy and destabilization by the defeated Chamisa & Mugabes Alliance. No to anarchy![116]

Two issues emerge from @JonesMusara's tweets. Firstly, he appears to be playing down the death of six people who were shot by the military. Reference to the constitution is

meant to legitimise the actions of the military, which is 'protecting Zimbabwe' in this instance. It can be argued that @JonesMusara through his tweets sought to sanitise, defend and legitimise the killings by the military as a necessary act meant to restore peace and order, which was under threat from 'MDC Alliance hooligans'. Secondly, in his argumentation, @JonesMusara promotes the discourse that upon realising that defeat from ZANU PF's presidential candidate Emmerson Mnangagwa was imminent, Nelson Chamisa incited his party supporters to cause 'anarchy and destabilise' the electoral process. It should be stated that ceremonial rhetoric is brazenly deployed by @JonesMusara as he seeks to discredit Chamisa. Chamisa is represented as a violent leader who cannot accept defeat from a free and peaceful electoral process. On the other hand, ZANU PF's candidate is presented as a man of the people 'EDHasMostVotes'. It is therefore clear that the *Varakashi* used Twitter to build a narrative that MDC Alliance is led by a power-hungry leadership that refuses to accept electoral defeat.

#Concourt ruling and the aftermath

The decision by the MDC Alliance to approach the Constitutional Court of Zimbabwe to contest the presidential results announced by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) sparked debates. The *Varakashi* took centre stage on Twitter as they sought to set an agenda that promoted and supported ZANU PF's position and ideology. They discursively constructed the appeal as 'blessing in disguise' and the ruling as an 'emphatic endorsement' of ZANU PF and Mnangagwa's victory. From the onset, *Varakashi* ridiculed the MDC Alliance and its leader Chamisa as bitter losers with no basis to contest election results. This is evident in the following tweets:

> … the best evidence would have been the contents of the ballot boxes, that is, primary evidence … (@nicolehondo)[117]

> It's very important to note that on every issue presented to the Constitutional Court by @nelsonchamisa, he won none! The signed & blank forms he presented were fake/ fabricated … The numbers he presented were debunked by @ZECzim … (@KMutisi)[118]

Varakashi often deployed ceremonial rhetoric to dismiss and pour scorn on MDC Alliance's petition as something not worthy of consideration, especially by the highest court of the land. Thus, *Varakashi*'s discourses on Twitter were aimed at casting MDC Alliance as time wasters who only approached the courts without 'primary evidence'. Richardson argues that argumentation plays an active role of attacking someone's viewpoint. In this instance, MDC Alliance is attacked for contesting the outcome of a free and fair election without tangible evidence.

While *Varakashi* used Twitter to castigate MDC Alliance, they deployed ceremonial rhetoric to praise ZANU PF and its leader Mnangagwa. Mnangagwa is portrayed as a law-abiding political leader who is at ease to follow and respect the dictates of the constitution. In a way, there is a discursive construction of political and constitutional legitimacy. Tweets such as ' … the petition was actually a blessing in disguise for President ED whose legitimacy has been boosted constitutionally and legally … ' (@JonesMusara)[119] and ' … my President prefers to win this case on its own merits & not on a technicality … ' (@nickmangwana),[120] suggest that even though MDC Alliance through its petition tried to discredit Mnangagwa's victory, his election has further passed the legal tests.

Ultimately, *Varakashi* pushes to close the debate on the free and fairness of the general elections as confirmed by the highest court of the land. Tied to the discourse of political and constitutional legitimacy is a sense of vindication ushered by the constitutional court through its ruling dismissing the appeal. Interestingly, *Varakashi* appear to be basking in glory of comments by international observers that 'European Union urges all Zimbabweans to respect the #ConCourt decision' as they quickly used such comments to validate their position 'confirming President Mnangagwa as the winner' (@nicolehondo).[121] Such comments from EU were used to further confirm *Varakashi's* long held position that results of 30 July elections were a valid expression of the people's will.

In the aftermath of constitutional ruling, confirming Mnangagwa as the winner of presidential elections, *Varakashi* continued their determination, this time around advancing 'New Dispensation', 'Second Republic' and 'New dawn' discourses. A close analysis of the tweets from foregoing *Varakashi* shows they deployed political rhetoric laced with logos mode of argumentation. Richardson argues that political rhetoric is concerned with future and desirability of political decisions.[122] On this point, *Varakashi* presented the 'new dispensation' as hitting the ground running by pushing a 'Zimbabwe is open for business' mantra. In a tweet accompanied with an image of President Mnangagwa and the Germany Minister of Economic Cooperation and Development, @nicolehondo appears to paint a bright future in that the world is keen to work with the new Zimbabwe under the leadership of Mnangagwa. It should be highlighted that this draws parallels to many years of isolation the country experienced due to the policies of the former President Robert Mugabe. Further, *Varakashi* appear to create frenzy at the prospects of brighter Zimbabwe, a view they credited to the astute and mature leadership of President Mnangagwa. @nicolehondo wrote 'Global giant, Nestle [Nespresso unit] pledges to support over 400 small scale coffee farmers in the country … Bright prospects ahead for the country as investors start to pour in #ZimbabweIsOpenForBusiness'.[123] In a similar vein, @JonesMusara posted: 'when Britain, Germany and Canada all are falling over each other to increase business investment in Zimbabwe, know that Zimbabwe economy will grow more under the leadership of the crocodile [Mnangagwa]'.[124] It is argued that this form of rhetoric is meant to assure the electorate that they made the right choice by voting for ZANU PF and its leader Mnangagwa.

Lastly, *Varakashi* presented Mnangagwa as a progressive leader pursuing pro-poor policies that were going to leverage the country's economy. This is evident in tweets such as:

> Zimbabwe's new lean Cabinet is a breath of fresh air. The mixture of experience and competence can only lead us to a better brighter future (@nicolehondo)[125]

> in Beitbridge the 2nd Republic is ensuring that the road from town to the boarder is expanded and modernized (@nickmangwana)[126]

> Deep in rural Zimbabwe … President @edmnangagwa has a vision to connect every part of Zimbabwe with state of the art transport infrastructure (@KMutisi)[127]

Here, *Varakashi* were engaged in political discourse that represented ZANU PF and its leader Mnangagwa as elected by the people in a free and fair election and constitutionally confirmed in a transparent court of law.

Conclusion

ZANU PF has always relied on legacy media to sustain its hegemony.[128] Through 'patriotic journalism'[129] articulated in state media such as *The Herald*, ZANU PF sought to demonise members of the opposition parties as 'sellouts'. Thus, the ruling party has appropriated and utilised the state-controlled legacy media to legitimize its hold on power. In the same way, Twitter is being used by pro-ZANU PF actors to construct binary frames that seek to legitimate Mnangagwa's administration and denounce opposition. Name-calling or the vilification of opponents has always been central to ZANU PF's political struggles.[130]

The spawning of news websites is transforming journalism practice and democratic engagements in the country. Although digital public spaces have traditionally been associated to oppositional voices, pro-ZANU PF actors are using Twitter to articulate official discourses. Due to its interactivity affordances, Twitter allows both pro-ZANU PF and anti-ZANU PF actors to engage and debate on political issues. As such, Twitter has become a site of political struggles between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces.

The *Varakashi* are appropriating and utilising Twitter in ways that reproduce and sustain ZANU PF's hegemonic discourses. In November 2017, the *Varakashi* sought to legitimate and sanitise the military 'coup' that dislodged Robert Mugabe. This was conducted by othering and demonising the so-called *G40* members as enemies of the state. In addition, the *Varakashi* projected the coup as a military intervention to prevent the establishment of a Mugabe dynasty. The *Varakashi* used Twitter to denigrate Chamisa's MDC Alliance party in the run-up to the 2018 election. Through the binary construction of Mnangagwa as a visionary, peaceful and mature, and Chamisa as immature and violent, the *Varakashi* sought to defend Mnangagwa's legitimacy that is in crisis. Notwithstanding the role of social media as a space for challenging the power bloc in Zimbabwe, Twitter has been appropriated by ruling party apologists to promote and perpetuate ZANU PF's ideologies. Through discursive practices on Twitter such as othering, naming and demonising rivals as enemies of the state and counter-revolutionaries, the *Varakashi* are contributing to the shaping and redefining of the political landscape in the post-Mugabe era.

Notes

1. Tierney, "Disentangling Public Space", 82.
2. Wasserman, "Mobile Phones", 148.
3. Mare, "A Complicated But Symbiotic Affair".
4. Moyo, "Citizen Journalism".
5. Ndlovu, "Speaking for the Dead"; Mpofu, "When the Subaltern Speaks".
6. Moyo, "Citizen Journalism"; Ndlovu, "Speaking for the Dead".
7. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vF-NI66pEC0.
8. Moyo, "Social Media, Civil Resistance", 15.
9. Ibid.
10. Chibuwe, "Social Media and Elections in Zimbabwe", 7.
11. Moyo Dumisani, "A Vicious Online Propaganda War that Includes Fake News is Being Waged in Zimbabwe" *News24*, 25 July 2018.
12. Saka, "Social Media in Turkey", 163.

13. Moyo, "A Vicious Online Propaganda", Op. Cit.
14. Ibid.
15. Atton and Mabweazara, "New Media", 667.
16. Wasserman, "Mobile Phones", 148.
17. Wasserman, "Mobile Phones"; Atton and Mabweazara, "New Media".
18. Mungwari, "Media Framing", 1.
19. Ibid.
20. Asuelime, "A Coup or Not a Coup".
21. Mungwari, "Media Framing", 2.
22. Ibid.
23. Asuelime, "A Coup or Not a Coup".
24. Ibid., 6.
25. Pigou, "After Elections".
26. Tshuma, "Political Billboards".
27. Ranger, "Historiography, Patriotic History".
28. Sachikonye, "Zimbabwe's Lost Decade".
29. Ndlovu, "Speaking for the Dead"; Mpofu, "When the Subaltern Speaks".
30. Chitanana and Mutsvairo, "The Deferred 'Democracy Dividend".
31. Moyo, "Blogging Down Dictatorship".
32. Moyo, "Citizen Journalism".
33. Moyo, "Blogging Down Dictatorship".
34. Guzura and Ndimande, "Music, Political Space".
35. Karekwaivanane and Mare, "We are Not Just voters".
36. Gukurume, "#ThisFlag and #ThisGown", 49.
37. Chitanana and Mutsvairo, "The Deferred 'Democracy Dividend", 80.
38. Rheingold, Smart mobs, 121.
39. Chikowero, "African Music, Power and Being in Colonial Zimbabwe".
40. Mare, "State-Ordered Internet Shutdowns".
41. George Ogola, "Africa has a Long History of Fake News After Years of Living With Non-truth" The Conversation, 27 February 2017. https://theconversation.com/africa-has-a-long-history-of-fake-news-after-years-of-living-with-non-truth-73332
42. Ncube, "Digital Media, Fake News", 44.
43. Mare, Mabweazara and Moyo, "Fake News and Cyber-propaganda", 2.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Mare, "State-Ordered Internet Shutdowns".
47. Ibid., 4244.
48. Richardson, Analysing Newspapers, 24.
49. Hall, "The Work of Representation", 44.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid., 49.
53. Jorgensen and Phillips, Discourse analysis.
54. Foucault, "The Order of Discourse", 52.
55. Jorgensen and Phillips, Discourse analysis; Foucault, "The Order of Discourse."
56. Foucault, History of Sexuality, 95.
57. Frey, Botan, and Kreps, Investigating Communication.
58. Patton, Qualitative Evaluation.
59. @HentryNemaire, 1 October 2018, https://twitter.com/HenryNemaire/status/1046839714232389633
60. Richardson, Analysing Newspapers.
61. Ibid., 155.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid., 157.

64. Ibid.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
67. Nyambi, "Of Weevils and Gamatox", 60.
68. 15 November 2017, https://twitter.com/nickmangwana/status/930789947182854144.
69. Ndlovu and Chinembiri, "The Discursive Legitimation", 126.
70. 16 November 2017, https://twitter.com/nickmangwana/status/931137709837639680.
71. Nyambi, "Of Weevils and Gamatox".
72. 10 November 2017, https://twitter.com/JonesMusara/status/928856210337538055.
73. Ncube and Gwatisira, "Discrimination Against Female Politicians", 59.
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81. 15 November 2017, https://twitter.com/JonesMusara/status/931967651781361664.
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83. 23 December 2017, https://twitter.com/JonesMusara/status/944393451512016897.
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85. 21 November 2017, https://twitter.com/nickmangwana/status/933001095592464384.
86. Richardson, *Analysing Newspapers,* 155.
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90. 17 July 2018, https://twitter.com/nicolehondo/status/1019155020401520640.
91. 17 July 2018, https://twitter.com/nicolehondo/status/1019156846236635137.
92. Hall, *The work of representation.*
93. 10 May 2018, https://twitter.com/nicolehondo/status/994526804634415104 Richardson, *Analysing Newspapers,* 157.
94. 10 May 2018, https://twitter.com/nicolehondo/status/994526804634415104.
95. 30 May 2018, https://twitter.com/nickmangwana/status/1001884106597203968.
96. 30 May 2018, https://twitter.com/nickmangwana/status/1001884106597203968.
97. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems, "Reinvoking the Past in the Present".
98. 29 July 2018, https://twitter.com/nickmangwana/status/1023433854131101697.
99. 2 July 2018, https://twitter.com/nicolehondo/status/1013755716635684864.
100. 8 July 2018, https://twitter.com/KMutisi/status/1015932911676256256.
101. 12 July 2018, https://twitter.com/JonesMusara/status/1017408459447255040.
102. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Mugabeism?*
103. Richardson, *Analysing Newspapers,* 157.
104. 19 June 2018, https://twitter.com/JonesMusara/status/1009145929046167554.
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130.   Nyambi, "Of Weevils and Gamatox", 59

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