

THE POLITICISATION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

This article analyses local government politics in Zimbabwe. The political scene in Zimbabwe changed drastically in the year 2000 with the formation of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). The party threatened the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front's (ZANU PF) political dominance and this resulted in ongoing conflict, with the ruling party using its power at central government level to frustrate the opposition that often dominated local government. Several events such as the clean-up operation in 2005 and the 2008 cholera outbreak in Zimbabwe were indicative of a governance system that had been politicised, with negative effects on citizens' lives. A watershed moment occurred in 2013 when a new constitution was introduced and for the first time since independence, local government was recognised. One of its key tenets is devolution of power to local communities. However, due to the polarised nature of politics in Zimbabwe, very little has been done to implement this principle, as the ruling party regards devolution as a threat to its political influence. The article argues that creating and fostering a democratic society in Zimbabwe will ensure that devolution is implemented, and that citizens will have a say in how their communities are governed.

Keywords: Constitution, Local Government, Decentralisation, Devolution, Democracy, Zimbabwe



1. Introduction

Scholars and policymakers regard local government as an important component of governance in any country. Within the African context, it is deemed important because it is the sphere of government closest to citizens. Chapter 14 of Zimbabwe's new constitution that was introduced in 2013 recognises the importance of local government. This was seen by many as an important step for the country as previous constitutions did not recognise this sphere of government. More importantly, the constitution advocates for the devolution of power to local communities. This was, again, regarded as significant as it provides a platform for citizens to have a say in governing their communities. However, there has been little progress in implementing this principle, which this article argues is due to the politicisation of local government.

In the early 2000s, the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) faced a considerable challenge from the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). With ZANU PF dominating central government and the MDC local government, the parties were at constant loggerheads, with each blaming the other for the woes of local government. The sections that follow discuss local government within the Zimbabwean context, starting with a general overview followed by a discussion on how local government in the country has been heavily politicised to the detriment of the citizenry.

2. Local Government During Colonial Times

The history of local government in Zimbabwe can be traced back to the colonial period. The British South African Company (BSAC) which entered the country under the leadership of Cecil John Rhodes in 1890 appointed the Salisbury Sanitary Board (SSB) to oversee the running of its affairs (Mapuva 2014, 12; Kurebwa 2015, 96). This centralised system meant that the British government maintained full control (Mapuva 2014, 13).

The colonial government dismantled the traditional African system of governance of kings, chiefs, headmen, and village heads (Chigwata 2018, 67). Between 1890 and 1980, the Rhodesian government adopted several governing systems to advance the interests of the colonial government (Chigwata 2018, 71). These would serve as a model for postcolonial Zimbabwe when, as in colonial times, local government became an instrument for the ruling party to retain power.

As noted by the literature on colonialism, this governance system was inherently racist, discriminatory, and based on ethnic divisions (Chigwata 2018, 76). While the structures were designed to control the African population, efforts were made to include it in decision-making processes as was evident in the 1969 constitution. It provided for a House of Assembly consisting of 50 European and 16 African members and a Senate made up of 10 Europeans and 10 African chiefs (Chigwata 2018, 77). Chigwata (2018, 77) argues that this was an attempt to contain the conflict between the nationalist movement and the colonial government (Chigwata 2018, 77). Local government thus became politicised as a strategy to appease the disgruntled, marginalised African population.

Furthermore, the Rhodesian government showed little respect for African culture and systems of governance. Traditional leaders served at the pleasure of the colonial government that also sought to reduce the number of chiefs serving rural communities and replace them with more pliant traditional leaders (Chigwata 2018, 86).

3. Local Government After Independence

On independence in 1980, Zimbabwe inherited a racially skewed system. It has been argued that the democratically elected government under Robert Mugabe did little to change this system and this is also true of local government (Mapuva 2014, 13; Stoneman 1981, 8). The inherited system would be the foundation upon which local government would function. However, the government did adopt measures to redress the effects of colonialism. Most of these efforts were driven by the aim of uniting a country that had been divided along racial lines and thus advocated for nation-building (Dorman 2016, 45). As noted earlier, local government previously served the needs of the white minority.

Local government was centralised under colonialism, resulting in the marginalisation of African communities. To redress these inherited inequalities, the government promulgated the Rural District Councils Act which resulted in the amalgamation of African councils into District and Urban Councils (Mapuva 2014, 13). This was intended as a decentralised form of governance. In 1980, the government created a ministry to oversee local government which was headed by the late Eddison Zvobgo (Kurebwa 2015, 96). These initiatives reflected the desire to accommodate sections of society that had been marginalised by the colonial government.

Thus, following independence, from a policy perspective, the Zimbabwean government adopted a decentralised mode of governance. The uneven nature of the new Zimbabwean state would be one of the biggest challenges that the country would grapple with in its formative years. In 1984 and 1985 the office of the Prime Minister issued the *Prime Minister's Directives on Decentralisation*. These introduced changes to the local government structure that were seen as a shift from the colonial mode of governance. Local government legislation was enacted, resulting in an inclusive system based on universal suffrage (Kurebwa 2015, 97). This reflects a shift towards a system based on participatory democracy.

Decentralisation was seen as a strategy to improve local government by promoting good governance, accountability, and transparency (Kurebwa 2015, 97) that were lacking under the colonial government. The Prime Minister's directive of 1985 created the office of 10 provincial governors to coordinate and implement development plans within their provinces (Kurebwa 2017, 97). The Rural District Councils Act [Chapter 29:15] which came into effect in 1993 led to the creation of 55 Rural District Councils which covered all communal land in Zimbabwe (Kurebwa 2015, 98). This was viewed as a symbol of the shift to a new local government system.

Despite these seemingly progressive measures, challenges persisted in cities such as the capital, Harare, that continued to function like a regulated colonial city (Dorman 2016, 25) and the city battled with several issues such as urban agriculture which was also the case under colonial rule. Mugabe's government was also accused of focusing development on certain areas at the expense of others. Whilst Harare and other cities received significant support for development, areas such as Matabeleland, the Zambezi Valley, and Chipinge received less in the way of post-independence reconstruction and improved services (Dorman 2016, 47). One can, therefore, argue that the politicisation of local government was evident in the formative years of the Zimbabwean state. It has also been argued that although colonial rule had come to an end, the dual system that it established persisted. The government reforms of 1993 disenfranchised farmworkers, and mineworkers and divisions between communal, urban, and resettlement areas persisted (Dorman 2016, 55), perpetuating the inequalities that were evident under colonial rule.

The rising urban population was a major challenge confronting the new government. Post-independence, larger cities such as Harare, Bulawayo, Mutare, and Gweru saw an influx of citizens. In Harare, this resulted in the development of squatter camps, much to the dismay of the government that embarked on clean-up projects to eradicate them.

The first major campaign, dubbed ‘Operation Clean-up’, resulted in the arrest of more than 6,000 women, some of whom were wrongly accused of being prostitutes (Dorman, 2016, 59). The government’s heavy-handedness would be an on-going feature of its management of local government.

4. Local Government and Multiparty Competition (2000–2013)

In Zimbabwe’s formative years, the ruling party, ZANU PF, did not face considerable political challenges. However, the early 2000s would change the dynamics in the country with the formation of a new vibrant opposition party, the MDC, which was founded by trade unions. From 2000, ZANU PF would be at loggerheads with the opposition and this resulted in a period of political violence, murder, assassinations, destruction of property and poor economic conditions which culminated in the economic crisis in 2008 (Jonga 2014, 79). This contestation would have a huge impact on local government as the two parties were pitted against each other at central and local government level.

Zimbabwe witnessed degeneration of the rule of law which played out on the political front with examples including the land reform programme and *Operation Murambatsvina*. Local government would also be affected as public institutions like urban councils whose duty it was to provide public goods and services to communities in a democratic manner failed to play their role (Jonga 2014, 79). The politicisation of local government came to the fore due to the conflicting political ideologies of ZANU PF and the MDC.

From the time of independence, Zimbabwe enjoyed relatively democratic local government. Although skewed towards the minority, the inherited system functioned to a certain extent with citizens receiving basic services such as water and refuse collection (Jonga 2014, 79). However, after 2000, local government failed to deliver these basic services to ratepayers. In 2002, for example, ZANU PF officials owed the Harare City Council US\$7.3 million in unsettled bills (Jonga 2014, 82). It can be argued that ZANU PF officials used their proximity to power at central level to manipulate local government. In analysing the power dynamics within Zimbabwe, it is clear that while considerable competition is allowed in respect of local government and legislative elections, this does not apply to the presidency as “spanners” are thrown at opposition candidates to prevent them from assuming the presidency (Masunungure and Shumba 2012, 127). This explains why the opposition had, and to a certain extent continues to

enjoy more success in winning elections at the local government level than at central level. It not only illustrates the politicisation of local government but also sheds light on the electoral setup in Zimbabwe which makes it almost impossible for the opposition to win presidential elections.

The dynamics in Zimbabwe seem to confirm Harold Laswell's (2018) definition of politics as "who gets what, when, how." In the Zimbabwean case, central government funds some local government activities, and ZANU PF uses this situation to frustrate the efforts of the opposition. The politicisation of local government prevents it from fulfilling its primary duty, which is to deliver basic services to citizens on a non-discriminatory basis (Jonga 2014, 82). A prominent example of this state of affairs is *Operation Murambatsvina*.

The opposition won several seats in Harare in the 2005 parliamentary elections. In response, ZANU PF embarked on a campaign to clean up the city (Bratton and Masunungu 2006, 22). The chair of the government-appointed Harare Commission which was overseeing the city's affairs, Sekesai Makwavarara, announced that *Operation Murambatsvina*¹ sought to enforce by-laws to halt illegal activities, including vending, illegal structures, and touting/abuse of commuters by rank marshals (Potts 2006, 275). It was further announced that all illegal structures would be demolished and that activities in areas deemed undesignated would be halted (Potts 2006, 275). On paper, this was an effort to clean up a city that had once been dubbed the "Sunshine City" following independence. However, closer analysis reveals the political motivation behind the operation. First, the Makwavarara-led 'government-appointed' Harare Commission was imposed by ZANU PF on local government, and second, the operation targeted areas that the opposition dominated in the elections.

ZANU PF thus used *Operation Murambatsvina* to settle a political score with the opposition. According to Bratton and Masunungu (2006, 22), after the MDC won control of urban areas, the ZANU PF-led government launched this crackdown which had huge ramifications not only for the opposition but also for affected citizens. There have been conflicting reports on how many citizens were affected, but the academic literature estimated between 650,000 and 700,000 based on a report authored by United Nations (UN) special envoy Anna Tibaijuka (Potts 2006, 276). Those affected lost their source of livelihood, their homes, or in many cases both. This campaign highlighted ZANU PF's approach to dealing with dissenting voices, in this case, the

1 Shona term for "Move the Rubbish"

urban population. It has been argued that rulers who gain office through violence are prone to repression (Bratton and Masunungure 2006, 21), and this is applicable to ZANU PF in this instance. In addition, many analysts and commentators noted that this crackdown was conducted indiscriminately with excessive force, and that it violated national and international laws pertaining to evictions (Bratton and Masunungure 2006, 22). The actions of ZANU PF during *Operation Murambatsvina* are among the litany of acts deemed to be in violation of human rights carried out by the party, especially since the turn of the millennium.

The cholera outbreak was one of the lasting impacts of *Operation Murambatsvina* and the political and economic crisis in 2008. *Operation Murambatsvina* resulted in those affected having to find alternative accommodation and many settled in Hopley Farm which was described as a “highly-impoverished area” (Chigudu 2019, 421). The cholera outbreak ravaged Hopley Farm and other high-density areas such as Glen Norah, Glen View, Budiriro, and Mbare. Its cause can be linked to ZANU PF’s interference in local government.

The lack of clean water was one of the major contributors to the cholera outbreak. In 2005, the state-owned Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA) took over management of water in what was viewed as a move to wrestle public service delivery from the MDC-run municipality (Chigudu 2019, 423). It was believed that ZANU PF benefited financially from this takeover and it also frustrated the opposition’s efforts in local government. Under the ZINWA, water management was in a sorry state with the organisation deemed incompetent by citizens (Chigudu 2019, 423). In addition, Zimbabwe’s economy was in the doldrums with inflation reaching astronomical levels and believed to be in the region of 79.6 billion percent (Chigudu 2019, 416). These circumstances led to the deadly cholera outbreak. Chigudu (2019, 425) notes that “The implacable ruthlessness of cholera left behind a spectacle of death”. Zimbabwe’s Ministry of Health announced that 98,592 cases and 4,288 cholera deaths had been recorded (Morof et al. 2013, 645).

5. Local Government since 2013

After the controversial election in 2008, the two largest political parties in Zimbabwe—ZANU PF and the MDC—joined forces, albeit it reluctantly, to form a Government of National Unity (GNU). Part of this agreement was the crafting of a new constitution which for the first time since independence included local government. More importantly, the new constitution provided for devolution. As noted previously,

prior to 2013, citizens played a limited role in local government. Devolution as set out in Zimbabwe's constitution aims to enhance good governance, and empower local communities politically and economically by providing them with a platform to share resources and be involved in decision-making (Chikwawawa 2019, 19).

The new constitution was viewed as a watershed moment for Zimbabweans as, at least on paper, citizens had a say in the governance of their local communities. Chapter 14 Section 264 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe provides for devolution of power from central government to local government with the overriding aim of ensuring good governance, democratic participation of communities, and accountability (Chikwawawa 2019, 20). Close perusal of this section of the constitution suggests that its authors were aware of previous cases whereby power had been misused by political leaders. The shift of power from central government to local levels, and advocacy for democracy, transparency, accountability, and peace all speak to a country that was deprived of these principles (Chikwawawa 2019, 20).

One of the major issues in relation to this section of the Zimbabwean constitution is the unclear role of the state. It states that the state should devolve power to provincial and local levels "whenever appropriate" (Chikwawawa 2019, 20), suggesting that power still resides with central government and that devolution will be implemented when and as it sees fit. This has further contributed to the politicisation of local government. This phrase also speaks to the dynamics that led to the adoption of the new constitution. ZANU PF and the MDC, that are diametrically opposed at an ideological level, were in a GNU between 2009 and 2013. ZANU PF, especially under Mugabe's leadership, was not in favour of devolution whilst the opposition angled for it (Chikwawawa 2019, 21). One of the reasons why ZANU PF was against devolution was that it undermined its stranglehold on power. As a result, devolution has been an extremely slow process. It is believed that former President Mugabe did not implement devolution because he was of the view that it was a divisive issue. The nature of Zimbabwe's centralised state, rampant corruption, and the citizenry's exclusion from decision-making were additional factors (Chikwawawa 2019, 22). This speaks to the power dynamics that are associated with devolution in the country.

A key obstacle in implementing devolution is the state of democracy in Zimbabwe. Nyikadzino and Vyas-Doorgapersad (2022, 7) note that successful devolution requires the creation of an environment that allows citizens to participate in governance. One can argue that this has not been evident in post-colonial Zimbabwe with its polarised political environment that is at its worst during election periods. For devolution to be

implemented and for it to yield results it is important that democratic principles are adhered to. For example, electoral laws should promote regular, democratic, free, fair, and transparent elections at both the presidential and local levels (Nyikadzino and Vyas-Doorgapersad 2022, 7).

6. Conclusion

Like many postcolonial states, Zimbabwe has struggled to implement democracy since its independence in 1980. Local government, which should serve citizens' needs, became a tool for the ruling ZANU PF to retain power. In analysing local government in Zimbabwe, it is important to acknowledge the role played by colonialism in centralising power through laws and institutions. The postcolonial government inherited this skewed system.

Up until the year 2000, ZANU PF faced little competition, but the formation of the MDC threatened its stranglehold on power. In order to retain power, it used its proximity to power in central government to thwart the efforts of the opposition at local government level. Events such as *Operation Murambatsvina* in 2005 and the creation of the ZINWA are examples of ZANU PF's efforts to prevent the opposition from making strides in local government. The introduction of a new constitution in 2013 provided for a platform to improve local government through devolution.

While the aim of devolution was to empower local communities, due to the power dynamics within Zimbabwe, this has not occurred at the pace many hoped for. Under former president Mugabe and current president, Emmerson Mnangagwa, very little has been done to implement devolution and many argue that this is due to the fear that it will cause the ruling party to lose its grip on power. Democracy calls for citizens' inclusion and successful devolution requires that all involved adhere to democratic principles. Only through the adoption of democracy at all levels of government will citizens have a say in how their communities are governed.

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