

## Re-imagining Democracy and Political Transformation in Zimbabwe

### 1. Introduction

The initiative to conduct a dialogue on prospects of economic and political transformation in Zimbabwe is timely and welcome. Establishing a link between that dialogue and the publication of a book on the theme is useful and appropriate. It represents a bold attempt to subject the ideas, conclusions and recommendations of the book to scrutiny and debate. The authors of the book, the publishers and the sponsors of the initiative should be applauded for the initiative.

My own contribution begins by providing a wider context for discussion on prospects for transformation. It acknowledges that Zimbabwean intellectuals and other scholars have sought to engage with issues of transition and transformation for 30 years or more, issues of democracy and change for over 25 years (Mandaza, 1986; Stoneman, 1988; Mandaza and Sachikonye, 1991; Sachikonye, 1995). Their production of knowledge and perspectives as well as scenarios has continued in the past 15 years as I illustrate by reference to particular seminal texts (Makumbe, Moyo and Raftopoulos, 2000; Kanyenze et. al., 2011).

The final part of my contribution not only establishes the common elements in that literature and the book being launched today but also their limitations. I also reflect on the '*Democracy Manifesto*' contained in the book.

### 2. State and Class in Zimbabwe

The theme of democracy and political transformation has been subsumed in earlier publications. I would argue that the compelling imperative for transition from colonial political economy was the motivation behind the scholars who contributed to *Zimbabwe: the Political Economy of Transition* that was published exactly 30 years ago. Their concerns were multiple:

- Consolidation of nationalism, freedoms and state-building;
- Imperative for a national bourgeoisie to emerge act as an anchor class;
- Development of a working class organized in strong federations and
- Industrialization linked to land reform and human resource development.

As one of the most industrialized countries (in the top tier of five) in Africa, the prospects for Zimbabwe in the 1980s generated as much optimism amongst intellectuals as policy makers. There was even discussion of prospects of Zimbabwe becoming one of the newly industrializing countries (NICs) (Stoneman, 1988).

The focus of debate in those years was not so much on the content of democracy but on how to transform the state from its colonial features and orientation. Unless there was a transition from the post-white settler state, economic and political emancipation would not be complete. In addition, the various classes

needed to witness material change in their lives to make independence a reality. A social contract should underpin the huge investments in social services like education and health.

It was perhaps inevitable that social scientists in the 1980s directed most of their focus on state formation and state power, class formation and power distribution in society. Marxism was still a major force in academia in those years.

### **3 The Constitutional question and Political compromise**

Several developments in the 1990s and 2000s highlighted weaknesses in economic policy, constitutional limitations and in the social contract. The Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) was a watershed in Zimbabwean development trajectory and politics. Not only was the social contract broken reversing gains in the socio-economic spheres, but also trust and legitimacy in the political system. Hence the growth of opposition to government by organized labour and business, and demands for constitutional reform to introduce checks and balances between branches of the state.

The discourse in the 1990s and 2000s thus revolved around how powers of the President should be curbed, electoral reform introduced and Commissions set up to safeguard and monitor various rights as gender, human rights, media rights amongst others. This was the context of the formation of the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), Women's Forum and other key civil society organizations such as Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, Zimbabwe Election Support Network, Zimrights, Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights amongst others. There was a ferment for various types of rights and needs during this era between 1990 and 2010.

In sum, this was an era in which deficits in economic, political and constitutional arrangements provided a source for pressure for change. There was push for economic reform (ZCTU, 1996). Constitutional reform was firmly placed on the agenda (NCA, 1998). The newly formed Movement for Democratic Change announced its political agenda in 1999. All these developments sought to give concrete content to democracy and political change. A democratic social movement was emerging (Sachikonye, 1995).

However, the context of these developments had changed. It was now a post-Cold war era in which globalization and the discourse on 'good governance' became hegemonic. Neo-liberal development and good governance as associated with democracy and human rights were pushed as the new formula for developing countries such as Zimbabwe. The national and global discourses affected each other in a context in which national consensus on governance priorities became elusive.

A review of the discourse of this era cannot ignore the offshoot debate on where the priority should be placed on: on democracy and human rights or economic rights. The argument for prioritizing economic rights became a standard retort to donors and civil society groups that advocated for democracy and human

rights. It reached banal heights with the expression that you did 'not eat democracy'. In my view this was an exaggeration, if not a caricature, of the thrust of the position that pushed for democracy and human rights. Political and economic rights were not separable, as they still are not, to those who campaign for substantive democracy not least in Zimbabwe.

The Global Political Agreement (GPA) in 2008 was an important milestone as a stopgap political compromise between contending parties and forces in society. The formation of a Government of National Unity (GNU) underlined the political stalemate between the leading parties. The adoption of a new Constitution in 2013 was a major landmark and asset in the gradual democratization process, and it seemed a fitting closure to one era.

#### **4. Democracy and Transformation: re-imagination and a manifesto**

In the post-2013 era, following Zanu PF's landslide, how can we imagine democracy and change in Zimbabwe? Indeed, if we have imagined them before, how can we re-imagine them? These are questions that motivate Tendai Murisa in his two chapters, '*Not yet Uhuru*' and '*The Democracy Manifesto*' in the book. There is no better place to start. However, I should give a preface to this commentary.

In normal circumstances, the 2013 Zanu PF landslide should have signaled consolidation of its power and unity as well as a coherent development policy. Instead, the party has degenerated into factionalism, and the economy into a deep crisis. On both counts the party is unable to fulfill its mandate to its supporters and citizens. The cancer of factionalism affects opposition parties as well. Instead of regrouping and learning from their shortfalls at the last election, they have broken into factions just like Zanu PF.

##### *Internal Party democracy*

A general proposition that may be advanced is that internal party democracy is in intensive care in all political parties. This has significant implications for democracy. If parties cannot exercise democracy in their affairs, how can they implement it on the local and national stages? Charity begins at home.

##### *Political patronage and clientelism*

Although elections do not amount to democracy, you cannot have democracy without elections. Zimbabwean elections are increasingly won or lost on patronage and clientelism. The party with the largest accumulation of resources like funding, powers to allocate land, minerals, contracts, tenders, media access and so forth can entice more voters and stands greater chance during an election. Direct and subtle forms of voting buying spoil the purpose and content elections.

### *Crisis*

The current economic and social crisis may not be as deep as that of 2007-2008 but it is very worrisome. Unemployment is high. The state has fiscal challenges. There is no coherence in the state's development project. De-industrialization deepens. Food security is worrisome to more than 2 million citizens. How to give content to democracy in such a context is a conundrum. Intense competition for limited resources gives impetus to factionalism but also to corruption that is eating into national fabric. This preface takes us to the 'Democracy Manifesto'.

## **5. Democracy Manifesto**

### *Critique of electoral/political democracy*

The manifesto's critique of democracy is advanced in these terms:

'democracy has been used as shorthand for a certain form of political arrangements which, mostly include regular elections...Such thinking has led to narrow institutionalism without an organic evolution of democracy from the bottom. The 'democracy is equal to elections has been exported to Africa...and led to an elite based and unaccountable dynastic form of politics strengthened by clientelist relations which fuel corruption and inequality' (Murisa, 2015:350).

It is argued that this is defective democracy. The alternative is a democratization process that depends on an ecosystem of civic alliances, inclusive local government processes, social norms, and deliberative practices that have an organic rather than an institutional quality.

Instead of electoral democracy there should be developmental democracy (Mkandawire, 2011). While acknowledging the importance of civil and political freedoms such as the right to vote, participation and association, there should be equal weight to equitable development.

Murisa identifies key building blocks in the construction of democracy and transformation:

- Citizenship
- Participation and
- Associational Life

### *Invigorate Citizenship*

The majority of citizens feels powerless or do not see the need to participate in the national process of electing leaders or exercising control over their communities and national futures (p.351). Citizens should be at the centre of the political process in a more significant way than the five minutes accorded to them by the political class after every five years.

People must be empowered to insist on good governance on their own terms. Institutions will work when a public covenant builds around them and demands that they work. 'A civic compact between formally established organizations and

communities is what makes it sustainable, and it should begin at the level of communities' (p.353).

### *Promote Participation*

Participation has been reduced to tokenism in which functionaries tick a box on their checklist to indicate that they have engaged with a community before embarking on a public programme. The challenge for Zimbabwe is to remake participation through the reframing of interactions amongst communities, professionals and institutions into a truly participatory space (p.355). An engaged citizenry should be given appropriate spaces to deliberate on public affairs. An inclusive and participatory framework is central to this process especially in rural areas.

### *Draw on Associational Life*

Zimbabwe has a vibrant associational life. It includes civic engagement groups, residents associations, neighbourhood watch committees, faith-based groups, loans and savings associations, women's groups, burial societies, and various professional associations. In 2002, there were about 3 000 local associations.

These associations do not feature in the democratization discourse especially around constitutional reform and elections. The potential synergy that can be derived through engaging local formations is underestimated in the politics in government and civil society (p.357). They have the potential to provide a platform for broad-based mass mobilization.

These attributes of citizenship, participation and associational life will strengthen democracy and enable the reduction or eradication of adversarial politics that take the form:

- General disengagement from the public sphere;
- A sense of powerlessness on the part of citizens;
- Rampant individualism that supports narrow conceptions of citizens as consumers, tax payers or spectators and
- Polarization and misunderstanding across perspectives that decrease confidence in fellow citizens and justify adversarial politics (p.357).

## **6. Comments and Clarifications**

### *Electoral democracy*

There is a dim view of the value of elections in democracy. Was the vote not a hard won right at Independence? Is it not too early to dismiss one of the few channels of expression of preference, especially given that the electoral process remains imperfect? A great deal remains to make our electoral institutions and processes accountable and transparent. As for viewing electoral democracy and developmental democracy as distinctive, should we not strive to make both aspects complementary? Democracy and development should enrich each other. One is suspicious of the rather paternalistic argument that you need a stage of

authoritarianism before democracy. Should citizens and voters not have the last word on this issue?

### *Vehicles for active citizenry and enhanced participation*

The arguments for building conditions for participatory citizenship are compelling. The question is which institutional or organizational vehicle should be used for that purpose. Why does the manifesto leave out the strategic vehicles of political/social movements or parties? Can any mass mobilization be possible outside movements or parties? We are inclined to believe that large ideas and manifestoes will need vehicles through which they can be debated and refined and become a motivating force within the framework of a movement or party. Otherwise they will remain just good ideas and frameworks.

### *Associations, Democracy and Development*

While associational life is believed to be vibrant, its impact on democratic practice has been limited. How can this be changed? Can they participate in democracy and transformation without some engagement with the state? The agenda of transformation presupposes a strategic role for the state. Access to state power will be imperative. How can the gap between associational life, participation and citizenship and access to state power be negotiated and addressed?

### *Beyond the Crises and the Book*

The implicit issue in most of the books that have been written to make the case for democracy, transition and transformation is what constellation of classes, groups and alliances should form its vanguard and base. Specifically, what should be the role of the intelligentsia (intellectuals, civil society activists, policy makers, professionals etc.) in the process of transformation? How can a 'silo approach' be avoided? The books tend to be silent on this. The silence needs to be broken.

In view of the critique that the process of democracy and transformation cannot be subcontracted or outsourced, what therefore needs to be done, by whom and how? How can theory and praxis be merged to produce an innovative and broad based programme for transformation? These questions are often not raised so explicitly but they cannot be ignored.

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