

Revisiting:

‘Beyond the Crises- Prospects for Transformation in Zimbabwe’

Postscript/Afterthought One:

Prospects for Political Mobilization in Present-Day Zimbabwe

Introduction

Predicting the future is one of the most unreliable sciences. It is even worse in politics. In Zimbabwe, like in many other countries, we have had the privilege of good analysis to help us make sense of what may seem chaotic; but the current configurations of power and ever changing alignments/alliances especially in the Movement for Democratic Change-T (MDC-T) and more recently, in ZANU (PF) seem to have only served to confuse even the more experience sages of our time.

There is an urgent need to embark on a comprehensive analysis of what one may call political behavior in Zimbabwe. Since 2000 the MDC as a protest/political movement has been rarefied and positioned as the ultimate savior out of ZANU (PF) despotism. However recent developments such as the recent triumph of ZANU (PF) in the July 2013 election and internal coups at Harvest house, where it seems everyone has the power to expel/suspend others from the party, have only served to dampen the mood and expectation of an MDC- led change process. Within ZANU (PF) the story remains the same, despite an election victory (rigged or otherwise) they just do not seem to have the capacity to get it- they just can't rise beyond internal factionalism to effectively address the national question. They are so pre-occupied with the post Mugabe era (as if he will die tomorrow) instead of delivering on the promises they made to the electorate. The media also seems to be caught in this conundrum- everyday they have to spin a new yarn either about Mugabe's deteriorating health (we have heard it before and the man is still standing) or how so and so belonging to such a faction has pulled a new move- all based on reliable sources. Which leaves us with the question- what is the future of Zimbabwean politics? Should we still remain beholden to charismatic/messianic politics based on the gifted orator or do we need to think in other terms? Is there room for a new kind of politics- that is grounded within the current socio-economic realities of Zimbabwe and also based on citizenship and class?

Background

I will start off by analyzing what may look very peripheral to Zimbabwean politics- the Zimbabwean left. Munyaradzi Gwisai, leader of the small but very vocal International Socialist Organisation (ISO) has been one of the few voices interested in the masses and in a 2014 article he made an attempt to not only bring back the working class at the centre stage as the revolutionary class but also makes a persuasive attempt at analysis rooted in political economy. One must add that ZANU (PF) has always claimed the mantle of being left whilst in reality it has vacillated from talking left and acting right to a radical populist movement. It's elite is so contradicted and behaves as a typical bourgeoisie, well there are comprador elements but thanks to the land and agrarian reforms there has emerged within ZANU (PF) an entrenched agrarian capitalist class which is behaving and accumulating in a manner similar to the dispossessed white minority large scale farmers except of course for the dependence or abuse of the state.

On the other hand although the MDC has its roots in working class politics it embraced a very neoliberal stance both from its alliances and also some of the programs it pushed whilst in the Government of National Unity (GNU) from 2009 until 2013. In this article, without primarily focusing on party politics I raise a fundamental question for mobilization, can we speak of a progressive working class in a context of de-industrialization where trade unions are shrinking in numbers and labour relations regimes in place serve the interests of the employers? Besides the legal regimes what incentives do workers have to even engage in public protests such as strikes given the threat that hangs over many of these enterprises? What is the realistic chance that we will see animated workers' struggles such as the ones we witnessed in the 1990s?

The Working Class

Let's briefly revisit the historical assumptions regarding the emergence of the working class and juxtapose these assumptions with Zimbabwe's current economic situation. Historically, according to Marx a pure working class was supposed to emerge after the total collapse of peasant agriculture through the industrial revolution and subsequent farm mechanization which would render peasant agriculture unviable. Dispossession of land and proletarianisation of the peasantry were prescribed as a quick fix. Capitalism was viewed as an inevitable historically progressive process, which provided possibilities of a type of society materially more progressive with unprecedented

development of the material forces of production which would also lead to the creation of a 'progressive' proletariat class (Marx, 1976). Such a proletariat would be the first universal class capable of abolishing class society and the complete dismantling of capitalist ways of production and accumulation and the introduction of a class less society (Marx, 1976, Lenin, 1964[1899]. 1954).

Did we ever have such a class in Zimbabwe? To be fair at some point we were very close to boasting of a fully proletariat class given our status as the second most industrialised country after South Africa in Sub-Saharan Africa. We also had the second highest proportions of unionized workers in Sub-Saharan Africa. Others such as Gwisai (2014) argue that the unionized and disciplined working class is only supposed to be the core or nucleus of the broader working class based struggle. Moyo and Yeros (2005) prefer the term semi-proletariats when referring to the majority of the working class and they argue that these are households that straddle both the urban and rural spaces in terms of social reproduction. Even a study commissioned by the ZCTU in the 1990s tends to align with this position; in a sample of 1 500 members of trade unions in textile, metal workers, and food industry 75 percent of the respondents maintained dual homes in the urban and rural areas (Peta et al., 1991). We have to remember that the period from 1980 up until maybe 1995 was economically much better than the post 2000 period and even then we did not have a pure working class solely dependent on a wage (based on the ZCTU) - I will revisit this issue later on.

The economic collapse that began with Structural Adjustment led to massive retrenchment of workers initially within the textile industry when big employers such as Cone Textiles (Chitungwiza), David Whitehead (Kadoma) and Merlin (Bulawayo) either had to shut down or restructure. However, since 2000 company closures have become more common than new investments and according to my own guesstimate the ZCTU has lost more than 60% of its members due to retrenchments and company closures. It is also important not to romanticize the consciousness and mobilization of the working class for progressive change. For instance, firstly, at the peak of workers' struggles against ESAP only 3000 out of a possible 25 000 heeded the ZCTU's call for a general strike which was also very short lived. Secondly, we have to remember the alliance that was established in the late 1990s between the capitalist class and working class as they converged on the need to dislodge ZANU (PF) from power. In that alliance the bosses

(employers) actually facilitated/encouraged worker stay-aways by locking their premises. Does such an alliance exist today?

Opportunities for Mobilization beyond a Workers' Perspective

Whilst the 2003 Labour Relations Act is definitely a progressive piece of legislation its implementation has been curtailed by the precariousness of finding employment- and of course the 2015 judgement on summary dismissals- the pendulum has swung towards protecting the interests of the employers. Also bear in mind that we literally have an overwhelming demand for jobs to an extent that fewer workers are prepared to confront their employers or engage in activities that will threaten job security. What we have instead is a de facto Master Servant relationship between employers and employees mimicking the domestic government regimes we had on commercial farms.

Currently the public service looks like the most organised sector but the multiple trade unions servicing their needs only serve government's interest of 'divide and conquer'. Also we should bear in mind that President Mugabe has also seen the potential for dissent in this sector-hence his calls for increments and bonuses besides obvious evidence that government is literally broke with unpredictable revenues. Workers in the public service will probably go on a sector wide general strike only when salaries dry up but even then that confrontation will mostly be focused on a narrow agenda of remuneration without incorporating the broader governance issues that need urgent attention.

At this stage the most convenient critique to the argument that I have presented so far is that I am narrowly treating the working class as comprising only of those in formal sector employment-organized labour. True. There is definitely a need to conceptualize the working class beyond these narrow spaces of mobilization and this where I propose a new kind of politics. Before delving into the new politics manifesto we need to discuss the broad configurations of the working class within both the rural and the new urban terrain. There is no doubt that after fast track land reform we have more Zimbabweans living in the rural areas than before. Different studies including the latest census data put the rural population at around 67% and the majority of these would fit into a broader concept of a working class if we use incomes, modes of productions (own labour vs. hired labour) and also the nature of socio-economic grievances that they confront. Using neoliberal

standards of measuring wellbeing and poverty the majority of these are living on less than US\$2 a day.

However, and unfortunately we have not made much of rural politics in Zimbabwe. Popular land occupations signifying a real demand for access to some form of economic production were mostly dismissed as part of ZANU(PF)'s political machinations. The rural grievances and real demands for land were thus not factored into the broader struggles for governance reforms that was mostly driven by urban based civics. In the process we have missed out on a very important opportunity of linking the urban and rural struggles for a broad based development and democratic governance model. It was not only the opportunity that we missed but also lessons of grassroots based self-organisation which have driven these land occupations since 1980. Colleagues on the left such as Gwisai are unfortunately very silent on this and I am not surprised. Most of the scholars and activists steeped in orthodox political economy do not make much of rural struggles. Remember Karl Marx also did not believe that the peasantry could survive the expansion of capitalistic relations of production within the countryside, he argued that they were only compatible with a limited development of industrial capitalism and that in the longer term they would be destroyed through impoverishment (Marx, 1976: p854). In Russia revolutionary ideologues such as Engels (1895)¹ realising the challenges of the position of the peasantry suggested that a lie is presented to the peasantry:

“Let us say it outright: in view of the prejudices arising out of their (peasants) entire economic position, their uprising and their isolated mode of life, prejudices nurtured by the bourgeois press and the big land-owners, we can win the mass of the small peasants forthwith only if we can make them a promise which we ourselves know we shall not be able to keep.”

That lie entailed making a promise to protect the peasant's landholdings as private property when in fact the party was intending to abolish private property in a socialist Soviet Union. Even on the continent suggestions of a rural protest in post-independence Africa were rare, unwelcome and seen as utopian (Amin, 1990:12). Thus the rural, especially in a context where the peasantry is actually expanding like in Zimbabwe, remains a thorn in the flesh for many whose lens of organizing and struggle is steeped within a traditional Marxist framework.

¹ Frederick Engels (1895), *The Peasant Question in France and Germany*

However, it should not be so. Others such as Moyo (2001), Moyo and Yeros (2005), Alexander (2003 and 2006) have painstakingly demonstrated that peasants are highly engaged in politics and in the process have radically resolved a century old problem of colonial land theft and dispossession. Yes ZANU (PF) has entered into an alliance with them since the turn of the century but it's the same ZANU (PF) that was busy establishing squatter control committees to curb land occupations in the late 1980s into the 1990s. The continuous demand and engagement in what Moyo and Yeros (2005) have called uncivil actions for land by peasants is what broke the camel's back and the GoZ conceded by embarking on Fast Track Land Reform Program (FTLRP) in 2003 after it had failed to contain the land movement that had intensified from around late 1999.

Besides agitations for land, many other studies (see for instance Murisa, 2009, 2011 and 2013) have also shown that peasants have a penchant for organizing themselves to achieve greater synergies, be it in economic production processes or defending their rights. In 2002 it was estimated that there are 3 000 local peasant organisations in Zimbabwe (Bratton, 1986, Moyo 2002, Sibanda 2002). The rural space is thus made up of a mosaic of associational forms which if adequately analysed point towards readiness to engage in struggle as long as it directly resonates with the grievances that they face. The late Sam Moyo writing in 2002 argued that these local associational forms serve a (wide) variety of purposes and assume a multitude of roles but they are mostly formed in responses to the negative effects of state politics and market penetration.

In the urban areas the majority of the working class are engaged in what are referred to as informal sector activities. It is estimated that only 20% of urban households have at least one member in fulltime formal employment and the rest eke out an existence on the margins of this formal economy. Others estimate that more than US\$2billion circulates within sector. However, there are very few analytical studies of how players in this sector are organizing themselves. It is a highly differentiated sector with the upper echelons earning more than their formal sector counterparts but others are also living on the margins of poverty- earning just enough to scrap by. What are the implications for political mobilization? Probably one has to look at the diversification within the sector and identify an entry point for organizing. One of the longest surviving associations in this space is the different types of vendors' associations that occur at a very local level. Given the implosion of the economy and the rise of the unemployment one can only imagine that the number of vendors or broadly informal traders has increased. The implosion and collapse of service

delivery has spawned new opportunities in the informal sector such as owner operated short and long distance taxis, water vendors, mobile phone and mobile cash agents. Operators in this space have become a bit more sophisticated with capacities to play cat and mouse with the bureaucracy and potential to organize themselves in pursuit of achievement of collective goals. We have also seen the emergence of thriving residents' associations. These formations have in the recent past been at the forefront of demanding accountability and transparency within local authorities.

However, as already mentioned, in the absence of good field based analytical studies we know very little about the internal organization of these associational forms and also the terrain in which they organize. One can only surmise on the basis of the Tunisian uprising that those who are looking to and investing energy in organized labor or reconstituting an NGO led civic movement maybe missing a golden opportunity of building a grassroots broad working class movement.

The New Politics

Today one of the most common discussions is who will take over in ZANU (PF) and for the MDC, the question is about who will be able to unite the different factions in light of the coups and party dismissals. In the conversation one dictates something more of a messianic expectation- who will take us to the proverbial promised-land. Good leaders are without a doubt a very necessary component of our fragile democracy. However, in the absence of issue based politics - where parties are evaluated on a set of policies and programs that they pursue - we may find ourselves stuck with mediocre leadership, good on rhetoric and weak on delivery. Leadership should be seen as just one component of the democratic equation but if we are not careful it can easily keep us enslaved in the bygone era of African strong men (never women). In the discussion that follows I will discuss in more detail the vital components of what I call the democratic ecosystem. *The democratic equation should read thus- leadership is a necessary component but not sufficient condition for democracy we also need engaged citizens.*

One of the questions that we rarely ask and thus never answer is 'politics/democracy for what'? During the liberation struggle the objective was very clear we wanted to dismantle minority rule and replace it with majority rule and universal suffrage. A working people's socialist revolution was to be fair utopia even at that time- especially if one looks at the leaders of that struggle-these were not working people although some were sympathetic to workers' rights. The post July 2013 dispensation provides us with an opportunity to re-imagine our struggle for democracy and this

time we need to work with the end in mind and two questions come to mind; (i) the nature of the democracy that we want and (ii) what do we want from that democracy?

Since the turn of the century the democracy discourse has been dominated by the broad alliance of human rights organisations, trade unions and the MDC. The realization of political and civil rights was amplified to be the sine qua non of democracy itself. The system of representative government is by nature very exclusionary. Citizens rarely have the opportunity to influence day to day allocation of resources-which by the way is central to politics! In many countries that claim to be democratic such as Zimbabwe, citizens do not have access to sufficient information required for making political decisions such as voting. Secondly the effectiveness of platforms for interaction between the elected and the electorate is very limited in many ways; firstly they are too few and incoherent in terms of the agendas they seek to promote. Secondly they are structured in a way that does not promote dialogue but rather the speaking down to citizens by the elected.

In practice democracy has been used as shorthand for a certain form of political arrangements which mostly include regular elections for local and national government processes. Such thinking has led to narrow institutionalism without an organic evolution of democracy from the bottom. The 'democracy is equal to elections' mantra has been exported to most of Africa with varying consequences for governance, economic development and the manner in which political power is exercised. However, Zimbabwe was not alone in having to deal with such a conceptualization, it was indeed part of the global neoliberal project. Mkandawire (2011:41) observes that during this period "...democracy eschewed substantive issues of material well-being and equity and focused on the more formal aspects of 'good' governance', that is free and fair elections, transparency and so on". In many ways it has led to an elite based and unaccountable dynastic form of politics strengthened by clientelist relations which fuel corruption and entrench inequality. So do we throw democracy away? Absolutely not. We invigorate and broaden it.

ZANU (PF)'s attempts at broadening democracy to include social and economic rights initially did not receive as much attention given the contradictions within ZANU (PF) itself and the violent nature of the transformation process. The success of the land reforms in terms of absorbing otherwise idle labour and also the opening up of new markets such as the recent entrance of smallholders into cash rich tobacco have served to challenge the myths of collapse and chaos in land reform (see for instance Scoones 2011). Indeed, even the then Secretary General of the MDC-

The party is quoted as saying the ZANU (PF) manifesto resonated with people's interests of redistribution and material well-being. The ZANU (PF) led process of re-imagining democracy are constrained by the self-serving elite which ends up making everything that the party says or does seem farcical and contrived to perpetuate the regime. The party cannot lead this process of re-imagining a new distribution of power especially given its violent past.

We the citizens have to engage in a process of re-imagining how we want to be ruled. The ideal of a democratic society can only be achieved through a complex arrangement of state and non-state institutions that seek to ensure that political, civil, economic, social and cultural rights of all citizens are protected. The democratization process depends on an ecosystem of civic alliances, inclusive of actors focused on local government processes and ensuring access to economic resources for well-being. There has been an awakening across the developing regions of what others have referred to as resource nationalism- especially in the countries where there is an abundance of high value natural resources. The manner of ownership and utilisation of these resources has somehow found its way into questions of democracy-especially where social and economic rights are considered.

What are our options- do we mobilize for a working people's socialist revolution as suggested by Gwisai or some form of democratic reformism based on the realization of tangible increments at any period? Are we socialist at all? From my own analysis most of the economic actors; peasants (petty commodity production), informal sector workers (mostly merchants) and small entrepreneurs are all engaged in attempts to penetrate and benefit from the market using more or less the same strategies that any other capitalist would. I only hear of socialism from small think-tank groups such as ISO and maybe there is a core of those in formal sector employment desiring the same- but it's not really a part of the national discourse. The talk about revolution is mostly part of the rhetoric that ZANU (PF) has used since the turn of the century and this was mostly in reference to capturing the commanding heights of the economy. Some sections of the economy such as agriculture have definitely gone through this transformation without necessarily ceding all the means of production to a proletariat class but rather it has led to some form of a hybrid structure which combines a purely capitalist agriculture class with another that is ostensible subsistence oriented-mimicking what we inherited from the Rhodesians. Thus the worker's revolution envisaged by Gwisai is yet to become reality and honestly there is no evidence of a critical core of

organised social forces working towards the realization of this goal. Zimbabwe is ready to pursue, as it has been doing all along, some form of democratic reformism. Rather than talk of revolution I prefer a more realistic concept like ‘invigorating citizenship in national processes’.

Zimbabwe faces a huge challenge of apathy and this does not only refer to staying away from voting but a total disengagement from public matters. Citizen disengagement is partly explained by the historical intimidation and violence that characterise Zimbabwean political processes. Other forms of disengagement manifest at the level of social service delivery- one would have assumed that the collapse in essential services such as health, water and sanitation, unreliable electricity would have led to massive strikes like we see in neighboring South Africa- no not in Zimbabwe. Instead the middle class types (real and aspirational) have managed to devise ways of coping through the purchase of generators, installation of solar panels, digging of boreholes- in the process creating new market opportunities but allowing the government to survive despite the fact that things have fallen apart. Disengagement is a real threat to a thriving democracy. The disengagement has led to an embedded practice of deference. In this context deference is a process by which citizens elect not to engage in a political activity and instead choose to ‘delegate’ it as the role of politicians, civil society organisations and at times to so called ‘academics.

Citizens are rarely engaged on national matters- take the new constitution- it would be interesting to carry out a survey to find out the proportion of citizens aware of the fact that we have a new constitution before we even ask about its provisions. In the new political culture of deference, we have citizens who have chosen to hide under the guise of religiosity, avoiding controversy/confrontation or are just too busy, praying and eking out an existence and have no time to be involved in national matters besides the direct causal relationship with their current situation. The task of mobilization should start off from the perspective of re-inserting citizens into politics-not just elections but in its everyday forms. A new consciousness around the national question and also national interest needs to be developed. I might as well quickly add that we have to guard against the obvious temptations by political party elites to hijack such processes and reduce them into patronage politics that ends spiced up by a redistributive tendency.

Citizen engagement has to start where the people are and has to address issue of direct relevancy. A common phenomenon in the rural and urban contexts is tendency towards associationalism. However most often the formations that are established tend to be parochial in nature-only focused

on a single issue. The task of organising will be in encouraging them to broaden their focus beyond the immediate grievances that they originally established to address, and to begin collaborations with others in similar circumstances and also address the systemic causes of the challenges they confront.

One may ask, how these formations can contribute towards deepening the process of democracy. Very little has been invested in terms of working with these associations as part of a broader engagement on national and local democracy. Tocqueville asserted that ‘in democratic countries the science of association is the mother of science’. Despite the fact that most of us belong to at least one association no university has yet created a Department of Associational Science/Studies. We do not have systematic studies of associational life’. In most instances these voluntary associational forms do not feature within the democratisation discourse especially around the big projects such as constitutional reform and elections. The potential synergy that can be derived through engaging local formations is underestimated especially within the realm of politics in government and civil society. They provide a platform for broad based mass mobilisation as we have seen in Latin America within the land movements and also in former communist countries such as Poland, where engaged citizens gathered under the banner of ‘Solidarity’ toppled a dictatorship. However, most analyses of the public space have unfortunately been devoted to the professionalised spaces dominated by donor supported NGOs. These NGOs and other professionalised formations are not necessarily at the centre of organic community mobilisation and in many cases their consultative and consensus building capacity is inadequate.

Beyond associations one of the most obvious gap in creating a democracy ecosystem is the limited linkage between rural focused unions such as the Zimbabwe Farmers’ Union (ZFU) and the more urban focused such as the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Union (ZCTU). Whilst they seemingly represent different interests they are mostly representing either same people (semi-proletariats) or people of similar income status. Zimbabwean smallholder agriculture has traditionally been financed through remittances from the urban areas-this suggesting a symbiotic relationship between the two sectors. However moments of joint action between the two unions mentioned above are very rare. Instead the ZFU has historically preferred to enter into an alliance with different forms of commercial farmers unions despite the different class interests represented. An

alliance between a farmers' union and a trade union around broader economic and political governance issues has potentially a bigger chance of creating real headaches for the ruling elite.

Re-invigorating the Zimbabwe Social Forum Platform

The Zimbabwe Social Forum (ZSF) was created in 2003. The ZSF was born out of participation in the earlier processes of internationally organised protests such as at Seattle, alliances built in other campaigns such as the debt and trade campaigns and also in other WSF meetings. Like the World Social Forum and the Africa Social Forum the ZSF was created to 'open space for working people, the poor, the oppressed and exploited to discuss and strategize on how to link up struggles and liberation from the yokes of capitalism, just as the capitalist and their governments annually meet at the WEF in Davos and other national, regional and international forums' (Gwisai, 2007).

It was mostly under the leadership of mostly NGO based activists. Although membership and participation at the ASF and ZSF was open to all organisations, social movements and individuals that subscribe to the ideals and principles of the ZSF charter. At its peak participation grew from the initial 300 to around 3000 people in 2006. Key actors in the ZSF included the trade and debt networks (ZIMCODD, AFRODAD and MWENGO), the labour groupings (ZCTU, ISO and Gapwuz), governance and constitutional reform networks (Crisis, Women's Coalition and NCA) and the youth movement (ZINASU, SST and ZSCM). ZIMCODD hosted the secretariat of the ZSF since its inception. However most of the key actor organisations were predominantly urban based NGOs.

There are two important considerations to bear in mind, firstly that the NGO formation is not a problem per se but rather what is contested is its autonomy in terms of decision making (understanding donor/NGO relations), the ability of the NGOs to include a wide variety of agendas, approaches and process of rationalizing different opinions. Others would argue that these are internal to NGOs and are not an issue in the ZSF process given the fact that all members are equal. However, such an argument disregards the significance of organisational culture and habits, such as a project based approach to executing strategy, which can be exported into the ZSF processes from NGOs. Secondly there are inherent limitations within the social forum process both at a global and local level. It is constituted as a discussion forum and has no programme of action

besides discussing the negative impact of neo-liberal capital, identification of alternatives and alliance building amongst similar minded organisations and movements. Others have called 'it a safety valve or talking shop for working people to vent out their anger now and then, but leaving the structures of exploitation intact' (Gwisai, 2007). Aye Win (2007) asserts; 'we have spent the past years letting off steam on the corporate-led neo-liberal globalisation process and the widespread suffering caused by the unjust global political and economic system'.

Is there need to think of the new social forum as an aggregating space for collaboration and action? It can and should be seen as a space where different groups can come together, connect their struggles and identify strategies for carrying them forward. Can the ZSF be reconstituted as a people's space rather than another NGO managed process?

Conclusion

We are in a period of uncertainty and unpredictability and face the risk of an entrenched longer period of despotism and stagnation. Current developments within the opposition forces do not hold much promise in terms of an organized mobilisation against the ruling regime. We face two possibilities, either continue with the usual formula or try new mobilization and protest civic action methodologies that put citizens at the centre. There is no quick answer to our quest for deepening democracy of our political processes except that we need to think, mobilize and act in other ways. Perhaps a starting point is to re-mobilizing the different social forces that have all along been reduced to spectators of an elite based political struggle.

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