

## **Worth the gamble? Access to information, risks and ethical dilemmas in undertaking research in authoritarian regimes: the case of Zimbabwe**

### **Le risque vaut-t-il la peine? Accès à l'information, risques et dilemmes éthiques dans l'entreprise de recherches dans des régimes autoritaires: Le cas du Zimbabwe**

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Undertaking ethnographic or phenomenological inquiry under a hovering cloud of dictatorship can often be a mammoth, some might even say life-risking, venture. In such circumstances, researchers are confronted with ethical dilemmas: the need to strike a balance between accessing credible first-hand information and playing it safe. It is against this background that this paper traces the challenges confronting researchers planning to conduct fieldwork in authoritarian regimes. Conducting research under a political culture of fear, polarization and censorship has proven to be something of a heinous task for my own research in my home country of Zimbabwe. Drawing from this experience, the paper discusses the risks, ethical dilemmas and apprehensions that underscore the challenge of carrying out fieldwork in authoritarian regimes. Specifically, the paper discusses how researchers, whose research might be perceived by governments as a threat to national security, can deal with risks, threats, and dangers regarding access to the gathering and retrieval of data.

**Keywords:** Access to information; Field work; Authoritarianism; Research techniques

Entreprendre une enquête ethnographique ou phénoménologique dans un contexte où plane un vent de dictature peut souvent constituer une entreprise colossale, certains pourraient même dire risquée pour la vie. Dans de telles circonstances, les chercheurs sont confrontés à des dilemmes éthiques: la nécessité de trouver un équilibre entre l'accès à des informations de première main crédibles et la sécurité. C'est dans ce contexte que cet article retrace les défis auxquels sont confrontés les chercheurs qui envisagent de mener des travaux de terrain dans des régimes autoritaires. Mener des recherches dans une culture politique de peur, de polarisation et de censure s'est avéré être une tâche odieuse pour mes propres recherches dans mon pays d'origine, le Zimbabwe. S'appuyant sur cette expérience, l'article discute des risques, des dilemmes éthiques et des appréhensions qui ressortent du défi de mener un travail de terrain dans des régimes autoritaires. Plus précisément, le document explique comment les chercheurs, dont les recherches pourraient être perçues comme une menace pour la sécurité nationale par les gouvernements, peuvent faire face aux risques, menaces et dangers liés à l'accès à la collecte et à la récupération des données.

**Mots clés:** Accès à l'information; travail sur le terrain; autoritarisme; techniques de recherche

## **Introduction**

Conducting research in states with authoritarian governments is a hazardous exercise which may undesirably lead to apprehension, arrest, or violence against both the researcher and their research participants. This, to a great extent, creates an environment of fear, time constraints, frustrations, and anxieties for the researcher. In my experience, authoritarian regimes are skilled at putting in place deterring mechanisms and stop-gap measures that ensure the access to information and retrieval of data are close to impossible. Yet, the failure to gather the courage to indulge in research in such circumstances is a disservice to the academic world and a violation of the cardinal virtue of knowledge generators – that is, generating knowledge and content for posterity's effective usage. The experiences are pivotal to providing insights into the human conditions and actions as viewed from multiple perspectives.

## **Characterizing Zimbabwe as an authoritarian state**

The Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front's (ZANU PF) hegemony and de facto one-party state status that the ruling party enjoyed for almost two decades began to dwindle with the coming of the new millennium (Rusero 2015). This coincided with the formation of a formidable opposition in 1999 which was a broad-based alliance of civil society, trade unions, students, farmers, the urban middle class, and the majority of the working-class who culminated in what became known as the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) under the leadership of former secretary general of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), Morgan Tsvangirai. However, ZANU PF and President Robert Mugabe never perceived the MDC to be a genuine alternative but instead framed them as agents of the west aiming to effect regime change to reverse the gains of the liberation struggle (Rusero and Mvundura 2020). Thus, the greater part of Mugabe's reign during this period was characterized by attempts to silence and curtail civic activism. His rule crystallized into authoritarianism characterized by the narrowing of democratic space, abductions, torture, the banning of Civil Society Organizations, silencing of the press, and wanton arrests of activists and critics (Makumbe 2006). All these are clear evidence of a deep authoritarian regime that manifested under ZANU PF's rule in Zimbabwe.

However, as early as 1983, Mugabe unleashed an army that killed an estimated 20,000 people in the Midlands and Matabeleland provinces – a crisis widely referred to as Gukurahundi (CCJP 1999). Although the government justified its actions by claiming it was clamping down on dissident activities planning to destabilize the newly independent state of Zimbabwe, contrary reports such as the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe (CCJP) suggest that the motive was primarily to weed out the threat posed by ZANU PF and Mugabe's main rivals: the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) and its leader Joshua Nkomo (CCJP 1999). ZAPU commanded majority support from the Midlands and Matabeleland provinces courtesy of the Ndebele tribal dynamics.

True to this realization, in 1987 Nkomo and ZAPU were cajoled into submission when they entered into a Unity Accord resulting in the amalgamation of 'PF-ZANU and PF-ZAPU' and the formation of ZANU PF (Coltart 2016). This was followed by yet another episode of violence in 1990, when founding member of ZANU PF and its secretary general Edgar Tekere was expelled after he vehemently refused proposals to make Zimbabwe a one-party state (Rusero and Mvundura 2020). Tekere went on to form the Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM) which challenged ZANU PF in the 1990 general elections. ZANU PF, averse to any form of dissent or alternative, responded by unleashing youth militia on ZUM supporters, burning property and torturing people sympathetic to and supporting ZUM (Mvundura 2020).

After a heavy defeat in a constitutional referendum in February 2000, ZANU PF responded by violently seizing white-commercial farms, claiming the move was aimed at redressing the colonial imbalances that were not resolved at Lancaster House Negotiations (Rusero and Mvundura 2020). According to the 2000 Parliamentary Election in Zimbabwe report of the Commonwealth Observer Group (2000, 10), the draft constitution provided for the compulsory acquiring of land by the government without compensation, unless resources came from the erstwhile colonial power, Britain. Rejection of a draft constitution with a provision of land was not taken lightly by ZANU PF (Rusero 2015). The historic sensitivities and grievances around the issue of land and the ruling party's approach to the land question served to trigger a process of rapid economic regression, and perfectly embodied its increasing hardliner and dismissive attitude to sound principles of political and economic governance and the rule of law (Simpson and Hawkins 2018). As such, the rejection of the ZANU PF-inspired draft constitution was followed with the effecting of the Constitutional Amendment No 16 Act 5/2000 which empowered the government to compulsorily acquire land without compensation (Dore 2012). Following the Amendment, No 16 of 2000, an intensification of occupations of white-owned farms occurred (Chari 2013). Facing resistance and opposition domestically and internationally, ZANU PF deliberately revived the immanence of a Zimbabwean nation

expressed through the Great Spirit mediums in the First Chimurenga of 1896-1897; and reincarnated by means of alliance between mediums of its liberation army wing of the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) guerrillas in the Second Chimurenga of the Liberation struggle. (Ranger 2004)

It became apparent that the legitimacy of the Zimbabwean state under Mugabe was derived not from the elections and international recognition, but from the historical fusion of authoritarianism and spirituality.

During the June 2000 parliamentary elections, ZANU PF lost most of its seats in the urban areas, while retaining overall control in the countryside, 'amidst well-documented systematic violence and intimidation against its opponents headed by the War Veterans and ZANU PF youth' (Amnesty International 2002). The MDC garnered 57 seats against ZANU PF's 62. Such ZANU PF victories, including the 2002 presidential election, continued to draw wide criticism against the Zimbabwean government from the west, such that during the entire crisis period until ZANU PF entered into a coalition with the MDC, the atmosphere was characterized by a plethora of authoritarian tendencies.

### **Authoritarianism: truth and fear in Zimbabwe**

As demonstrated above, until 21 November 2017 when President Robert Mugabe tendered his resignation before the Speaker of Parliament, Zimbabwe had been suffocating under a totalitarian government, massive oppression and a major crackdown against voices critical to the Mugabe authoritarian regime. According to Masunungure (2011), beginning in 2000, Zimbabwe's authoritarianism became militarized with the overt intrusion of the security sector into the political arena. Following its scare at the ballot box, the ZANU PF pursued authoritarian practices in the form of draconian and oppressive legislation. In a bid to remain in power by any means necessary, the militia was deployed to instil fear upon the masses.

By definition, authoritarianism is a form of government characterized by a strong central power, where individual freedoms tend to be subordinate to the state (Dahl 2008). Under an authoritarian regime, truth is often the first casualty of research, which makes conducting research under these circumstances a difficult task. When faced with such a task, the researcher

is confronted with emotive questions: Is it worth conducting a research project under potential life-risking circumstances? How limited might the research outcome be, given the risks associated with accessing data? And, how ethical or acceptable is deception – must one be truthful about the nature of one’s research at all times? These were the questions with which I grappled while carrying out my research project in Zimbabwe between 2012 and 2013.

My research, entitled, ‘The feasibility of regime change in Zimbabwe’ focused on the prospects of regime change in Zimbabwe with the, then forthcoming, 2013 harmonized elections in mind. Between 2009 and 2013, Zimbabwe was under the stewardship of the inclusive government comprising ZANU PF and two MDC formations. This arrangement was entered into at the behest of SADC and AU following the inconclusive harmonized elections of 2008. The 2008 elections saw three presidential contenders: Robert Mugabe of ZANU PF, Morgan Tsvangirai of the MDC as well as Simba Makoni who stood as an independent candidate following his defection from ZANU PF (Rusero and Mvundura 2020). The elections were inconclusive as President Mugabe was defeated in the first round by Tsvangirai who, however, did not garner enough votes, amounting to 51% as stipulated by the Constitution, to form the next government. This paved the way for a run-off slated for June 27, 2008, but citing persecution of his supporters, Tsvangirai pulled out of the race with Mugabe resulting in a one-man race where Mugabe was duly elected and sworn in as president (Rusero and Mvundura 2020). Citing legitimacy issues, the Africa Union (AU) and Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) intervened and recommended the formation of a coalition government. The inter party talks were mediated by the SADC-appointed former South African president, Thabo Mbeki. The talks concluded on 15 September 2008 following the investiture of the Global Political Agreement (GPA) signed by President Mugabe and the two MDC formations that, since 2005, have splintered into two groups following a dispute to contest the 2005 senatorial elections. The Government of National Unity commenced on 9 February 2009, after Tsvangirai was sworn in as Prime Minister, together with Arthur Mutambara and Thokozani Khupe as Deputy Prime Ministers. Governmental ministries were shared under agreed proportions stipulated in the GPA.

Whereas the GNU was largely projected as an opportunity to create a conducive environment for political transition, the political contest for the state continued and the expected transition under the GPA did not happen. As lamented by RAU (2010), the subtext of the power sharing arrangement was a clear demonstration to the ZANU PF that flawed elections would not impose the same kind of political pressure as coups and violations of the Constitutive Act of the African Union. ZANU PF’s total disregard for the GPA demonstrated to all and sundry that the erstwhile liberation movement never seriously considered adhering to the dictates of power sharing, as evidenced by the attempts to doctor the GPA prior to signing, the many ambiguities in the drafting and passing of Constitutional Amendment 19, and the unresolved issues around government appointments (RAU 2010). The situation was further complicated by the pronouncement of security chiefs who, throughout the course of the GNU, insisted that the MDC-T was unfit to govern and denigrating its leader, Tsvangirai, as a security threat (Rusero and Mvundura 2020). This leaves observers questioning whether an election where some prospective contenders were deemed unfit, unsuitable, or even security threats would yield any meaningful results.

On its own, as an expected alternative to ZANU PF, the MDC largely proved weak leading others to cast doubts on whether regime change was feasible. The increased political bickering and discord of the inclusive government, an arrangement which was meant to solve political enmity and civil strife led to lots of research on the feasibility of regime change in Zimbabwe. As such, the basis of my research was simply to examine whether regime change was feasible and whether there were prospects of any democratic, or even non-democratic space, for toppling

the ZANU PF regime from power. Far from what was perceived by some research subjects, my research objectives were to:

- Evaluate the feasibility of regime change in Zimbabwe.
- Assess public reactions, perceptions, and experiences to the regime change agenda.
- Make recommendations on requirements for consolidating democratic virtues by relevant stakeholders in Zimbabwe.

I was convinced that my research was of paramount importance because it was unique and timely to the real political situation on the ground. Regime change or renewal had fast become the simplest yardstick, or epistemological measuring instrument, to assess whether a government adheres to the basic tenets of democracy to which Zimbabwe was no exception.

### **Access to truthful information**

Fieldwork demands on the qualitative researcher are far greater than demands on researchers adopting other research strategies (Hurrell 2005) and the challenges faced in the process become aggravated in politically unstable environments. Challenges of conducting research in environments characterized by authoritarianism usually revolve around three broad themes: accessing participants, time limitations, and the subsequent frustrations and fears (Mukeredzi 2011). Oettler (2008) points out that one critical challenge in qualitative research is the sublation of multi-faceted research experiences. In relation to gaining access, Ely et al. (1994) contend that researchers may not obtain the consent and support of original line managers, or the support of other stakeholders who may be contextually closely connected to the field in which the researcher wants to do the fieldwork. Thus, from the onset, even prior to research being conducted in the form of penetrating the research setting, hindrances are already encountered as researchers are unlikely to receive any form of support.

In such circumstances, sabotage of the research process and its activities always occurs. As was the case with my research, researchers concur that, under repressive regimes and societies, academics on research activities are often perceived as spies and occasionally taken hostage and/or abused (Hubbell 2003). For instance, Bailey (2007) suggests that while restrictions may be imposed in particular settings, they may also be spawned by and intended to meet political mis-sions. The implication here is that the researcher should seek permission and speak to political leaders or other spokespersons if that is what it takes to facilitate entry into research sites in politically unstable settings. As such, given that gatekeeping and entry are dominant themes to consider for accessing participants, consultations with different levels of political hierarchies cannot be overlooked (Mukeredzi 2011).

Problems of access and communication have become compounded in authoritarian regimes. Again, researchers often make do with adequate and or inappropriate interview spaces in these settings, contrary to the standards of qualitative research that mandate that there should be an interview setting that allows for privacy and trust (Oettler 2008). On the other hand, taking participants out of their contexts for interview purposes also contradicts qualitative data generation norms and practices and may affect the interview content (Bailey 2007). The natural setting of the research site is always preferable in a qualitative paradigm, but when such is tampered with, as in the case of extreme authoritarian tendencies, the whole research process could be jeopardized.

Accessing the truth in authoritarian regimes, which are eminently dictatorial, often violent, and clearly oppressive, is an essentially unpractical, introspective business of secluded and subtle contemplation. In those volatile circumstances, it is likely that fears and prejudices may

inhibit an unbiased approach. In contrast, qualitative fieldwork demands that the researcher enters the research field with as much openness as possible (Britten 2008). However, overcoming fear and anxiety is often part of the researcher's motivation to continue with the data generation process. It is often this desire to press on in the face of all the dangers and politically related challenges that provide some source of courage. According to Bailey (2007), researchers who are not only uncomfortable and frustrated but downright miserable in research settings have done wonderful research.

From Oettler's (2008) perspective 'failed' field work and interviews do not obstruct the research process, but instead may accelerate it. Thus, fieldwork and interviews that might qualify as 'not good; at first glance might, nevertheless, contain 'typical' or even 'untypical' statements the researcher might be searching for, notwithstanding any political or other context (Mukeredzi 2011). Mukeredzi (2011) further postulates that when entry is eventually gained, participants are often unable and afraid to engage in meaningful dialogue with the researcher. As illustrated by Hubbell (2003, 10) 'in partially free or un-free circumstances, participants share their experiences with extreme caution'.

Research on the processes and challenges of conducting research has thus far been greatly underdeveloped in Zimbabwe. Although a new crop of scholars has emerged, writing on such areas as 'Ideology, Civilian Authority and the Military' (Tendi 2013), 'The Fear: The Last Days of Robert Mugabe' (Godwin 2011), 'Dinner With Mugabe: The story of a freedom fighter who became a tyrant' (Holland 2009), 'From liberator to dictator: An insider's account of Robert Mugabe's descent into tyranny' (Auret 2009), few of these scholars have attempted to unpack the constraints involved in actually carrying out research in the troubled state. This paper acts as a corrective to this gap. In analysing the risks associated with research in an authoritarian regime such as Zimbabwe, I seek to broaden the literature on accessing information, particularly by dissecting the constraints of conducting interviews. Furthermore, I shall also reflect on the practical strategies that may be adopted in conducting research under extreme circumstances of authoritarianism and resistance by the authorities.

In the following section, I outline the utilized research techniques. This empirical section draws on my personal experiences whilst conducting field research on the feasibility of regime change in Zimbabwe. Finally, I broadly consider the topic of conducting research in authoritarianism, challenges encountered, practical strategies that may be adopted to break through the barriers, as well as interrogating whether conducting research under authoritarianism is worth the gamble.

### **Research techniques**

It is important at this juncture to unveil research techniques that were made use of effectively during the conduct of this research. Merriam and Simpson (1984) describe a research design as a systematic procedure for collection and handling data to solve a research problem. Given that the research area under the spotlight was the feasibility of regime change in Zimbabwe, which in essence attracted interest and debate, I preferred to use interviews and at a later stage content analysis. Interviews were appropriate in that they helped gauge the research participants' emotions, grasp of the topic, interest, and perceptions of regime change in Zimbabwe. However, at times, what was supposed to be an interview became a focus group discussion, given the vitality of the place that the interviews were being conducted. The study population, according to Babbie (1986), is that aggregation of elements from which the sample is selected. Babbie reveals that, as a practical matter, the research is seldom able to guarantee that every element meeting the theoretical definitions laid down has a chance of being selected in the sample.



The population that was under study constituted adults and well-informed people because the nature of the research required some comprehensive understanding of the political developments of the country.

The process of selecting interviewees and attempting to access them proved challenging. Although Zimbabwe's research infrastructure appears flexible on the surface, the process of actually conducting research is difficult and poses risks to both the researcher and the participants. The volatile political situation at times leaves one with no choice but to effectively making use of snowballing. Although it largely worked for the progress and continuation of my research, the challenge I found in snowballing is that I ended up speaking to people with similar political party idiosyncrasies. As such, what was supposed to be a process full of divergent views and ideas became one laden with a similar fashion of polished euphemism. Indeed, it would have been worse had I been a foreigner. The binary characterization of bilateral and multilateral relations instituted by the Mugabe regime at the height of Zimbabwe's diplomatic stand-off meant that all nationals of foreign lands were considered either as enemies by virtue of coming from states that were perceived to be hostile to Zimbabwe, or as friends coming from states that were considered as Zimbabwe's allies (Ranger 2004). This experience was largely captured by Joshua Pritchard, a PhD Candidate from Cambridge University, when he visited Zimbabwe for research between 2014 and 2015.

Between October 2014 and September 2015, I was engaged in lengthy negotiations with the Zimbabwe Research Council regarding a permit to carry out archival and oral research in the country. Despite the support of Zimbabwean academics and a number of prominent politicians, the Research Council twice refused my application on the grounds that I was 'from a country unfriendly to Zimbabwe.' In conversations with academics at Zimbabwe's two largest universities, it was made apparent that applications by foreign researchers were being blocked by the government on nothing more than the nationality of the foreign researcher applying. Furthermore, these decisions were evidently being made against the wishes of the academics themselves. (Pritchard 2016)

The revelation by Pritchard above is a clear testimony of Zimbabwean society where the interplay between politics and academia must be considered to gain access to the nation's archives and people if you are a foreigner. This also becomes problematic when, as a local researcher, you are also perceived to be an 'enemy' of the state by the very same people who wield power to grant access. Being an active citizen within Zimbabwe's political realm, I ended up preferentially selecting some of the referral interviewees through a sense of predetermined outcomes of what they were likely to contribute or say pertaining my research.

In general, speaking to people about politics, economics, or even social life during the period in question became very difficult. People who did not know me directly in one way or the other demanded assurances before speaking, some of which I was not able to convincingly guarantee as a researcher. George Orwell's (1949) 1984 views the truth in a dictatorship as a capricious creature defined by the elites who wield power: 'Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing'. The depiction is very close to what I was confronted with in the field, where the ruling elite's view of research and their attempt to use the researcher to mould their own narratives, not necessarily a contribution to the body of knowledge or truth. The situation is further complicated by the observations made by the Afrobarometer survey in September 2018, when they observed that 'Zimbabweans are cautious about interpersonal interaction ... Zimbabweans who identify with an opposition political party are more likely than others to distrust their fellow citizens' (Afrobarometer 2018, 2). Moreover, social trust, which is a basic requirement for the smooth conduct of data collection and/or gathering, is quite an expensive commodity in an authoritarian environment that is laden with insecurity. Beyond formal rules embedded in laws and contracts, people rely on

informal expectations; they need confidence that others will desist from harming them and that fellow citizens will stay true to their word (Afrobarometer 2018, 3).

My interview questions were structured as follows:

- Is regime change feasible in the current socio-economic and political context of Zimbabwe?
- In what ways could there be a power transfer if the security sector has vowed never to let power go to a non-war cadre?
- Are elections, therefore, a critical democratic engagement in an environment like Zimbabwe?
- Apart from the ballot, are there any political alternatives of regime change and how feasible are they?

Interviewing people on the feasibility of regime change in Zimbabwe was often interpreted as a regime change project disguised as research; it was met with heavy resistance, scepticism and apathy.

As observed by Ranger (2004), the coming of the new millennium ushered a new dispensation where the ruling ZANU PF invented a monolithic narrative of patriotic history which revered the liberation struggle and applauded ZANU PF as the monopolistic bona fide party that emancipated the Zimbabwean masses from the yoke of colonial bondage. This became more apparent with the binary characterization of citizens by President Mugabe. One was either a ZANU PF supporter and thus, a progressive patriot or opponent of the ruling party and, therefore, a dangerous sell-out. Such war-mantra has not been helpful in any attempt to determine whether it was feasible for ZANU PF to retain power in the then-forthcoming 2013 harmonized elections.

In addition to the narrative of patriotic history which made binary characterization of citizens into either patriots and, thus, pro-ZANU PF or sell-outs and, consequently, enemies of the state, one of the major challenges that could potentially present an obstacle to my research was the promulgation of two pieces of draconian legislation by the government: the Access to Information, Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) in 2002 and the Public Order Security Act (POSA) in 2004. These two acts were designed to target the legal instruments that mainly constituted journalists and opposition political parties. Conducting research under AIPPA and POSA largely constrained the smooth process of information exchange as well as gathering data. Dozens of people, particularly journalists, have been arrested, detained, or harassed (Media Monitoring Report, 2004). Section 64 of AIPPA strictly warns against the abuse of freedom of expression and is being used to silence and curtail meaningful research as it is not clear what kind of information may threaten the interests of defence, public safety, public order, public morality, public health, and economic interests of the State. Sections 24 and 25 of POSA state that all planned public gatherings must apply to the police four days prior to the gathering, which may be denied. Such a provision largely acts as a barrier towards the conduct of focus group discussions in research as they are often interpreted as a gathering. Thus, under POSA and AIPPA, civic activism was significantly curtailed in similar proportions to other activities, such as conducting research or soliciting views from the people. Organizations such as ZimRights, Transparency Zimbabwe, National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition (CiZC) and many others were negatively impacted by POSA and AIPPA through arbitrary arrests of their leaders and the ransacking of their offices in search of evidence (Ziso 2007). Such classic examples of legislation enacted to squeeze and narrow the democratic space clearly show how undertaking research in such a prevailing environment also proved to be difficult.



### Experience in the field

While the hurdles of AIPPA and POSA present legal and physical challenges to be overcome, another element that was far more difficult to navigate, because of its psychological aspect, was fear. According to Chingono (2010), fear of death, reprisals, starvation, or uncertainty in general force many people to change their behaviours, practices, and forms of expression accordingly. As Chingono sees it, fear triggers an element of mistrust in strangers and unwillingness to divulge sensitive information. Neuman (1994, 342) buttresses this point, highlighting that it is not always easy to build rapport. One of the sources feeding this fear and mistrust that I quickly discovered during requests for interviews is that members of the public did not always voluntarily divulge information without being cleared by a community leader, usually a protégé of ZANU PF with de facto powers. ZANU PF has, over the years, successfully crafted a tight-knit patronage system whereby enthusiastic supporters of the party are the beneficiaries of programmes ranging from land allocation, small business loans, and licenses for vending in the central business district. Beneficiaries of such lucrative programmes would rather safeguard their interests than participate in any kind of research project that could show the ruling party in poor light. In addition to the well-oiled ZANU PF patronage machine, after nearly a decade of socio-economic and political breakdown and state-sanctioned violence, many desperate citizens viewed any form of engagement with anyone requiring their assistance or services as an opportunity for profiteering. As such, I found that on many occasions my attempts to elicit useful data from research participants provided little in the way of reliable information when they realized there was no profit to be made from talking to me.

As a result, the idea of what is truth becomes heavily contested in contexts where fear negatively impacts the voluntary divulgence of information, exchange of ideas, and freedom of expression. In such a situation, the researcher finds themselves confronted with the complex task of deciphering partisan biases, ideological idiosyncrasies, and deceit encountered during interviews, and discussions. These were some of the major challenges that I was confronted with on a daily basis during the conduct of my project and it is to these challenges that the paper now turns.

The explanations that we give about our research to the people we are studying ‘are important, perhaps central to research, yet are intensely problematic’ (Walmsley cited in Shakespear, Atkinson, and French 1993, 37). This is so given that explanation and clarity must be provided to the authorities for research clearance purposes as well as to the research subjects whose consent has to be sought prior to indulging in the initial research process. Good research ethics demand that researchers treat their research participants with respect, honestly explaining what the research involves and what the researcher is doing to avoid endangering their lives (Chingono 2010). At times, under extremely difficult circumstances, a researcher may find their ethical principles challenged by the steps they take both to protect themselves and to facilitate their research. For some researchers, carrying out fieldwork in authoritarian states, protecting one’s self, and the integrity of one’s research can involve distorting the truth.

In states such as Zimbabwe where political violence is ingrained in the system, particularly in the lead up to elections, the question of whether to exercise total honesty about the nature of one’s research cannot be decided *a priori* but is, rather, more dependent on the demands of a specific situation, particularly where telling the truth may put the researcher or research participants’ lives in danger (Chingono 2010). For example, a youth from Matapi Flats in Mbare warned that if his father heard him discussing politics he would ‘cease’ to be his father.

One element of daily life in Harare that had the potential to threaten my research as well as other researchers was the ZANU PF-created shadow militia groups instilling fear and

intimidating people with the aim of weeding out known and potential threats to the ruling party. One such militia group was the Chipangano, modelled on the same wavelengths as Haiti's ruthless Taunton Macoutes and its reign of terror. The prevailing logic of ZANU PF at the time was that western-backed threats was sufficient justification to institute militia 'vanguards', such as Chipangano, guarding against regime change. In return Chipangano, which had de facto policing powers, established 'bases' to re-orientate 'sell-outs', 'party rebels', and, what it referred to as, 'lost' citizens in Harare's oldest suburb of Mbare (Dodo, Nsenduluka, and Kasanda 2016). However, political bases have remained a common feature of ZANU PF political approaches back-dating to the liberation struggle days. Bases have been used as institutions for the perpetuation of terror, pain, fear, and coercion (Dodo, Nsenduluka, and Kasanda 2016). An attempt of soliciting views on the prospects of regime change under the climate of bases where perceived enemies were sent for 'reorientation' or torture was likely to pause challenges and risks both for the participants in the research as well as the researcher himself.

Furthermore, the concept of regime change is not part of the ZANU PF's Orwellian '*newspeak*' because it is an anathema to the party's ideology and over-obsession with the centre of power craziness. So powerful was Chipangano that it extorted money from a large number of business operators in Harare, ranging from transport operators, car dealerships, shop owners and vendors. The money ensured a business license, provided a protection service and was an exhibition of loyalty to the ruling ZANU PF. It became a norm that whenever there was a function for ZANU PF, all business would come to a halt and Chipangano would ensure total compliance.

Conducting research in such an atmosphere of fear proved not only physically dangerous, but also costly, both to myself and to my research participants. In one instance, a young woman from Mbare Market asked me: 'Why are you interested in issues to do with regime change? What if you are a secret agent of Chipangano disguised as a researcher? Have you been cleared to talk to us at the Chipangano base?' This practice of asking questions peripheral to the motives of the research continued throughout the entire process of my research and as such created an obstacle to more meaningful responses that I had hoped to elicit. However, excessive peripheral questions were not the only obstacle to data collection. In some contexts, the mere mention of the phrase 'regime change' was interpreted literally by research participants as an attempt to remove ZANU PF from power, while others saw the research process as an opportune platform to demonstrate and pledge their allegiance to ZANU PF.

Informed consent, derived from persons other than those being targeted during interviews, was also a challenge to accessing data. In *Mupedzanhano*, a famous Harare flea-market, vendors were not allowed to speak to strangers without first receiving clearance from Chipangano leaders. Any attempts to divulge information without permission would be interpreted as selling out to the opposition and would result in the loss of one's stall. This would often be accompanied by beating or torture and finally blacklisting in the infamous Chipangano 'black book'. The threat of blacklisting was extremely detrimental to free participation in my research as it would automatically translate to the deprivation of any means of livelihood for the research participant. In some rare circumstances, the Chipangano leaders granted consent for the interviews to take place provided they themselves were present during the interview deliberations. This proved problematic given that most interviewees had been victims of these leaders at some time in one way or another. As a result, interviews conducted under such conditions were reduced to yes/no answers.

My evolving identity as a researcher has been heavily influenced, and greatly inspired, by the work that I do daily as a lecturer of Journalism Studies and an active participant in international and local media debates. This has proven problematic given that prejudices usually arise when talking to people who are media literate and thus, familiar with your views and perceptions,

especially towards the government. However, my research, as I was convinced, was not supposed to be perceived as strictly political or having any political connotations or insinuations on the need to topple the ZANU PF regime. It was simply a feasibility study given the manifesting squabbles within the opposition as well as its questionable preparedness to lodge a meaningful contest with the ruling ZANU PF ahead of the 2013 harmonized elections.

My identity, thus, presented a challenge to accessing data. As a newspaper columnist with one of Zimbabwe's daily newspapers, some potential research participants labelled me 'a well-known critic of ZANU PF' and others 'an apologist of the opposition'. Often in such circumstances, my multiple identities as a lecturer in Journalism Studies, a newspaper columnist, and a political analyst jeopardized the whole research process before it began.

### **Discussion: worth the gamble?**

Whatever the circumstances, any discussion pertaining to whether conducting research in authoritarian regimes is worthwhile should positively convince discussants that indulging in any research has its own detrimental and devastating implications but the exercise is worth pursuing given the potential that research has in unlocking the conundrum bedevilling troubled states such as Zimbabwe. Today knowledge is only power if it can be produced, disseminated and controlled by those with enduring mental faculties to generate on a daily basis. Knowledge is the icon of the new dispensation and pivotal to sustainable socio-economy development. A society can only prosper and become dominant if there is superlative moral and intellectual leadership. Those seeking to be dominant are cognisant that their ideas should be easily available and accessible through publishing and widespread dissemination. It is through providence of new knowledge, continued enquiry, and the pursuit of practical solutions that standards of life can be uplifted and the perennial problematic conditions that people are subjected to removed. This can only be achieved through constant and valid research activities.

The objective of my research, upon which the experiences discussed above were attained, was understanding the feasibility of regime changes in Zimbabwe ahead of the 2013 harmonized elections. Indeed, the underlying problem, given the multi-faceted problems as well as a split ripping the main MDC opposition apart, was how the former formidable party dislodge ZANU PF from power in 2013? What the researcher ended up being confronted with and the original intention of the research was two worlds apart. This required negotiating access and relations with people and deciding how much to disclose about the research to all participants interested. These confrontations accompanied with them frustrations and disappointments, but in spite of this, I soldiered on. In research, the information provided elsewhere is better than no information at all. As such perseverance and navigating the tides are traits that researchers conducting field work ought to develop and internalize when conducting research in authoritarianism. The notion that 'one does not always get what he or she wants' largely applies here. The bureaucratic and political processes confronted during the process of the research are hurdles but essential once attained as they, at times, act as the only shield and safety guarantee the researcher can have in the field.

In addition, researchers should master the art of tolerating purposeful expression of feelings – the recognition of the research participants' need to express their feelings, especially during interviews. Researchers should listen purposefully, neither discouraging nor condemning the expressions of those feelings, sometimes even actively stimulating and encouraging them when it is therapeutically useful for attaining valid information. Mastering a non-judgmental attitude is another technique researchers ought to employ which denotes quality based on a conviction that the researcher desists from making judgments about the standards, attitudes, or actions of research participants. There is a need to guard against stereotypes based

on gender, religion, race, tribal, political, or cultural relations. More importantly, upholding confidentiality is a prerequisite when conducting research in authoritarian regimes and such assurance must be made to the research participants to combat signs of scepticism that may arise at the early stages of the research process. Certain information conveyed to a researcher might not be for public consumption but for the researcher to have a clear understanding of the story.

Conducting research in authoritarian regimes is a critical venture in bringing to light dark episodes of socio-economic and political wellbeing. This paper has attempted to identify some of the main practical, theoretical, and ethical problems likely to confront researchers carrying out researching authoritarian regimes. As such, although the qualitative research paradigm was adopted, a combination of various qualitative techniques was seen as the most feasible research approach. This has been buttressed by Neuman (1994, 336) who states that a field researcher 'does not begin with a set of methods to apply or explicit hypothesis to test. Rather, he or she chooses techniques on the basis of their value for providing information'. Polarization and criminalization of regime change have had detrimental effects to conducting meaningful research in Zimbabwe, which the implications of the new political dispensation now in place should rectify.

After being confronted with the negativities of extrapolating information within the context of authoritarianism, the researcher had to be patient, flexible and diverse in accepting people as they are and not necessarily affected by negativity and prejudices. It is, thus, a major requirement going forward when undertaking research in authoritarian regimes or politically unstable environments for researchers to exercise caution, sensitivity, and at times empathy to the research participants. The concept of 'individualization', borrowed from the discipline of humanitarian work can be employed in the circumstances under discussion. Individualization is the recognition and understanding of each victims' unique qualities. It is based upon the right of humans to be individuals and to be treated not just as human beings but human beings with personal differences. In gathering information, a researcher should not simply assume that all citizens living under authoritarianism are victims, and that, therefore, their problems, their feelings, and traumas are the same. It is in this context that researchers ought to be free from bias and prejudice, and harbour knowledge of human behaviour, an ability to listen and observe as well as retain perspective.

## **Conclusion**

The ousting of Robert Mugabe from power marked a new epoch in the history of Zimbabwe that can be cultivated for the advancement of research practice in Zimbabwe. However, researchers ought to be conscious that the same authoritarian system that Mugabe left is still in place and intact and may be reactivated anytime depending on the prevailing political climate of the day. As such, the skilful researching techniques and strategies I have highlighted ought to be mastered and perfected.

This paper proposes that far from being demotivated and abandon potential researches, the snags, surprises, frustrations, fear and times boredom and impatience associated with conducting research in authoritarian regimes should not stall the research process but instead, flexibility, patience, and tolerance should be a motivational factor to continue extrapolating information that may be relevant and useful.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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