

Crisis of political leadership in Zimbabwe

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SUMMARY

Zimbabwe faces the deepest crisis of its time. The three main impediments to getting out of the crisis are, first, the current kleptocratic and dictatorial rule of President Emmerson Mnangagwa and his ZANU–PF party; second, the leadership and policies of the largest opposition party, the MDC; and last but not least, the operations of the World Bank and the IMF in Zimbabwe.

Introduction

This debate piece presents arguments that, for Zimbabwe to get back to being the stable and strong southern African economy that it once was, Zimbabweans have to eliminate three main impediments: the first and most toxic one is the current kleptocratic and dictatorial rule of Emmerson Mnangagwa and his Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF) party; followed by Nelson Chamisa, the president of the largest opposition party in Zimbabwe; last but not least, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) representatives in Zimbabwe. This strong viewpoint emerged from a detailed review of political manifestos of the main political parties which took part in Zimbabwe’s 2018 general elections. The ultimate goal of the review was (and still is) to answer a very important question posed by the late Gibson Sibanda, a Zimbabwe trade unionist and founder member of the opposition party Movement For Democratic Change (MDC), who rhetorically asked ‘for how long shall we wait for the biblical Moses to deliver us?’ (as quoted in Raftopoulos 2000, 276); although it has been over 20 years since he asked that question, it remains even more relevant today. As Ibbo Mandaza put it in January 2019, ‘the country is burning and those purportedly in charge are clueless and virtually in disarray, what is to be done?’ (Gonda 2017). In my view, the impending implosion is going to catch the international community unawares because they have been successfully beguiled by Mnangagwa while some, particularly the British, seem to have fallen for Chamisa’s empty rhetoric. These contentions will be explained further in the rest of the piece, and in the conclusion I will share my opinion on Zimbabwe’s most urgent developmental trajectory.

In the first draft of this paper, I merely concluded that Zimbabwe is a broken nation completely devoid of political leadership, and a strong civil society. One reviewer pointed that observations about the lack of ideological clarity have been made by others in the past (see Bond 1998; Sithole 1999; Gwisai 2002; Zeilig 2008; Kriger 2012) but missing from all this is a clear position about the needed future trajectory. In this review of political manifestos, the main element that I was in search of was a central idea or ideology, but none of the Zimbabwe ruling and opposition parties spelt out their political or economic ideology very clearly; however, on closer analysis, they were all (except for the late Dumiso Dabengwa’s Zimbabwe African People’s Union [ZAPU]) unapologetically neoliberal in scope, especially Dr Nkosana Moyo’s Alliance for the People’s Agenda. The absence of what I would describe as a Zimbabwean soul was and still is evident; the country is grounded in ideas borrowed largely from its English colonial masters and, to a much lesser extent, Marxist-Leninism plagiarised from countries that funded the war against colonialism.

One person who holds a distinctly different political position in Zimbabwe is Gwisai (2002), a former MDC member of parliament who is currently a general coordinator of the International Socialist Organisation in Zimbabwe. In brief, he situates the revival of Zimbabwe in socialist-led workers' movements. I appreciate that workers have played a significant role in Zimbabwe politics during both the colonial and post-colonial era but today the country is deindustrialised – less than 10% of the population are in formal employment where they can have representation of a workers' union. The main controversy about Gwisai's political ideas is over his call to get rid of capitalism; what remains unanswered is what will happen after capitalism? Not only that, but what does his communist economic blueprint entail, and where has it ever worked? He supported the land invasions, but today many ZANU–PF and ex-combatant-owned A2 farms are growing weeds instead of wheat and maize to feed the nation. He also supported expropriation of white-owned businesses, with the end result that many of the war veterans and other black Zimbabweans who took over these productive businesses only managed to asset-strip them and abandoned them afterwards. Given this dire state of affairs, is it realistic for Zimbabwe to put its future in the hands of the less than 10% of the population who are currently in employment and a communist movement that many are not familiar with?

Mnangagwa's ZANU–PF manifesto followed the adage 'The voice of the people is the voice of God', but I doubt that I'm alone in not understanding what Mnangagwa really meant by that. I suppose it is probably associated with the promise to uphold democratic values, but the irony is that he promulgated that phrase when the military (not the people) was removing Mugabe from power. Aside from that, if truly the voice of the people was the voice of God, one wonders how 20,000 unarmed Ndebele people in Matabeleland were murdered by the Fifth Brigade (see Keane 2002; Doran 2015) simply for belonging to a tribe that is different to that of Mnangagwa, Mugabe, Shiri, Chiwenga and their accomplices, and how the voices of over three million Zimbabweans ended up in foreign lands where most are treated as subhuman, forced into dirty and dangerous jobs far away from their loved ones? More recently, once again the so-called voice of God was killed and silenced on 1 August 2018 (Burke 2018) when the young people who took to the streets in protest over the delay in announcing the 2018 election results were shot by soldiers who are meant to protect them. As if that was not enough, in January 2019, Mnangagwa's government again ordered security forces to fire live bullets at unarmed civilians who were protesting over the 150% fuel price increases announced on 12 January (Cotterill 2019).

The vacuous 'The voice of the people is the voice of God' was an equally sterile ideological thrust in an 'egalitarian society' but with no explanation of what that actually entails or how it is going to be actioned. The reality today is that inequality remains extreme, and the false commitment to egalitarianism is all too clear: the vice president, former president and other senior government officials are flown by private jets to India, Singapore, South Africa or wherever they feel like going for medical check-ups (or whatever else), while hospitals and pharmacies have no medication, doctors and nurses go unpaid for several months, innocent civilians die of treatable medical conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, HIV etc. The dire state of health care was recently characterised as a silent genocide by Zimbabwean medical doctors who have been on a prolonged general strike over low wages. This gap between rhetoric and reality are all too common with Mnangagwa and ZANU–PF as a whole; speaking egalitarianism and democracy has become a cheap ZANU–PF ploy to pacify and silence Zimbabweans and the international community, while they kill and pillage as they have always done.

To assess ZANU–PF’s position on the economy one doesn’t really have to rely on their manifesto as such, as their actions can be examined. At the time of supposed ‘austerity for prosperity’ (*The Herald* 2018) the Zimbabwe government increased soldiers’ salaries by 17.5–22% despite the fact that the projected economic growth for 2019 was –7.1% (IMF 2019); in the 2018 budget, they allocated a US\$546.9 million budget to the ministry of defence, almost US\$2 million more than the budgetary allocation for higher and tertiary education in a country that has been at peace since 1987. The splurge didn’t end there – President Mnangagwa purchased brand-new all-terrain 4 × 4 vehicles for traditional chiefs at an estimated cost of US\$6 million. To illustrate the absurdity of such expenditure, Matabeleland North province of Binga has 18 chiefs, all of whom received the brand new Twin Cab Isuzu 4 × 4 vehicles at an estimated cost of US\$0.5 million, and yet the whole of Binga district only has one ambulance, barely in working order, and some of the hospitals and clinics don’t even have doctors or life-saving medication. The President also purchased brand new vehicles for war veterans; and yet when Zimbabweans report crime to the police, the victim of crime is forced to shoulder transport costs because the police do not have working vehicles to get to the crime scene. When the ex-President Robert Mugabe’s mother-in-law passed away while Mugabe and his wife were abroad in Singapore, Mnangagwa chartered a private plane to fly both of them back to Zimbabwe (Thompson 2018b); and Robert Mugabe was awarded a retirement package that was double that of the former British prime minister Tony Blair, whose country has a per capita GDP which is 37 times that of Zimbabwe. Within two years of Mnangagwa taking over power in November 2017, by August 2019 the money supply in the country had increased 2.5 times. Despite abusing tax payers’ funds in this manner, the government have no qualms attending world meetings with a begging bowl in their hands.

Moving on to the Movement For Democratic Change Alliance (MDC Alliance)’s ‘SMART’ manifesto document, it reads like an information communication technology (ICT) essay written by a poorly performing vocational college first year student: it is peppered with pictures including a drone spraying pesticides on a green crop field, a Photoshopped image of an urban motorway system, construction workers grinding it out under a beautiful sunset, a mobile-phone-controlled irrigation sprinkler system and much other fanciful imagery. During the 2018 election campaign, Chamisa came out on the news accusing ZANU–PF of stealing some of his ideas expressed in their ‘smart’ document, but I am confident that those who took their time to read it will not be convinced that there was anything worth stealing, even by ZANU–PF. Branding a document ‘smart’ does not make it smart; as Professor Diana Jeater aptly observed, ‘a call for Big Ideas is not in itself a Big Idea’ (Zhangazha and Sibanda 2018).

Proposals made by the MDC Alliance are not that meaningfully different from ZANU–PF; they both offer common-sense commentaries about the economy but not much beyond that. Most of Chamisa’s promises are rather grandiose, bordering on naive in some cases; for example, he speculated (note, I did not use the word forecast) that Zimbabwe would be a US\$100 billion economy in less than 10 years. For that to materialise, the economy has to grow by an average of 12.2% every year, and yet between 2007 and 2016 the average growth rate in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) has been 3.7%; furthermore, the Africa Development Bank forecast that real GDP will be 2% in 2018 and 2.4% in 2019. This begs the question, how realistic is it that Zimbabwe’s economy would grow four to five times that of SADC. For such a miracle to happen, my guess is that the whole of SADC region would have to suspend production for those 10 years.

Fiscal and monetary policies

Many of the political parties responded to Zimbabwe's financial crisis but in the process regurgitated World Bank and IMF financialisation and financial inclusion dogma, while others made minor adaptations but retained the essence of monetarism, which in this instance is a belief that a bank account, digital and plastic money can alleviate the economic and liquidity crisis and extreme poverty that the country is currently facing. In their manifesto, ZANU–PF routinely resorted to hyperbole and rhetoric, making feckless pronouncements like 'capacitation of the country's financial institutions', 'introduction of innovative financial products', 'promoting financial inclusion' and 'financial literacy programmes' and 'efficient circulation of cash through the banking system'. Nearly all the political parties proclaim a commitment to the use of 'plastic money' and 'digital platforms such as internet banking', 'mobile money transactions' and other technologically based financial services. The irony in these banal pieces of advice is that in total Zimbabwe made US\$37-billion-worth of payments in the second quarter of 2018 (a month before the elections), and of these, 97.84% were electronic i.e. real-time gross settlement (RTGS), mobile money, point-of-sale (POS) and online debit and credit card payments. Despite the cash-light economy (98% electronic payments) the liquidity crisis is worsening every day. The same electronic forms of money that they are all advocating for empowered the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ) to spend recklessly and engage in unorthodox activities that led to the government debt shooting from less than US\$8 billion in 2013 to an estimated US\$20 billion at the end of 2018.

Mnangagwa's so-called new dispensation is probably even worse; from December 2017 to June 2018 his government racked up US\$7-billion-worth of debt in just six months. It is astounding how both the ruling party and opposition would hold the belief that the poverty that Zimbabweans are experiencing could somehow be due to the fact that the poor do not have bank accounts, access to digital money or perhaps lack the skills to budget the 35 US cents that 70% of Zimbabweans are estimated to be earning per day.

The People's Rainbow Coalition (PRC), led by Dr Joyce Mujuru, promised to provide more funding to the Small and Medium Enterprises. Zimbabwe has had the Small Enterprise Development Corporation (SEDCO) for over 30 years, but besides subsidising powerful politicians and in turn being subsidised by the RBZ, SEDCO is only renowned for advancing loans to politicians who never pay them back. The MDC Alliance proposed to set up a 'Financial Affairs Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (FARAZ)' which will carry out supervision and surveillance of financial institutions; their plan is that it will take away from the Reserve Bank the power to regulate and supervise the financial and banking sector because, '[i]t is heavily debatable whether a country which does not print its own money requires a reserve bank' (MDC Alliance 2018, 40). They quickly contradicted themselves by stating that they would reintroduce the Zimbabwe dollar, without explaining how that would be possible to achieve without a central bank. Strangely, they also undertake to reform the RBZ, an institution whose functions they want to replace with another monetary outfit. If the purpose of FARAZ is to supervise financial institutions just as all central banks do, how is that a unique innovation unseen before in Zimbabwe or elsewhere? Chamisa, the leader of the MDC Alliance, goes on to state that he will seek World Bank approval on re-basing the economy e.g. revaluation of the country's GDP etc., commitment to the repayment of the IMF debt so that he can borrow more money from them; he says this without raising the moral question, firstly about an independent nation seeking direction from the IMF for a mundane and inconsequential proposal and, secondly and most importantly, about an international financial institution owned by the richest nations in the world forcing a country of starving people to repay a debt that they cannot afford. Lastly, he does not even challenge

the fact that the World-Bank-imposed Economic Structural Adjustment Programme was the main accessory in the destruction of Zimbabwe's economy although of course, as others have stated, the blame sits entirely in the hands of ZANU–PF and its respective leaders. Failure to engage with these pertinent debates at this critical juncture suggests that, for a person in his position, Chamisa does not have sufficient grasp of monetary and fiscal policies nor much awareness of the complex financial history and politics surrounding the country's economic prosperity and more recent decline. In my view, the economic decline is partly attributed to neoliberalism, in particular the World Bank economic policies which led to severe hardships for people in the low-income group, and especially deindustrialisation and retrenchments that were on a scale never experienced before.

The sad over-reliance on externally determined solutions does not engender faith that these second-hand proposals are made by people who are competent in turning around the broken nation of Zimbabwe.

Agriculture and rural development

Agriculture and land are increasingly becoming highly charged emotive issues in Zimbabwe, but all the manifestos reviewed in this debate piece do not provide reasoned rational insight on how this complex issue could be addressed. It has been almost 20 years since the fast track land reform and yet both the ruling party and opposition political parties remain vague about how agricultural production can be restored. They have all had the chance to either read previous land audits or commission their own, but their ambiguous propositions suggest that they could not be bothered with either the former or the latter. Although it is unlikely that the land reforms could be reversed, the whole issue about taking land from white farmers (who are also Zimbabwean, if I may add) without compensation was rejected by Zimbabweans in the 2000 referendum. Perhaps voters who rejected this knew that the land would simply be transferred from a few white farmers to a few politically connected black owners; for example, media reports strongly affirm that the majority of beneficiaries of A2 farms are ZANU–PF government ministers and ex-combatants. If indeed that is true, are Zimbabweans prepared to accept that 4000 white Zimbabwean farmers were displaced only to be replaced by ZANU–PF and ex-combatants?

ZANU–PF promises 'consolidation of land ownership and security of tenure'; similarly, the Coalition of Democrats (CODE) guarantees 'provision of title to current land occupants', and likewise, the PRC, led by Dr Mujuru, promises to 'issue full title deeds'. Their propositions completely overlook contested farm ownership, and complexities relating to monetisation of title deeds; what are the chances that Zimbabwean banks would be so imprudent to accept as security a title deed from someone who has owned a farm for 20 years but still has no capacity to produce anything but weeds? The MDC commits to the 'resolution of the land question' but what they fail to state is what the land question is. They go on to state that 'reorganization of communal land will include separating residential land and farming land' (MDC Alliance 2018, 58). It is a puzzle how they managed to prioritise separation of residential and farming land; a cursory review of contemporary debates and literature does not suggest that this is supported by empirical research, theory or practical problems that communal farmers are currently facing. It is impossible that such sideshows will address the impending food crisis, predicted by the UN (BBC 2019). All the manifestos were dismal: the only consolation was in ZAPU's stand on the land issue, in their promises to *strengthen the independence of the Land Commission and operationalise its mandate to conduct land audits*

and determine productive farm size, and to set a limit on the size of land and number of farms owned.

Traditional leadership, ex-combatants and men of God

The relevance of traditional chiefs and ex-combatants in Zimbabwe's social and political space has to be urgently re-examined. In the colonial past, many chiefs chose to be the lapdogs of the colonial Rhodesian government and more recently extensions of ZANU–PF. On the other hand, ex-combatants never miss the opportunity to remind Zimbabweans that they owe their political independence to them. They conveniently wipe out everybody else's contributions to the liberation struggle. Since 1980, the self-declared war heroes have been making monocratic claims on Zimbabwean society, their list of demands including exemption from parking fees in towns, allocation of 20% residential and commercial land in all urban areas, and a US\$450,000 one-off gratuity. These demands are in addition to what they have already received in the past: assembly and demobilisation pay; a US\$50,000 lump sum gratuity; a monthly pension of US\$2000; free primary, secondary and tertiary education; presidential scholarships; commercial farms; gratuities from the war victims compensation fund, etc. Despite all these, the ruling and opposition parties made pledges which suggest that they all intend to appease them right up to the detriment of ordinary Zimbabweans who have been sacrificing their sweat and blood for nearly four decades. None of the parties were audacious enough to ask the question, at what point will enough ever be enough?

The nation of Zimbabwe is under the spell of superstition and juju Christianity; at the core of this moral degeneration are traditional healers and the self-styled men of God who have sprouted up across Zimbabwe and sub-Saharan Africa. They make grandiose claims that they can speak to God directly. Their insidious activities range from selling anointed condoms, to alluring women to bring their underwear to church so they can bless them. Other flippant antics include guessing (for show) their supplicant's home addresses and ID numbers, and predicting the death of old, senile world leaders. There are numerous newspaper reports about designer-clothes-wearing Pentecostal preachers who sexually harass and rape their congregants, demand money in exchange for supposed divine miracles, and make exorbitant and veiled demands for tithes out of a downtrodden and suffering nation. To them, the virtues of a good pastor are no longer measured by recognised training in theology and a long-standing commitment to their flock's spiritual needs; instead they have a nefarious agenda to manipulate society into believing that god's blessings cannot come through hardship; and yet adversity has often led to compassion, kindness and humility. By attributing trials and tribulations to the works of witchcraft by jealous friends and relatives, they dismantle the very same social bonds that religion is meant to be strengthening.

The reason why no one from politics, government and civil society is challenging these new age church leaders, is because they have all been captured. Part of the reason why the leader of the MDC and his party have no strategy and are repeatedly outmanoeuvred by ZANU–PF is because the leader outsources analysis, reasoning and strategy to Pentecostal pastors (Ndlovu 2018; Chibamu 2019; Gambakwe 2019). Similarly, the current president, his deputies and a few ministers have been seen dining and coveting with some of these self-declared men of God (Tafirenyika and Kwaramba 2015; SABC 2018b; New Zimbabwe 2019) who have on numerous occasions asserted that Mnangagwa was chosen by God. For a country that boasts of having an educated population, the preference for divine miracles at the expense of logic and common sense is astounding. As David Coltart lamented in 2019, the country has 'far too many buffoons' with doctorates (Ndlovu 2019).

Economy

MDC's former finance minister Tendai Biti and the current finance minister Professor Mthuli Ncube don't see eye to eye on a professional and personal level (see Ramorei 2019) but I will argue here that ideologically they eat from the same plate. Biti's enthusiasm for cash budgeting is no secret: when he was finance minister he went (and still does) by the mantra that we eat what we kill. During his tenure as finance minister between 2009 and 2013, when the country was run by the Government of National Unity (GNU), ¹ Zimbabwe achieved stability and economic growth of over 10% per annum. The IMF, World Bank and other international organisations lauded him for his strict fiscal discipline, and yet the largest economies, the USA in particular, is significantly sustained by a budget deficit, estimated to be US\$1 trillion in 2020. Predictably, his celebrated success ended with the dissolution of the GNU in 2013. Similarly Professor Ncube recently congratulated himself on a budget surplus (see Nyoni 2019; *The Independent* 2019) but forgot to mention that he funded it by taxing mobile payments made by the already overtaxed Zimbabweans, and furthermore omitted the fact that the surplus was also funded from inflation, which is suspected to be running in excess of 500%. Professor Ncube's various photo opportunities with African Development Bank officials and press statements suggests that the esteemed professor is a surrogate of the World Bank and IMF officials who are dictating the tune behind the scenes.

Conclusion

This debate suggests that the question of who shall lead Zimbabwe is indeed a very important one. In his short time as leader of MDC Alliance, Chamisa has already made far too many serious mistakes, e.g. the perceived insensitivity of taking power while Tsvangirai's family was in the midst of making his burial arrangements (see Thompson 2018a), agreeing to proceed with elections without the necessary reforms because of his gamble that he would win (SABC 2018a), and failing to manage the expectations of the young hungry and justifiably angry youth when they protested about the delay in announcing election results – not only that, but calling them stupid! (BBC 2018; news24 2018); and the member of parliament (MP) election debacle, i.e. fielding multiple candidates to contest as MPs in the same constituency. The biggest one is publicly supporting a military coup which is obviously undemocratic and then after a few months protesting about a stolen election and electoral fraud (both of which are just as undemocratic as the military coup). As a democrat, his main focus today is forcibly removing a president who controls 66% of parliament (179 MPs out of a total of 270); even if he had won the disputed presidential election, it is difficult to contend how he would have authoritatively run the country while controlling a mere 32% of parliament. This raises the suspicion that Chamisa has a veiled desperation for power rather than genuine concern for Zimbabwe's long-term interests. If Chamisa cared enough, right now he could be concentrating on seeking funding and support for the four million Zimbabweans in the diaspora to vote at the next election, engaging with the ruling party about electoral reforms, reaching out to junior military officers and providing the necessary reassurances so that in the future they may have the courage to defy orders that do not serve the nation of Zimbabwe, proposing a convincing and credible alternative monetary solution to the current crisis and protesting about that single idea until it gains public legitimacy. Just as Jeater observed, Chamisa is clearly out of his depth; if an average performing MDC Alliance politician was in his place, I believe that as the main opposition party in control of all high economic activity zones (urban areas mostly), the person would be the one defining monetary policy decisions, not the hapless finance minister Professor Ncube.

Zimbabwean society is indeed a fractured society – or manipulated electorate, as the Zimbabwean political scientist Dr Mandaza put it in an interview with Violet Gonda (Gonda 2017). The country is splintered along political and religious lines: some support MDC, ZANU–PF or other parties, while other people are divided by the Pentecostal movements according to the charisma and level of flamboyance of the pastor. Unlike Gwisai, I have no problems with capitalism until the day a credible alternative is found, but I know that neoliberalism has no place in our society. Zimbabwe needs to find itself or a ‘third way’ political movement whose main priority is not to physically confront Mnangagwa but to propose a new trajectory which dispels the delusions and illusionary divide that the MDC, ZANU–PF, the IMF and World Bank, Pentecostal churches and traditional healers are trying to carve through our society. The proposed third way has to put the Zimbabwean society of all creeds and colours at its fore and chart a new way forward, one based not on borrowed ideas but on our own realities as a people. This could be in the form of a charter mandated by the people for the people. The idea of resorting to mass action to remove dictators has not worked in many countries, most recently the Arab Spring, and the removal of Robert Mugabe which left Zimbabwe in the hands of worse creatures.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note on contributor

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Notes

1 See Chitiyo (2009) for more on GNU.

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