

“There cannot be two bulls in one kraal”: insights from the political conversions of Nelson Samkange on governance and opposition disruption in Zimbabwe, 1960s–2000s

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the public life of Nelson Samkange, who was active in Zimbabwean politics from 1961 to the eve of his death in 2013. Samkange repeatedly shifted his party allegiance throughout Zimbabwe’s liberation struggle, but consistently opposed the ultimately victorious liberation movement, Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), until the early 1980s. After two decades of public service in parastatals, Samkange finally achieved prominence in ZANU-PF circles in 2003. His strategic nomination as provincial governor is emblematic of a pragmatic tactic of co-optation that ZANU-PF deployed to solidify support amidst the fallout from a prolonged national crisis that began in the late 1990s. The study also shows how Samkange’s variegated political heritage paradoxically coalesced to make this long-time opponent a staunch ZANU-PF demagogue who shored up the party’s revolutionary credentials at a time of strain.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine la vie publique de Nelson Samkange, qui a été actif dans la vie politique zimbabwéenne de 1961 à la veille de sa mort en 2013. Samkange a changé plusieurs fois d’allégeance politique tout au long de la lutte pour la libération du Zimbabwe, mais il s’est toujours opposé au mouvement de libération victorieux, le ZANU-PF, jusqu’au début des années 1980. Après deux décennies au service public dans des organismes parapublics, Samkange s’est finalement fait remarquer dans les cercles du ZANU-PF en 2003. Sa nomination stratégique au poste de gouverneur provincial est emblématique d’une tactique pragmatique de cooptation déployée par le ZANU-PF pour consolider son soutien dans le contexte d’une crise nationale prolongée qui a débuté à la fin des années 1990. L’étude montre également comment l’héritage politique hétéroclite de Samkange a paradoxalement contribué à faire de cet adversaire de longue date un démagogue convaincu du ZANU-PF qui a renforcé les références révolutionnaires du parti à un moment difficile.

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Introduction

Despite notable shortcomings, for nearly two decades after independence in 1980 Zimbabwe's transition from white settler control to majority rule was hailed by many external observers as a success. Advances in education, health and race relations were lauded by outside observers (Herbst 1988; Tumwine 1992). First Lady Hillary Clinton toured Zimbabwe's State House in 1997. However, these optimistic perspectives, always selective, deteriorated around the mid-point of the rule of President Robert Mugabe (1980–2017). The late 1990s saw the collapse of the Zimbabwean dollar and the onset of massive inflation, leading to food riots. From 2000, a land reform and indigenisation programme (the "Third Chimurenga") that ostensibly aimed to rectify unjust colonial-era legacies chaotically and violently unfolded. Zimbabwe was suspended from The Commonwealth in 2002 following elections that the international association deemed were "marred by a high level of politically motivated violence" (*Guardian* 2002). In 2005, Operation Murambatsvina, ostensibly an urban clean-up exercise, adversely affected the livelihoods and demolished the lodgings of hundreds of thousands of residents in the capital, Harare, and its satellite township, Chitungwiza (Potts 2006).

Outsiders and Zimbabweans alike have struggled to comprehend how the long-ruling Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) managed to maintain power through this turmoil.¹ This article examines the experience of Nelson Samkange, a one-time Mugabe opponent, whose political career ultimately culminated with him becoming a mid-level ZANU-PF elite and central committee member. Samkange's experience highlights two core themes. Firstly, it delineates the impact of the independence struggle on the consolidation of a fraught political environment in independent Zimbabwe. Secondly, Samkange's lengthy career demonstrates how competition among Zimbabwean liberation movements for nearly two decades prior to independence shaped a culture of elite expediency that persisted into the political life of independent Zimbabwe. Samkange's experience also provides insights on Zimbabwe's deteriorating governance trajectory, the precarious position of the opposition, and continuities between the liberation struggle and the radical politics that ZANU-PF promulgated from about 2000 on.

Samkange's case shows how ZANU-PF has co-opted opponents to bolster its revolutionary credentials amidst a time of strain. Throughout the liberation struggle, Samkange and Mugabe were at odds. Samkange generally backed his cousin, James Chikerema, a Mugabe foe and the other prominent anti-colonial nationalist from the Zvimba region of Southern Rhodesia (colonial Zimbabwe).² However, this appears to have been a personal allegiance, rather than a reflection of any sort of deep-rooted ideological affinity. During the 1960s and 1970s, Samkange was a prominent overseas representative for a succession of Zimbabwean liberation movements linked to Chikerema. In the 1980s and 1990s, he served as a high-ranking official in a Zimbabwean tourism parastatal. In 2003, Samkange returned to party politics as a ZANU-PF insider who eagerly pursued the radical policies that Mugabe was then embracing. This account draws on the evolution of Samkange's public and political career to explicate the transformation in Zimbabwe that took place under Mugabe's rule and the strategies deployed by ZANU-PF to shore up its strength through the incorporation of one-time foes. Samkange's trajectory elucidates one of the pathways by which intra-nationalist competitors of the 1960s and 1970s were co-opted by ZANU-PF in post-independence Zimbabwe.

Samkange was born in the first half of the 1930s.³ Like Mugabe, his clansman, he had family ties to the Zvimba district in Zimbabwe's north-west (Nyamukondiwa 2013b). Samkange's party affiliations during the liberation struggle were among the most peripatetic of any anti-colonial nationalist. He first came to political prominence as the Publicity Secretary of the short-lived Zimbabwe National Party (ZNP) in 1961 but resigned from the party early the following year (*Central African Daily News* 1962a). Many top-ranking nationalists were detained or jailed in 1964 when the two main liberation movements – the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) and Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) – were banned and a state of emergency was declared.⁴ Samkange fled to Zambia shortly thereafter. With many prominent nationalists out of commission, he became the first permanent, full-time representative of ZAPU in the United Kingdom in early 1965 (Day 1967). ZAPU was then led from exile by the Zambian-based Chikerema; the party's life president, Joshua Nkomo, was held at Gonakudzingwa restriction area inside Rhodesia.

Chikerema gradually lost control of ZAPU around 1970 (Tshabangu 1979). For the remainder of the decade, Samkange was hitched to Chikerema's political wagon and followed him into a succession of political parties: the Front for the Liberation of Zimbabwe (1971), the (United) African National Council (1974), and the Zimbabwe Democratic Party (1979). Only after independence in 1980 did Samkange align with ZANU-PF. Samkange's gradual climb up the political ranks in independent Zimbabwe accelerated in tandem with the country's economic and political decline. His career peaked in 2003 when he was appointed Governor of Mashonaland West Province by Mugabe (*Herald* 2003).

Samkange's winding journey underscores the shifting allegiances that have hampered the expression of political pluralism in Zimbabwe. His experience offers insights on an array of ZANU-PF survival strategies that have been deployed to weaken the opposition. Samkange's voyage saw a substantial personal evolution. His political career was initially firmly grounded in the ranks of the anti-ZANU opposition. After post-independence public service as a state tourism executive, his political life culminated in an enthusiastic embrace of Mugabe's aggressive post-2000 political rhetoric. Following a contextual section, this article chronologically recovers Samkange's meandering political journey.

Context, literature, and methods

As Blessing-Miles Tendi noted in an assessment of book-length accounts, "political biographies of ZANU PF elites are habitually about Mugabe" (Tendi 2020, 5). In 2002, a Harvard scholar glibly posited that President Mugabe was "the answer" to questions about the then recent rise of Zimbabwe's international censure (Power 2003, 88). The erosion of Zimbabwe's reputation in the early 2000s spurred the appearance of a spate of biographies (or quasi-biographies) that intrinsically linked Zimbabwe's notorious leader with the nation's turmoil (Godwin 2011; Holland 2008; Meredith 2002). Consequently, efforts to evaluate how specific ZANU-PF figures (beyond Mugabe) navigated political entanglements and adapted rhetoric, policies and positions over time are minimal. This neglect reinforces the primacy of Robert Mugabe in the literature. It probably also contributed to the inability of Western policy elites to foresee how little might change in a post-Mugabe environment. British diplomats expected more substantial reforms from Emerson Mnangagwa (Mugabe's successor), while politically connected analysts in the US

seemingly overestimated the democratic bona fides of Zimbabwe's opposition and unduly anticipated that it would be strategically bolstered by Mugabe's exit (Gavin, Moss, and Noyes 2018; Tendi 2017b).

The lack of biographical study can, in part, be explained by the paucity of relevant archival material. Over the ten-year period that coincided with the peak of Zimbabwe's economic collapse, its national archives received only one bequested collection from an individual active in the liberation struggle (Mazarire 2010). Shorter outputs, such as book chapters and journal articles in which a biographical approach might be more feasible given source constraints, have largely avoided a focus on the role of individuals. While there are some exceptions, these works generally rely on oral histories or privately held manuscripts and emphasise the colonial period or very early years of independence (Alexander 2017; Marmon 2023; Shutt 2019).

This article has neither resource to make use of. Rather, it draws on Samkange's lengthy public political career, which spanned more than a half century, to explore how his political expression evolved with the changing times. Although Samkange was not one of Zimbabwe's most prominent political figures, he was of sufficient stature that he received irregular press coverage throughout this period. In particular, this article relies on a file on Samkange held at the Zimpapers Knowledge Centre at Herald House in Zimbabwe. This curated dossier spans the period from 1978 to Samkange's death in 2013. However, most material in this folio covers Samkange's tenure as the provincial Governor of Mashonaland West from 2003 to 2008. Sporadic archival records, colonial-era press accounts, and interviews with two of Samkange's family members and several associates/contemporaries further draw out the portrait of his political life.⁵

While there is no extant scholarship focused on Nelson Samkange, there is an embryonic field of Samkange studies centred on a specific nuclear wing of the family. Most notably, Terence Ranger produced a book on three male figures in the family: Thompson Samkange, and his sons, Stanlake and Sketchley, who were all active in the struggle for black rights in colonial Zimbabwe (1995). Stanlake and Sketchley were Nelson's cousins (*Central African Daily News* 1958). Several journal articles have focused on Thompson and Stanlake, who made pioneering contributions in the fields of Christianity and literature in Zimbabwe, respectively (Jackson 2021; Ranger 1993; Verstraelen 1999). Michael West's exploration of the emergence of a black elite in colonial Zimbabwe also devotes significant attention to Thompson and Stanlake Samkange (2002).

However, this article proffers a more indirect contribution to the field of Samkange studies. It primarily contributes to the historiography attuned to the consolidation of a repressive political culture in Zimbabwe. Since coming to power, ZANU-PF has privileged a historical narrative that unduly elevates the party's role in the liberation struggle (Kriger 2006; Ranger 2004). A number of scholars have examined how intra-nationalist competition and the violent contours of the liberation struggle contributed to this deleterious environment. Doran (2017), Mazarire (2011), Moore (2022), Scarnecchia (2008), and Sithole (1979) have explored this development from a longitudinal perspective. Others have gone on deeper dives to explore the reverberations of major incidents during the liberation struggle, such as ZANU's internal turmoil during the Nhari Mutiny within the party's armed wing, or the assassination of ZANU's Chair, Herbert Chitepo, shortly after that mutiny was put down (Tendi 2017a; White 2003).

Although ZANU-PF crafted a historical narrative that the party was overwhelmingly responsible for the success of the liberation struggle, it was itself a breakaway party from ZAPU. As such, it had an institutionalised heritage of poaching key members from its competitors, a path that Samkange eventually followed, albeit via a particularly circuitous route (Banana 1989; Martin and Johnson 1981). Solomon Mujuru, styled the “king-maker” of Mugabe, was aligned with ZAPU until that party suffered internal turmoil around 1970 (Tendi 2020). Moton Malianga, a key ZANU co-founder who made his way back to the party after independence, was the National Chair of the United African National Council (UANC; Marmon 2021). In the early 1980s, ZANU-PF tacitly embraced the formation of the Democratic Party, a pro-ZANU-PF, white-dominated entity led by figures who had achieved some prominence in the colonial-era settler regime (Forrett 1981). These transfers of allegiance, even the monumental 1987 Unity Accord that saw ZANU-PF subsume ZAPU, have been the subject of limited targeted study (Mashingaidze 2005).

While a judicial assault to undermine one-time opposition leader Nelson Chamisa is the most notable contemporary case of opposition disruption, expediency and co-optation continue. Under Mnangagwa, Zimbabwe’s state media triumphantly broadcast defections from the opposition while also embracing the legacies of some of Mugabe’s most significant political opponents, including Chikerema (*Sunday News* 2022). While two Zimbabwean analysts speculated that ZANU-PF would suffer from increased cases of elite defections, this generally has not transpired (Sithole and Makumbe 1997). Rather, the party has enjoyed success in pursuing a variety of pathways to disrupt and/or co-opt political opponents. Samkange’s example illuminates a lesser-known case of how the long-running divisive nature of the liberation struggle, coupled with personal political ambition, helped ZANU-PF transform a long-time foe into a reliable ally.

Samkange in the liberation struggle

Although Nelson lacked the academic credentials and erudite reputation of his more prominent elder cousin, Stanlake, he was also a member of the black intellectual elite in colonial Zimbabwe. Nelson Samkange passed his A-Level examination (a secondary school leaving qualification) in 1955, was a staff editor at a Rhodesian newspaper company (African Newspapers Ltd.) and taught at several government and mission schools (*Central African Daily News* 1958). This was all prior to his pursuit of a tertiary degree, initially at Pius XII (Roma College) in Lesotho where he unsuccessfully dabbled in student politics (Mubako 2020). Around 1962, Samkange enrolled at the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (now the University of Zimbabwe).⁶ Samkange’s horizons quickly broadened from student to party politics.

Due to his executive role in the ZNP, Samkange was one of the first anti-colonial nationalists exposed to intra-nationalist tensions in the liberation struggle. The party’s June 1961 launch was violently repressed by partisans of the National Democratic Party (NDP), which counted Nkomo and Mugabe among its most senior leaders. The ZNP was under extensive pressure from the NDP and was not able to hold a public meeting until several months after its formation (Marmon 2020). In late January 1962, Samkange resigned from the ZNP and joined ZAPU (successor to the NDP, which had been banned that December), stating that the two parties had minimal policy differences

and that he trusted ZAPU's leadership (*Central African Daily News* 1962b). Samkange's rapid volte-face could partly be attributed to the NDP and ZAPU adopting more uncompromising policy positions as a result of pressure from the ZNP, which campaigned against a February 1961 constitutional agreement with the white ruling elite that Nkomo and the NDP originally backed (Marmon 2024; Slater 1975). The NDP/ZAPU policy shift undermined the ZNP's prospects. Nevertheless, it is unclear why Samkange's confidence was so fully restored by a policy reversal of ZAPU, particularly as the party had taken violent action to suppress the ZNP. As it became clear that the ZNP was unable to gain traction, Samkange may have opportunistically sought to cast his lot with the more viable ZAPU. As ZAPU's chief UK representative, he disingenuously asserted that "Nkomo never accepted that constitution" (*The Transcription Centre* 1965).

Samkange's tenure in ZAPU is poorly reflected in the historical record. The party was banned in September 1962, and for much of the liberation struggle references to liberation movements in the Rhodesian press were *verboden*. However, Samkange sought to leverage his tenure with the ZNP to increase his profile. Just days after leaving the ZNP, he challenged that party's vice-president to a public debate in which Samkange would advocate ZAPU's principles (*Central African Daily News* 1962b). It remains unclear what official role Samkange may have played in ZAPU prior to becoming the party's UK representative.

In February 1965, Samkange arrived in London from Zambia, although the British High Commission in Lusaka had attempted to discourage his travel (Lusaka 1965). Judith Todd, a ZAPU ally, recalls Samkange recounting that he had escaped into Zambia from Gona-kudzingwa by simply walking out of the restriction camp and heading north by foot. He supposedly grew a beard to disguise his appearance (Todd 2007). Conversely, Samkange's cousin, Christopher, does not recall hearing that Nelson was confined to Gona-kudzingwa; rather, family lore involves a story in which part of his travel to Zambia was facilitated by a lift from a Rhodesian police vehicle, with the officials having no clue of the true identity of their passenger (Christopher Samkange, pers. comm., 20 May 2024). It is likely that family ties encouraged ZAPU's acting leader, James Chikerema, to appoint Samkange to lead ZAPU's UK office upon his arrival in London (Victor Chikerema, pers. comm., 24 October 2023). Samkange was based in the UK for the next two decades, through independence.

Through his leadership role in the UK, Samkange's vision for Zimbabwe's liberation first emerges in the documentary record. Although some diplomats believed that in the final stages of the liberation struggle, Whitehall favoured Nkomo's supposedly more "moderate" ZAPU (Anthony Lake, pers. comm., 6 December 2023), Samkange's tenure as ZAPU's UK chief mirrors much of the rhetoric that Mugabe and ZANU-PF embraced both during the struggle and after independence. Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) from British rule in November 1965 made the renegade colony a major international issue. However, rather than quietly and diplomatically cultivating British officials, Samkange condemned comments by the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, about possible conditions for the release of political prisoners held by the settler government (Foreign Broadcast Information Service 1966). Shortly after UDI, Samkange travelled behind the iron curtain, visiting both Cuba and Czechoslovakia (Special Branch 1966). He sensation-ally declared that ZAPU "will accept help from God or the devil" (*The Ghanaian Times* 1965).

Nevertheless, Samkange and ZAPU still looked to the UK for an armed intervention to alleviate the situation. In the absence of such measures, Samkange expressed support for ZAPU organising military operations to oppose the settler government in the event of British inaction (Fairbairn 1965). After UDI, Samkange secured a meeting with Britain's Commonwealth Relations Office and declared that force would be necessary to end the Rhodesian rebellion (Wood 2012). He pursued a public relations campaign to push the imperial authority to use arms against the renegade Rhodesians. In an interview originally given to the mouthpiece of the British Communist Party, Samkange stated:

Moves that stop short of force are ineffective in dealing with the illegal regime in Rhodesia. Britain must accept its responsibility in a physical sense. This means entry into the country to take over the administration ... We appeal to all British people to bring pressure to bear on their government to enter Rhodesia physically and protect the lives of all innocent men, black and white, who are in danger ... (The Spark 1966)

Samkange's emphasis on force to achieve political aims reflected a lesson that he learned early in his political career. The ZNP was unable to find momentum due to the uncompromising attacks it faced from the NDP. Similarly, ZAPU and Joshua Nkomo launched blistering attacks on ZANU to counter the party's growth as it attempted to get off the ground several years later (Msindo 2012). Once in power, ZANU-PF acted similarly, applying pressure to eventually consume ZAPU as part of a one-sided "unity agreement" in 1987. The opposition in the twenty-first century has also faced sustained attacks from ZANU-PF. Although physically removed from the more serious clashes between the competing nationalist movements due to his base in the UK, Samkange would have been acutely aware of what Masipula Sithole dubbed "the struggles-within-the-struggle" (1979, 1). Reg Austin, a fellow ZAPU comrade based in London during the struggle, recalls that Samkange had a "mercurial political profile [that] distanced him from some of his more consistent colleagues" (pers. comm., January 30, 2024).

As ZAPU's UK representative, Samkange argued that ZANU lacked strength and that there was not sufficient space for competing liberation movements: "We are not very worried about this split ... it has been demonstrated that the people have decided in favour of the leadership of ZAPU ... there cannot be two bulls in one kraal" (Fairbairn 1965, 27). This repressive philosophy carried over into post-colonial governance; ZANU-PF pushed for a *de jure* one-party state throughout the 1980s (Mandaza and Sachikonye 1991).

As Rhodesia's UDI endured, the diplomatic position of the United Kingdom lost prominence. Focus shifted to Africa, especially the Frontline States.⁷ Furthermore, from 1970 to 1971, ZAPU activity substantially decreased as an internal struggle for control of the party unfolded. This conflict culminated in the formation of the Front for the Liberation of Zimbabwe (FROLIZI) in Lusaka on 1 October 1971 (*Times of Zambia*). Chikerema, its guiding force, was initially the party's Secretary for Special Affairs, but came to the forefront as FROLIZI's Chair the following year (Philda Chikerema, pers. comm., 28 January 2023). Samkange's FROLIZI tenure is poorly represented in the historical record, but alongside other one-time ZANU members based in London, he dispatched a public cable welcoming the party's launch (*Times of Zambia* 1971). He went on to serve on the party's executive committee (O'Meara 1975). Samkange oversaw the production of the official FROLIZI organ, *FROLIZI Line*, reprising a role he held for the UK edition of ZAPU's *Zimbabwe Review* as early as 1966 (*Times of Zambia* 1966; Vambe 1983).

After a decade of engagement in the liberation struggle, Samkange likely had no viable option but to join FROLIZI upon its founding. Lawrence Vambe recalled that Samkange felt isolated from his ZAPU colleagues in the London area and distrusted most of them (Vambe 1983). It is unclear why Vambe felt this way, although by the time of the independence election in 1980, the results revealed that ZAPU had little support in the majority Shona-speaking region of the country that Samkange hailed from. This distance probably increased in 1969/1970 when turmoil erupted in ZAPU. Chikerema lost control of the party, and many of its Shona-speaking members defected to ZANU or FROLIZI. By virtue of their familial ties, Samkange would have been seen as a Chikerema acolyte. Like the ZNP, FROLIZI struggled to gain traction. It was the weakest political party and the one that most readily integrated into the UANC when regional leaders like Nyerere and Kaunda shepherded a unity agreement into place in December 1974 (Mubako 1975).⁸

It appears that Samkange initially held no prominent formal position in the UANC. In the first half of 1978 he was appointed the UANC's Under Secretary for External Affairs (*Zimbabwe Report* 1978). This was likely due to the consolidation of the position of Chikerema and his key FROLIZI deputy, George Nyandoro, as the UANC's First Vice President and Secretary for Foreign Affairs, respectively, in the second half of 1977 (*Zimbabwe Times* 1977). The extent of Samkange's networks in the UK is unclear, but he maintained an occasional correspondence on behalf of the UANC with one of the party's reticent supporters, the Conservative British parliamentarian Lord Alport, around this time (Alport 1977, 1979).

On 3 March 1978, the UANC and two other black-dominated political parties reached a power-sharing transitional agreement with the Rhodesian government. However, whites maintained disproportionate control. ZAPU and ZANU resoundingly condemned the accord (Mugabe 1983). A ZANU official based in Mozambique even produced a death list targeting several of Samkange's colleagues in the UANC, including Chikerema (Zvobgo 1978). Despite this antagonism, Samkange sounded an unexpected note of conciliation with his nationalist foes. He expressed unease about the implementation of the settlement: "people are concerned about the lack of advancement of Africans in industry and the public sector and the fact that there is still racial discrimination" (*Herald* 1978). He called for an all-party conference that included ZANU and ZAPU as a more viable solution to the conflict plaguing Rhodesia (*Herald* 1978). Although Samkange remained estranged from ZAPU and had never had formal ties to ZANU, this acceptance of a role for the more mainstream nationalist parties foreshadows Samkange's ability to claw his way back into ZANU-PF's good graces after independence.

However, Samkange's shifting political allegiances amidst the liberation struggle included one final act. In June 1979, just weeks after Muzorewa was inaugurated as Prime Minister of the short-lived Zimbabwe Rhodesia, Chikerema broke with Muzorewa to establish the Zimbabwe Democratic Party (ZDP). This exacerbated friction on the political scene. Weeks after the breakaway, Chikerema's brother and cousin were murdered in Zvimba. The ZDP leader charged that paramilitaries loyal to Muzorewa were responsible for the deaths (*Rand Daily Mail* 1979). The Lancaster House Conference ushered in a new constitutional agreement and a fresh set of elections in February 1980 that resulted in international recognition of Zimbabwe's independence. Samkange unsuccessfully contested a parliamentary seat on behalf of the ZDP (*Herald* 1980). It is unclear whether he returned from London to campaign in person, but a relative says that he secretly

wanted ZANU-PF to win (Christopher Samkange, pers. comm., 20 May 2024). The ZDP performed poorly and disbanded soon thereafter. Although this marked the end of Chikerema's political life, Samkange began a prolonged political rebound.

Samkange in public life

After independence, Samkange initially remained in the United Kingdom. During the liberation struggle, he worked for Camden Council (a London borough) as a public relations officer (Christopher Samkange, pers. comm., 20 May 2024). Around 1982 he became the Senior Tourist Attaché at Zimbabwe's High Commission in London (*Herald* 1985). With ZANU-PF settling scores in independent Zimbabwe, this was probably an ideal post for an individual who had traditional ties to Mugabe, but had long worked in opposition against him (Alexander 1998). However, he swiftly gained Mugabe's confidence after the country's High Commissioner, Robert Zwinoira, was recalled over alleged financial improprieties (Christopher Samkange, pers. comm., 20 May 2024). In 1985 Samkange finally returned to Zimbabwe to direct marketing at the Zimbabwe Tourist Development Corporation (ZTDC), a parastatal (*Herald* 1990). By the early 1990s he was the ZTDC Director. In 1993 he stated, "at present, Zimbabwe enjoys a good international reputation for high standards and we would like to keep it that way" (*Herald* 1993). He stressed upscale tourism, declaring the government's policy was to "target the upper market ... we are trying to promote environmentally friendly tourism. We cannot afford to have huge numbers of people descending on our little country" (Mutume 1994). Three decades later, Zimbabwe's Ministry of Tourism and Hospitality reversed course with a ZimBho - Uripi initiative focusing on a middle-class domestic audience (*Chronicle* 2023). Ironically, Samkange, who had worked to favourably portray Zimbabwean hospitality in the United Kingdom, became an active participant in the tumult of the Third Chimurenga that contributed to the decline of Zimbabwe's tourism sector, necessitating this strategic about-face.

After a short-lived stint as Chair of Zimpapers, a parastatal media company, from 1999 to 2000 (*Herald* 2000), Samkange finally secured the sort of political position he had coveted since the 1960s in 2003 when Mugabe appointed him governor of their home province, Mashonaland West. According to Tommie Samkange (Stanlake's wife), Nelson and Mugabe became personally close due to their shared personal trials. Nelson's first wife, Dorothy, passed away as a result of kidney failure, and Nelson drew on this first-hand experience to console Mugabe when the president's first wife also developed kidney problems, leading to her death in 1992 (Tommie Samkange, pers. comm., 31 July 2018).

With his new political power, Samkange resurrected political rhetoric that harkened back to the intolerance of the liberation struggle. Ahead of parliamentary elections in 2005, Samkange announced,

the forthcoming elections should be a time for Zimbabweans in general ... to reclaim their identity as black people. We should be proud of being black and the only way we can show that is to vote for a party that shares those ideals. (*Herald* 2005a)

At a political rally the following year with Mugabe's nephew, Leo, Samkange emulated Kaunda and Nyerere, the regional African leaders who sought to mend rifts in Zimbabwe's

liberation movement. He urged absolute unity for ZANU-PF, asserting, “we do not want to hear of divisions within the party and the constituency” (*Herald* 2006).

It seems incongruous that Samkange, who remained with ZAPU after the ZANU breakaway in 1963 and was allied throughout the liberation struggle with James Chikerema, one of Mugabe’s most ardent opponents, so enthusiastically embraced ZANU-PF’s post-2000 assault on democracy and human rights. However, despite his lengthy political career, Samkange had no independent political base. He spent most of the struggle in England, and his original political godfather, Chikerema, had been out of politics since 1980. Samkange’s then recent removal from the Zimpapers executive board was certainly done at Mugabe’s behest. When he finally entered the political scene three years later, it was not as an elected official, but as a Mugabe appointee. This debt, coupled with Samkange’s intimate knowledge of the repression against the ZNP, the friction between ZAPU and ZANU, and the inability of FROLIZI or the ZDP to make any political headway, rendered Samkange acutely conscious of his political vulnerability. According to Pius Wakatama, a friend of Nelson’s and a former political associate from the ZDP, “Mugabe took [Samkange] in because he wanted familiar people around him, people he could trust” (pers. comm., 24 May 2024).

Accordingly, Samkange doubled down on the confrontational tactics embraced by Mugabe and ZANU-PF. As early as 1995, Mugabe launched a homophobic tirade at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair (de Saugy 2022). More than a decade later, Samkange continued the assault on gay rights during a Culture Week launch event: “some Zimbabweans are now advocating for the legalization of gay and lesbian activities. What is that to our culture? It’s taboo” (*Herald* 2007). However, the governor did not just echo the rhetoric coming from ZANU-PF’s most senior official. He pushed for new ways to expand land reform, including the expropriation of docking bays controlled by whites at Lake Kariba, which fell within his provincial jurisdiction. According to Samkange:

We have taken farms from the whites and given them to the locals and really why should we not take the harbours? I am also speaking as a Zanu PF member, if we want to take them [harbours] we will take them, there is nothing that can stop us from doing so. (*Herald* 2005b)

Samkange was himself allocated a seized farm, in 2004, shortly after being appointed governor. In a sign of the corruption and economic woes plaguing the nation, he began to charge rent from tenants, including primary school teachers, who had previously inhabited buildings on the property free of charge (*Standard* 2005).

In a further indication of how much the country’s political environment had transformed from the 1990s, the former ZTDC boss delivered these comments endorsing the seizure of private property at one of the country’s major holiday sites at an event marking World Tourism Day. Another sign of Samkange’s departure from his former hospitality functionary role amidst the Third Chimurenga was his initial acceptance of the wild claims of a fraudulent spirit medium, Rotina Mavhunga, who claimed to be able to conjure refined diesel from a rock (Fontein 2022). Spirit mediums played a significant role in the initial anti-colonial resistance, the First Chimurenga, in the 1890s, and the memory of two of the most prominent mediums, Nehanda and Kaguvi, featured prominently during the liberation struggle, the Second Chimurenga. Samkange excused his gullibility by declaring, “the government and the President believe in African culture, we believe in spirit mediums. She said the diesel was coming from our ancestors, so we had to pursue it” (*Financial Gazette* 2007).

Samkange's tenure as governor ended in 2008, in the aftermath of his embarrassing role in the Mavhunga scandal. In the denouement to his political career, he served in parliament from 2008 to 2013. Had Samkange represented any district other than the one Mugabe hailed from, this move would have been seen as a substantial demotion. It was probably not coincidental that this long-time opposition figure was co-opted by ZANU-PF for an election in which it faced an unprecedented challenge. The electoral campaign in Zvimba was inspired by the playbook of intra-nationalist violence that had been a recurring feature of the liberation struggle. Samkange's constituency, Mugabe's heartland, saw episodes of the widespread violence that marred the 2008 election and which gave rise to the unity government of ZANU-PF and two opposition factions from 2009 to 2013. Samkange's principal opponent, Knox Danda, claimed that his house had been partially burned down by Samkange loyalists and that he was unable to freely campaign due to threats on his life (*The Zimbabwean* 2008). Although ZANU-PF lost control of parliament at the election, Samkange's victory shows that this brutality could be effective. However, the regional and international repudiation of the violent tactics deployed at this election likely spurred ZANU-PF to consider more innovative means to disrupt the opposition, such as the judicial actions that have more recently frustrated Chamisa. Although of diminished prominence, Samkange continued to lobby on behalf of the party for key strategic goals, such as the removal of Western sanctions. As a member of the ZANU-PF elite, Samkange was subjected to these restrictions, imposed by the US and European Union in response to the land reform programme (*Herald* 2011). This was a remarkable transformation for someone who had previously led Zimbabwe's efforts to attract well-heeled tourists from the West. His political career ended shortly before his death in 2013 when he was defeated in a primary election (Nyamukondiwa 2013b).

Conclusion

Samkange was buried at his rural home in Motsi village (several hours south of Zvimba). Although he only held political office at the end of his life, he was mourned by a number of prominent ZANU-PF officials. Walter Mzembe, the Minister of Tourism and Hospitality, eulogised, "he was one of the pioneers who planted the seeds of the country's tourism industry development" (Nyamukondiwa 2013a). His funeral was attended by President Mugabe and an array of ZANU-PF luminaries such as Ignatius Chombo (Minister of Local Government), Ziyambi Ziyambi (Deputy Minister of Home Affairs), and Webster Shamu (National Political Commissar of ZANU-PF).

Despite his lengthy record of commitment to the liberation struggle, producing newsletters for ZAPU and FROLIZI and serving as a key foreign diplomat for those parties and the UANC, Samkange was only declared a provincial hero. His family expressed disappointment that he did not earn the more prestigious national hero status. Mugabe explained his party's decision in a rather disparaging eulogy he delivered at the funeral:

He was rejected by the people when he lost the last [primary] elections. Therefore, there was no way I could elevate him. It doesn't matter whether one is a Gushungo [Mugabe's totem which he shared with the late former governor], if the people reject you then that's it. He had gotten a plum farm at Rukoba which he again failed to fully utilise. Maybe farming was not his calling and probably the frustration over the poor productivity at his farm could have killed him. (*News Day* 2013)

This minor controversy upon Samkange's death embodies the contested environment around Zimbabwe's liberation struggle. Contrary to Mugabe's claim, rather than his 2013 primary downfall, it was probably Samkange's longtime allegiance to Chikerema and his belated post-independence embrace of ZANU-PF that prevented Samkange from obtaining a higher degree of national recognition.

Ironically, it was only after Zimbabwe's relations with the West began to rupture and the opposition to ZANU-PF experienced a resurgence that Samkange obtained political office in Zimbabwe. While there is no readily available documentation explicating the reasons for Samkange's appointment as provincial governor, it seems likely that Mugabe judged that his clansman, with a lengthy heritage of service to the liberation struggle, would readily adapt to and understand the discourse of the Third Chimurenga. Regardless of his previous party affiliations, Samkange's role in the struggle from the early 1960s helped the party reassert its revolutionary credentials in Mashonaland West. Additionally, he was more or less fully beholden to Mugabe for his position. Similarly, Mnangagwa has also been perceived as collaborating with ostensible political opponents like Douglas Mwonozora and Sengezo Tshabangu to undermine a prominent competitor, Nelson Chamisa (Harris 2021, 2025). ZANU-PF, while highly intolerant of opposition, has demonstrated a recurring pragmatic willingness to embrace political foes.

This biographical recovery of Samkange's political life has made two core contributions which elucidate the political culture of colonial and post-colonial Zimbabwe. Firstly, Samkange's lengthy journey to political relevance highlights how ZANU-PF co-opted an elite political opponent. Samkange's recurring transfer of political allegiance helps show why Zimbabwe's post-independence opposition has been susceptible to fragmentation. Secondly, Samkange's long-running exposure to political violence, beginning with the ZNP's thwarted launch in 1961, culminated in his expedient embrace of the confrontational rhetoric of the Third Chimurenga. Amidst the tumult of post-2000 Zimbabwe, Samkange adopted ZANU-PF language that attacked homosexuals and pushed for further expropriation of white-controlled resources, such as docks. This rhetoric was a complete about-face from the non-controversial image he cultivated as the nation's tourism chief. Samkange thus provides a window on how Zimbabwe's lengthy liberation struggle, and the intra-nationalist divisions within it, contributed to the consolidation of an intolerant political culture after independence.

After nearly twenty years of activity in the liberation struggle, Samkange sided with the ZDP, which finished a distant fifth in the 1980 independence elections. It took him twenty years of bureaucratic toil to merit sufficient favour to secure a partisan political appointment. For most of his adult life, aside from an allegedly unproductive farm, Samkange seems to have been largely dependent on liberation movements or state resources for his livelihood. Spending the last decade of the independence struggle in the political wilderness meant that when he finally attained a modicum of political authority in late 2003 as a Mugabe appointee, Samkange toed the political line espoused by ZANU-PF. This late rehabilitation was a prudent tactical move. Samkange reinforced the revolutionary bona fides of ZANU-PF as many of the liberation stalwarts passed on due to the march of time or fell out of Mugabe's favour. Samkange's lack of an independent power base or other significant political connections in the party underscored his new allegiance to Mugabe. However, Samkange's turbulent, depressing political voyage illuminates just one of the numerous mechanisms that ZANU-PF has leveraged to maintain its hold on power.

Notes

1. ZANU-PF did participate in a power-sharing government from 2009 to 2013.
2. Chikerema's mother was a Samkange.
3. At his passing in 2013, media accounts reported that Samkange was 82. However, other sources indicate that he was born in 1934.
4. ZANU adopted the suffix "PF" at the 1980 independence election. ZAPU was originally banned in 1962 but resurfaced a year later to operate in Rhodesia under the moniker "People's Caretaker Council."
5. I am particularly thankful to Pius and Winnie Wakatama and Philda Chikerema for engaging in an extended conversation on Samkange with me at the Wakatama's Harare home in 2024.
6. Although state media indicated that he obtained this degree, one of his classmates at the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland does not believe that he managed to complete it (Judith Todd, pers. comm., 28 January 2024).
7. Originally Botswana, Tanzania and Zambia. Angola and Mozambique joined after their independence in 1975.
8. The Lusaka Agreement ostensibly amalgamated the African National Council (ANC), ZAPU, ZANU, and FROLIZI under Muzorewa's authority.

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