The struggle for Zimbabwe: Contesting the meaning of liberation

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paper presented at the Harold Wolpe Lecture Series

University of KwaZulu-Natal, 29 September 2005

Introduction

Zimbabwe was reduced to a colony in 1890 by Rhodes' invasion force dubbed the pioneer column and by the subsequent concomitant acts of brutal repression, dispossession and destruction of pre-colonial power structures, African religion and values. The people of Zimbabwe heroically resisted these unprovoked acts of aggression and desperately sought to restore sovereignty over their resources, their freedom and dignity. The resistance stretched over decades finally assuming the form of a national liberation war particularly in the 1970s. The purpose of the war was articulated as a struggle for self-determination, democracy, freedom, social justice, human dignity and peace. These encapsulated the hopes and aspirations of the indigenous African people of Zimbabwe.

The national liberation struggle

The initial resistance against colonialism sought to restore the status ante i.e. the restoration of the sovereignty of the people of Zimbabwe over their country and resources as well as their freedom and human dignity. However, with the progress of time this increasingly became an unrealistic proposition at least in the short to medium term, given the monopolisation of force and institutionalisation of systematic repression by the colonial authority. The leit motif of the colonizing authority was the plundering of the country's resources for the benefit of international monopolies and their imperial masters. This could not be realized without the subjugation of the people of Zimbabwe. This set the stage for racist repression and the preservation of settler privileges as the pillar for the sustenance of Britain's imperial interests.

In view of the overwhelming odds against them, the African people resigned themselves to localised resistance based on non conformity and non co-operation. The white settler authority proceeded to progressively institutionalise an arsenal of repression buttressed in racist legislation to entrench the white settler minority privileges and safeguard the economic interests of their imperial masters. The colonial authorities went on to establish mines and set up industries that led to urbanisation. This added a further dimension to the struggle of the African people of Zimbabwe.

They no longer had only to contend with forced evictions from prime agricultural land and dispossessions of their livestock in the rural areas, but with the brutal exploitation of their labour and dehumanising working conditions as well. This was superimposed on forced labour on railway and road infrastructure and taxation to induce rural to urban migration to provide cheap labour for the mines and factories. Furthermore, and with far reaching implications for the future, the up to this point relatively unstructured African society gave birth to a working class and the petit bourgeoisie in addition to the peasant subsistence farmers residing in the now re-designated African reserves and the so called tribal trust lands.

The foregoing development engendered a struggle on two fronts i.e. the urban front for the emerging working class, the struggle for better wages and the rural front for the peasant farmers in defence of their land rights and livestock. As had happened elsewhere throughout the world, the struggle by the working class soon gave rise to organised resistance in the form of strikes in the mid 1940s. The promulgation of the Land and Animal Husbandry Act of 1950 saw the peasant farmers rise up in sporadic acts of defiance and non cooperation characterised by isolated attacks on dip tanks.

With these fronts of struggles having taken shape, it was now time for the petit bourgeoisie to enter the stage and articulate their grievances and provide leadership. This in turn gave rise to the birth of African Nationalism through the re-awakening of national consciousness engendered by the struggles on the two fronts. This development coincided with the end of the Second World War that spawned a wave of struggles by the world's oppressed peoples for their self determination.

Besides providing leadership and articulating the grievances of the workers and peasants, the petit bourgeoisie had its own characteristic pre-occupations i.e. the struggle for racial equality in response to the rampant racial discrimination that permeated the social fabric of Rhodesian society. The petit bourgeoisie cum African nationalist leaders wanted to be treated as equal partners to the white settlers in view of their higher level of education and skills and administrative training.

The quest for respect and equal treatment by the petit bourgeoisie was paramount to them and transcended all other considerations such as the exploitation of the workers and the evictions and dispossessions affecting the peasantry. This attitude of the petit bourgeoisie, emanating from its class nature, gave rise to the dichotomy of world outlook between the petit bourgeoisie on the one hand and the struggling workers and peasants on the other that plagued the national liberation struggle from beginning to end.

The petit bourgeoisie were, above everything else, desirous of being treated and accepted as equals by the white settler minority whereas the struggle of the masses i.e. the workers and peasants was more fundamental and driven by the desire for justice and self-determination as their assurance policy for social justice. Theirs was in essence a democratic struggle in contra-distinction to the reformist approach of the petit bourgeoisie. The workers and peasants hated the white settlers on account of their oppressive and exploitative system whereas the petit bourgeoisie was more concerned about being elevated to the status of the white settlers. Herein lay the seeds for the miscarriage of the hopes and aspirations of the liberation struggle.

The independent emergence of the nationalist struggle that was driven by the internal objective conditions within Zimbabwe characterised by colonisation and capitalist exploitation of the workers and the dispossession of the peasantry soon fell under the international orbit of the world people's struggle against imperialism. This enabled the nationalist leadership to better articulate the objectives of their struggle to conform with a more progressive form characterised by demands for national independence based on universal suffrage. This notwithstanding, the nationalist leadership was prepared to settle for far less than that[1].

The articulation of the objectives of the national liberation struggle however brought with it its own problems. Rhodesia had never experienced direct rule since 1890 as to all intents and purposes, the British South Company and successive white settler governments had run the country without any reference to the British Government. In 1923, Rhodesia became a self governing colony in terms of the promulgation of the Responsible Government Act of 1923. The repression and exploitation of the African people was perpetrated by the white settler authority in Rhodesia albeit primarily for the benefit of monopoly capital and Britain the imperial power. This distinctive colonial feature set Rhodesia apart from Britain's other African colonies that fell under direct British rule.

Failure to appreciate the significance of this peculiar colonial feature led the African nationalists to commit a major strategic blunder with far reaching consequences for the trajectory of the national liberation struggle and its outcome. It was against this backdrop that Rhodesia witnessed the emergence of two competing nationalisms - white and black nationalism. The black nationalists sought, demanded and counted on Britain's support in their struggle against the white settler minority which was a contradiction in terms given the essence and nature of imperialism. The white settlers on their part demanded from Britain full independence to run the affairs of the country although in essence this was already the case since 1923. The position taken by the African nationalists vis a vis the role of Britain in their struggle against white settler minority oppression fundamentally compromised the struggle against imperialism and helped steer Britain into a strategic position to influence political developments in Rhodesia and safeguard the interests of monopoly capital with the overt support and blessing of the African nationalists.

This misguided and parochial position adopted by the nationalists set the stage for the subsequent unprincipled compromise and betrayal of the ideals of the national liberation struggle and the aspirations of the African people for self-determination at Lancaster House in 1979. Britain could not have wished for a better outcome as it ensured the entrenchment of its imperial interests in Zimbabwe and for that with blessing of the Patriotic Front that represented the interests of the fighting masses of Zimbabwe.

The Lancaster House Agreement served to underscore the divergence in the interests of the nationalist leadership on the one hand and the broad masses of the people on the other. To the masses of Zimbabwe, the national liberation war was being waged for the attainment of self-determination and full democratic rights whilst for the nationalists, the war was essentially a pressure mechanism to induce political negotiations for the transfer of power to them.

To the African masses, the attainment of political power was to serve as the springboard for first the transformation of political power itself and state institutions to serve the interests of the majority and subsequently of the society to ensure the realisation of democracy, freedom and social justice. In essence, political power was to serve as the tool for the political, economic, social and cultural empowerment of the black majority. Power had to be democratised to ensure the realisation of these objectives that corresponded to the fulfilment of the aspirations of the national liberation struggle.

To the African nationalists, the pursuit and attainment of power was an end in itself. They had nothing against the nature of power and state institutions in their prevailing form that had been tailored to serve the interests of monopoly capital and the white settler minority. This reduces the unfolding scenario to a disjuncture and incompatible political objectives

characterised by a quest for decolonisation without rocking the boat by the nationalists and aspirations for self-determination, freedom, democracy and social justice by the black majority.

The reality of independence

The conquest of power by the nationalists who had been transformed overnight into a petit bourgeois elite at independence, put them in a position to shape the political discourse of the new Zimbabwe that marked a radical departure from the originally declared aims and goals of the national liberation struggle encompassing democratic convictions and socio-economic transformation. They promptly abandoned the cultivation of democratic virtues and respect for human that had been hitherto, the bedrock of 'struggle culture'. The nationalists had become reformists and independent Zimbabwe became a mirror image of the oppressive system that the liberation struggle had sought to destroy and transform. This marked a direct transition from colonialism to neo-colonialism.

The peoples basic freedoms became as constrained as they were during the colonial era. Political intolerance characterized the new political culture with opposition and dissent were elevated to hostility, antagonism and enmity. The ruthless suppression of ZAPU soon after independence and later of the new opposition party the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), the private media and civil society activists bear eloquent testimony to this. The distinction between the party, the government and the state became increasingly blurred. Tendencies towards autocratic rule took a turn for the worse and the so called national and sovereign interests became justification for all kinds of authoritarian excesses. Witness justification for the violence associated with the so-called 'fast track land reform' a political ploy that in the end enriched the elite through multiple farm ownership. Loyalty to the party and its leadership were now traded for the loyalty to principles and ideals of the liberation war era.

The new political elite was however careful not reveal their true colours as they were fully conscious of the contradiction between popular expectations and what they practiced. Conscious efforts were therefore made to demobilize and de-politicise the masses in order to ensure stability and maintenance of law and order. To cope with the emergent conflict, they became masters at the situational application of rhetoric[2]. The attribution of Zimbabwe's economic misfortunes to imperialist machinations and conspiracies is a case in point. The opposition MDC and civil society organizations are portrayed as agents and stooges of the West. The Zimbabwe government has whipped up anti-imperialist sentiments so as to mobilize regional and developing countries to rise up in its defence against Zimbabwe's international censure for human rights abuses. Total control of the media and suppression of independent critical voices ensures that the anti-imperialist rhetoric gains in currency.

Characteristics of the consolidated independent Zimbabwean state

The Zimbabwean state under the control of the petit bourgeois black elite can in classical terms be described as a weak state characterised by low levels of socio-political cohesion and political legitimacy[3]. This is a feature shared with most of the post colonial states in Africa. Political legitimacy is undermined by the institutionalisation of exclusion as a political tool serving the political interests of the elite which alienates some sections of society in terms of access to power, participation and resources[4]. This invariably leads to the withdrawal and erosion of loyalty to the state and its institutions.

The problem of legitimacy is further compounded by the personalisation of the state characterised by the blurring of the distinction between the state and the ruler[5]. The objective interests of the state become indistinguishable from the subjective interests of the ruler and his regime in power[6], a phenomenon defined by Weber as 'patrimonialism'. The ruler ensures the political survival and stability of his regime by providing security and selective distribution of resources and services to his supporters. The role of the rogue war vets and the youth brigades during the past elections and selective distribution of food aid are fitting examples of this phenomenon.

On account of the foregoing characteristics, the state is reduced to nothing more than a façade masking the realities of a patrimonial and personalised state bereft of legitimacy in the eyes of the public[7]. As a consequence of its vulnerability and insecurity the state becomes pre-occupied with its security and survival[8]. It adopts policies that utilise scarce resources for military purposes and manpower and perceives opposition movements and civil society with their demands for greater political space and participation as dangerous and threatening[9]. This tallies with Zimbabwe's purchase of military hardware from China, the expansion of the cabinet and introduction of the senate at a time that the country is literally broke.

Democratising the weak state

Given the foregoing attribute of a weak state that characterise Mugabe's Zimbabwe, the question now arise as to how to democratise s such a state and realise the original aims and objectives of the national liberation struggle. Western models on democratisation based on multi-partyism, multi-party elections, supporting state institutions and strengthening civil society have been tried in a number of African countries such as Zambia, Malawi, Kenya and Zimbabwe[10]. Though change of government might have been achieved in those countries other than Zimbabwe, it is doubtful whether democratisation has taken root in those countries. The political problems that continue to plague Kenya, Zambia and Malawi lend credence to this assertion. As for Zimbabwe, the Mugabe regime remains firmly in power with prospects for immediate democratisation continually receding.

There are a number of reasons for this. In the first instance, the so-called political parties within the framework of the multi-party system, are not formed on the basis of distinct views on policies and public interest as is the case in the West, but rather on attempts to unite people against those in power who they tend to regard as enemies[11]. Furthermore, there is a strong ethnic and regional dimension in African politics and a lack of a clear policy platform or ideological orientation and linkages to specific societal interest groups or associations[12]. To a certain extent, these assumptions are also true of the MDC in Zimbabwe.

The regime that assumes power on the basis of multi-party elections hardly ever transforms the basis of politics[13] with the result being more of the same and formal reforms masking continuity in African politics[14]. Such a scenario is fraught with serious consequences as it could result in the sedimentation of existing power structures through premature closure of the process of democratisation[15]. This flows from the establishment of formal procedures and institutions before real transformation of power takes place. What appears to be a multi-party system from a distance becomes in essence a series of

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patronage client networks[16]. Such a scenario could hardly resemble genuine democratisation.

Secondly, the support and promotion of civil society as a counter-weight to state power, noble though the objective might be, the approach is bedevilled by a number of constraints. Civil society in Zimbabwe and many other African countries is comparatively weak and beset by financial, organisational and operational constraints. As elsewhere in Africa, the same problems that afflict society such as poverty, corruption, nepotism, parochialism, opportunism, ethnicity illiberalism and the propensity for cooption are also mirrored in civil society[17]. In most cases, the CSOs generally operate within a tight agenda and parameters dictated by funding partners. Furthermore, some of the CSOs have an elitist world outlook without roots in the grassroots, the supposed beneficiaries of the CSO agenda.

On elections, it has to be borne in mind that democratisation entails a struggle for power. However given the concentration and personalisation of power in a weak state as discussed above, possession and control of political power becomes a critical factor and stakes are raised during elections[18]. In the light of the state of economies in weak states such as Zimbabwe, political power becomes the dominant social good and those in control of power have control over a whole range of other goods in society[19]. In such a situation, incumbents have at their disposal a formidable arsenal of tools and means with which to influence voter preferences and election outcomes[20]. Zimbabwe is an excellent case in point given the experiences of elections held since 2000.

Scholars have noted that holding multi-party elections in weak states like Zimbabwe, can be a generally destabilising experience with the possibility of arousing ethnic sentiments[21]. Furthermore, holding elections in an atmosphere devoid of the respect of the rule of law, where the protection of civil and political rights is not guaranteed as was the case in Zimbawe's elections since 2000, directly contributes to poltical violence and violation of human rights[22]. It is inconceivable that given the high stakes involved in Zimbabwe's elections that the incumbents could voluntarily commit suicide by levelling the electoral filed that would enhance the chances of their removal.

Some food for thought

The foregoing discussion of the problems associated with the democratisation of weak states underscores the need for a paradigm shift. Africa's curse and tragedy has been the advent of the political party system, the emergence of the petit bourgeois elite and the attendant winner take all political system. This whole scenario is discordant with the reality of traditional African culture with its tried and tested sound political culture founded on harmony, consensus and tolerance. Post colonial Africa has not as yet developed the requisite checks and balances to ensure accountability and the responsible exercise of power given a Western political system. Foisting competitive politics based on multi-party systems is counter-productive, destabilising and a recipe for disaster. This accounts for Africa's political and economic woes since independence. Political parties in the West are based on clearly discernible class interests and concomitant ideological platforms. Class differentiation is not that advanced in Africa giving rise to emergence of a petit bourgeois elite that monopolises power through the personalisation of the state, patrimonialism and subversion of state institutions like the army, police, the judiciary and civil service to serve the interests of the elite.

There is therefore need to rethink the model of democratisation of weak states given this problematic. Given the polarising effect of multi-party politics in Africa, there is a strong argument to focus on a consensus seeking approach that accords with African nature and culture. This should of necessity be driven by interests based groups and organisations such as workers, communal farmers, trade associations, women, the youth, professional associations and the military . Such groupings have a direct interest and stake in how the country is governed. Such interest groups should be the drivers for ground rules for the exercise and arrangement of power and how the country should be governed. In other words, there should be a greater role for interests based groups, a transformed civil society in determining the issues of governance and accountability.

The convenient starting point for such an approach would be constitution making. It is the institutionalisation of constitutional mechanisms that will generate the requisite culture of trust, tolerance and compromise that ensure the success of electoral processes and the legitimacy of power and not the other way round[23]. Successful constitution making is an assurance against the premature closure of the process of democratisation and defuses tensions associated with politics in weak states.

Such an approach to democratisation requires careful and painstaking work, political skill and patience given that democratisation itself is a conflict generating process involving dramatic change and new power arrangements[24]. Care should be taken to address the concerns of powerful interest groups such as the military that are omitted in Western models of democratisation. There is a cogent argument for the democratic forces to craft a military policy that canvasses the support of the military[25]. Sustained political crises and budget cuts associated with weak states on the defensive pre-dispose the military to lend support to the forces of democratisation.