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**DOMINANT POWER POLITICS AND DEMOCRATIC
CONSOLIDATION IN ZIMBABWE CIRCA,
1980-2017 A.D**

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Abstract

This paper examines issues in principles and practices of democratic consolidation in Zimbabwe. The political system in Zimbabwe theoretically upheld a multiparty system and has held periodic elections since 1980 but undermined reforms that could have put democracy and politics on a progressive trajectory. This is not peculiar to Zimbabwe alone but is a general political culture on the continent. Gleaning on evidence from diverse sources, the paper finds that the separation of powers in Zimbabwe existed on paper but in practice, the ruling party makes all the decisions. Part of the implication of this is that the House of Assembly became a rubber stamp for executive decisions, while cabinet members just pandered to the executive. This culminated in a deadlock over constitutional reform between 1999 and 2000. The deadlock further degenerated into authoritarianism as then-President Robert Mugabe hung to power and undermined a series of organised protests. The inability to demilitarize Zimbabwean political mobilisation techniques and the management of state institutions brings the nature of the inherited structures bequeathed to the people by the retreating colonial settler state into a sharp focus. The crux and summary of the argument are that both government and politics in Zimbabwe were centred on Robert Mugabe, a single political father figure, who refused to relinquish power to the people and got enmeshed in the web of autocratic rule. Therefore, the paper theorises that Robert Mugabe succeeded in allotting power to himself and his party, the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) while undermining the task of consolidating democracy in the country. This paper concludes that Mugabe remained a traditional autocrat and a strongman who ignored protests and disaffections that would have helped in deepening democracy and strengthening the dynamics of the politics of Zimbabwe. The paper recommended that democratic guidelines, protocols and terms of presidency need to be drawn to prevent a recurrence of Mugabe's years in the post-Mugabe era.

Introduction

Countries, the world over, appear to have transited from authoritarian regimes to democratic rule. This political transition (which is a positive development) is usually confronted by challenges of sustaining and consolidating democratic governance. Worldwide, the immediate aftermath of the transition is the challenge of how strengthening and stabilising the tenets of democracy. In other words, the challenges of deepening and consolidating democracy have been a major concern to political actors and scholars of developing nations. Early scholarly discussions in the 20th century largely examined democratisation processes and how democratically elected governments should be constituted. However, in the 21st century, the narrative appears to have changed as attention has shifted to a critical assessment of the prospects of post-democratic transitions and political institutions. The argument that has arisen from investigations is this: Are there possibilities of reverting to a new round of authoritarian regimes arising from the inability of states to stabilise and consolidate democracy?

In over 37 years of independence, Zimbabwe has confronted the task of consolidating democracy. From 1980 to 2017, the country has been ruled by President Robert Mugabe who dominated the nation's politics. His prolonged stay in power has more or less built the country's leadership process around him. The octogenarian, for instance, has repeatedly won all the elections conducted in Zimbabwe since independence including that of 2013. The focus of this paper is to examine the extent this landlocked country has been able to consolidate or deepen democracy within the period under review. The work is structured into the following: introduction, background to Zimbabwe's political development, theoretical framework and perspectives on democratic consolidation, father figure and democratic consolidation in Zimbabwe and conclusion.

Background to Zimbabwe's Political Development

Zimbabwe is a landlocked country in the Southern African region. It is situated within the tropics and has a population of about 12 million people. The country shares borders with Botswana, Mozambique, and Namibia at

its westernmost point. It is the 61st largest country in the world (although below average size for Africa), just larger than Japan or Montana but smaller than Paraguay, with a total area of about 390,580 km², of which 3,910 km² comprises lakes and reservoirs (Afrobarometer & MOIP 2006, p.25).

The first British explorers, colonialists and missionaries got to Zimbabwe in the 1850s. The massive influx of foreigners led to the establishment of the territory of Rhodesia, which was named after Cecil Rhodes of the British South Africa Company. In 1923, European settlers voted to become a self-governing British colony of Southern Rhodesia. After a brief federation with Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), and Nyasaland (now Malawi), in the post-World War II period, Southern Rhodesia (also known as Rhodesia) chose to remain a colony when its two partners voted for independence in 1963. On November 11, 1965, the conservative white-minority government of Rhodesia declared its independence from Great Britain (Makumbe 1998, p.33). The country resisted the demands of the black Africans, and the Prime Minister, Ian Smith withstood British pressure, economic sanctions, and guerrilla attacks in his efforts to uphold white supremacy. On March 1, 1970, Rhodesia formally proclaimed itself a Republic. The heightened guerrilla war and tactical withdrawal of South African military aid in 1976 marked the beginning of the collapse of Ian Smith's 11 years of resistance. Black Nationalist movements were led by Bishop Abel Muzorewa of the African National Congress (ANC) and Ndabaningi Sithole; the moderates and the guerrilla leaders, Robert Mugabe of the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and Joshua Nkomo of the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) that advocated for a revolution. Zimbabwe came out of the colonial womb as an independent state on the 18th of April 1980, with Robert Mugabe as Prime Minister and Canaan Banana as ceremonial President (Agere, 1998, p.35).

During the colonial period, nationalist politics was frequently characterized by violent altercations between and within nationalist parties. Extant literature shows that the new Zimbabwean state under the ZANU-PF government failed to break with the nationalist authoritarian tradition of violence, as well as not parting with the methods and techniques of

colonial settler oppression (Ndlovu, 2004, p.45). Failing to “demilitarise” its political mobilisation methods and management of state institutions, the new government covertly and overtly inherited the colonial and security-oriented structures left by the receding settler state—with serious implications for democracy, human rights and human security. Matlosa, (2005, p.34), avers that political developments after independence consisted of both change and continuity in government and leadership personnel, repressive state structures and practices. This limited space of transformation was equally buttressed by the provisions of the Lancaster House Independence Constitution, which placed serious restrictions on socio-economic redistribution as well as on major constitutional change before 1990. The uneasy amalgam of the new (political players) and the old (state structures geared to repression) structures created and compounded the challenges of conflict prevention and resolution. Although ZANU-PF had comfortably won 57 per cent of the vote in 1980, it was not magnanimous enough to the rival PF ZAPU with 20 per cent to avoid a five-year civil war from 1982 to 1987.

As a result of this, several ambitious institutional changes took place in the first decade of independence in Zimbabwe. Agere (1998, p.37) captures the changes succinctly: first was the abolition of 20 seats reserved for whites in the House of Assembly, and 10 in the Senate. The Senate itself was then abolished in 1989, only to be reinstated in 2005. Secondly, the ceremonial presidency gave way to an executive presidency in 1987, while provision was made for the introduction of eight provincial governors, 10 chiefs and 12 presidential nominees into the House of Assembly. In reality, these 30 non-constituency members of the Assembly were beholden to presidential patronage in a system that became more politically centralised than before. Thirdly, in 1987, there was the formal merger of ZANU-PF and PF-ZAPU and it effectively brought the conflict in the Matabeleland provinces to an abrupt end.

Though opposition parties mounted pressure to take over power in the late 1980s and early 1990s, their effort was not quite different from the small and ineffective older parties, such as the United African National Council and Zanu-Ndonga led by Bishop Muzorewa and Reverend Sithole,

respectively. It was not until 1999, with the founding of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) that the opposition movement became better organised and focused (Raftopoulos, 2006, p. 18). Elections have been characterised by political violence and intimidation, along with the politicisation of the judiciary, military, police force and public services. Statements by the President and government officials have referred to a state of war against the opposition political parties, particularly the Movement for Democratic Change – Tsvangirai (MDC-T). It was under this tense political atmosphere that Zimbabwe went into a general election in 2013, in which the president, Robert Mugabe won amidst serious controversies.

Theoretical framework

This paper considers the roles of institutions in the mechanics of democratization using the consolidation of democracy in Zimbabwe as a case study. It further argues that formal political institutions cannot and do not play a decisive role in democratic consolidation as several theorists suggest. This is because institutions – “electoral systems, constitutional provisions governing relations between the legislative and executive branch, and degrees of decentralization” – are more contingent and susceptible to revisionism than assumed by several theoreticians, (Colomer, 1995, p. 29). Proponents of the theory emphasize institutional contingency as being more plausible today than in earlier decades, given the substantial constitutional changes in numerous countries in the past years. Formal political institutions play two prominent roles in theorizing democratization. First, analysts portray them as outcomes, specifically the products of strategic interaction. Many authors, while acknowledging that limited information and, at least, partial uncertainty plague institutional engineers, concur with Lijphart and Waisman (1997: 17), that “the evidence points point up to the preponderance of self-interested motivations in the design of democratic institutions” in several regions. To simplify the findings of studies, transitions dominated by strong and electorally self-confident groups frequently result in plurality or majoritarian decision rules, while more evenly contested transitions (or ones whose pace is set by cautious oppositions) have often resulted in designs less punishing to minorities (Colomer, 1995: 29; Geddes, 1996: 23; Elster *et al.*, 1998: 32; Boix, 1999: 15). These suggest that a potentially decisive factor for

both easing authoritarian sectors out of power and enticing major political groups to cooperate with democratic processes against the backdrop of the versatility and malleability of political institutions. This is an adoption of the concept that “rules are adaptable.”

Political institutions also play other major roles in democratization, not as contingent effects, but as stable platforms from which contending groups could predict policy outcomes. Several studies concur that proportional representation (PR) and parliamentarianism provide the best institutional prospects for democratic stability by offering “losers” enhanced blocking powers and chances for entry into office (O’Donnell and Schmitter, 1986: 35 Linz and Valenzuela, 1994: 21). In one of the most forceful expressions of this view, Przeworski, (1991, p.58) concludes that such designs “reduces the stakes of political battles” by making unilateral and maximalist policies less likely. Actors who anticipate the effects of stakes-reducing institutions may calculate that even current defeat in democracy is preferable to the risks inherent in potentially violent overthrow attempts and even successfully-implanted (and unaccountable) authoritarian regimes. Actors can afford to abandon access to coercive instruments for exiting democracy when they detect low political risks in a regime.

This paper has adopted this theory because of its relevance in explaining democratic consolidation. In Zimbabwe, political institutions are in place but only in theory. In practice, available evidence point to the preponderance of self-interested motivations in the design of democratic institutions in Zimbabwe. The institutions are instruments by which President Mugabe perpetuated himself in power within the period under review. The electoral umpire, the judiciary and the legislature were used to ensure that President Mugabe retained power in the country. This position appeared plausible but it also had shortcomings. For instance, it emphasises only the role that electoral institutions play in consolidating democracy neglecting other factors that are vital in deepening democracy, other political cultures and states. It is suspect because it is silent on the place and roles that sound economy, transparent and fair elections, rule of law, human rights and freedom, political culture, civil society, good governance and competent leadership play in consolidating democracy.

Perspectives on Democratic Consolidation

Democratic consolidation is often associated with stability. Since whatever is “consolidated” has the quality of appearing immune to disintegration there is a tendency to associate it with durability especially if there are no regime reversals and the absence of potentially destabilizing factors. While the durability of a democratic era is a fundamental attribute of consolidation, this characteristic does not provide an adequate basis for the notion of consolidation. The retention of a democratic government after a process of transition does not necessarily ensure the consolidation of a democratic government. In some instances, democratically elected governments may succeed one another for a considerable period without recourse to absolutism due to leadership caution not to challenge the idea of democratic accountability. In recent times, challenges have emerged and added other tasks to the process of consolidating democracy. This task, according to Andreas, (1998, p. 10) has come to include divergent items such as popular legitimacy, the diffusion of democratic values, the neutralization of anti-system actors, civilian supremacy over the military, the elimination of authoritarian enclaves, party building, the organization of functional interests, the stabilization of electoral rules, the routine of politics, the decentralization of state power, the introduction of mechanisms of direct democracy, judicial reforms, the alleviation of poverty, and economic stabilization. In contemporary times, the concept of democratic consolidation transcends the establishment of political institutions to deepen it by granting the same autonomy to perform their assigned duties and functions. Political analysts have also identified four cardinal areas of democratic consolidation as follows: one, democracies that are strongly consultative and consensual, as Lijphart (1977, p. 9) has argued, deliberately restrains the influence of electoral majorities in areas of policy that are of specific interest to minority segments of the political community. Two, elements that prevent full governmental empowerment are the existence of what should be called reserved domains of authority and policy-making. The reserved domains remove specific areas of governmental authority and substantive policy-making from the purview of elected officials. Again, there are many instances in which policy areas are excluded from elected government officials’ control or from the scope of electoral majorities in regimes that can be considered, nonetheless, democratic.

Turning to the means of selecting those who will form governments as well as occupy legislative seats, a third way in which the operations of minimal democratic procedures can be vitiated is through major discrimination in the electoral process (Linz and Stephan 1989, p.13). Essentially, most electoral system in democracy is biased in the sense of under-representing minority parties and candidates. Finally, the fourth problem pertains to the centrality of the electoral means to constitute governments. Free elections must indeed be the only means through which it is possible to do so. Democratic consolidation cannot occur if military coups or insurrections are also seen by significant political actors as possible means to substitute governments.

In the final analysis, the consolidation of democracy is linked to the improvement of the socio-economic well-being of citizens. Substantive democracy is only possible with sustainable development along equitable lines, according to this perspective. According to Newland, the current perspective may be summarised as follows:

economic development leads to a higher level of education and a more democratic political culture; the citizens develop tolerant and moderate attitudes, behaviour and values resulting in a more rational and restrained political style on the part of those governing towards oppositional tendencies; increased social prosperity reduces extreme economic inequality, lessens differences in standing, class and status between the upper and lower classes, and leads to the creation of a strong middle class, which effectively calls for political participation, (Newland, 1982: 12).

Therefore, the above destabilises autocratic regimes and forms of government and opens the ground for democratic culture to thrive.

Essentially, democratic consolidation is not an irreversible condition, but a relatively stable equilibrium or balance of a democratic system's defining components. Yet, even a "maximally" consolidated democratic

system is not completely impervious to potential tendencies toward deconsolidation. Nevertheless, a consolidated democracy possesses vast reserves of resistance to destabilizing exogenous shocks, such as those that could develop from crises in the economy and foreign conspirators. In this sense, a concept of democratic consolidation, which encompasses people's political attitudes and values has greater futuristic potential (Klingemann, and Zielonka, 2006: 25), than minimalist concepts, in which legitimisation is suspiciously considered as tautological baggage of transformation based on systems theory.

Father figure and Democratic Consolidation in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe transited from colonial domination to democratic rule some decades ago in an election that gave the ZANU-PF party a landslide victory. The party led by Robert Mugabe consistently won all elections conducted in the country and had remained in power since independence. Zimbabwe, as political scholars observed, is only minimally adhering to the standard of democracy as the country has been subverting substantially the main tenets of rule of law, basic freedoms, and respect for human rights. Lloyd, Sachikonye, *et al* (2007: 37), argued that Zimbabwe's case illustrates a polity that has nominally upheld a multiparty system sustained by regular elections since 1980. The country did not undergo the motions of reforms experienced by countries such as Malawi, Mozambique Tanzania and Zambia, amongst others in the 1990s. There was, therefore, no similar transition in qualitative terms in Zimbabwe during that era. Instead, a stalemate over constitutional reforms occurred between 1999 and 2000 and degenerated into a swing towards authoritarianism as the incumbent government sought to consolidate its precarious grab for power in the face of broad, but heterogeneous protest movements under the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). The stalemate was protracted and debilitating but reflected democratic deficits in political and economic governance, local and corporate governance as well as in citizenship participation.

Democratic governance in Zimbabwe may aptly be likened to what, Valenzuela (1990: 10) describes as "dominant-power politics". The key political problem in dominant power politics countries is the blurring of the

line between the state and the ruling party (or ruling political forces). The state's main asset—that is to say, the state is seen as a source of money, jobs, public information (via state media), and police power, which are gradually put in the direct service of the ruling party. Rather than giving judiciaries and other political institutions independence, the judiciary in dominant-power countries is typically cowed, as part of the one-sided grip on power. As a typical dominant-power country, elections in Zimbabwe have not only been dubious but outrightly fraudulent in a manner that the ruling party tries to put on a good-enough electoral image to gain the applause and approval of the international community, while quietly tilting the electoral playing field to its favour to ensure victory. Elections in the country are hardly free and fair. Thus, elections become how leaders in countries such as Zimbabwe, hold on to power and where the minimal adherence to democratic standards – an election – suffices to keep the world at bay. Logan and Cho (2009: 18) are of the view that a situation like this could lead to a lack of trust in the institutions of the state, and willingness to defend democracy and, by implication, the durability of democracy. A study by Logan and Cho, further revealed that less than half the respondents are optimistic that democracy would survive, and that the mean score of a survey carried out in Zimbabwe, for optimism in the survival of democracy, is merely 56 per cent.

In Zimbabwe, it is observed that democratic consolidation is seen as a mirage as the country has been under an authoritarian regime since her independence (Tinhu, 2013: 27). The father figure or godfather politics played in Zimbabwe by Robert Mugabe remains a crucial factor inhibiting democratic consolidation in the country. His utterances, suppression of opposition political parties, non-adherence to the rule of law and other tenets of democracy are indications that democratic consolidation in Zimbabwe remains a far cry. Throughout his administration of 37 years, Mugabe was not only larger than life in the exercise of power; he was power and politics rolled into one. Nothing seems to have worked without him. The judiciary and legislature operated by his directives. Zimbabweans appeared to have lost faith in democracy as Mugabe imposed himself on them through the use of political institutions, military power and the judiciary. Again, the effects of Operation Murambatsvina, the near-total collapse of the Zimbabwean

economy, the extreme hyperinflation between 2006 and 2008, and the continued political violence saw a sustained diminution in the affections of the citizenry, and eventually by the voters' affection for Robert Mugabe and ZANU PF (Sachikonye, 2005: 17). However, the politics of incumbency appeared very slow to disappear as the former ruling party was wholly reluctant to cede any real power; insisted on the paramount status of the then President, and demanded more vociferously that another term in office for the incumbent was non-negotiable. Thus, despite the Global Political Agreement, "dominant power politics" remain in force and Zimbabwe remained hostage to the "Big Man" syndrome.

The centralisation of authority and power in the presidency was to the disadvantage of other institutional centres of power such as the parliament and the judiciary. Raftopoulos, (2006: 32) concluded that in general, there is a low level of public trust in government and its institutions. The report further revealed that Zimbabwe's political culture has been characterised by intolerance towards divergent views and dissenting voices even in the same ruling party as well as in the opposition party.

Conclusion

Democratic consolidation in Zimbabwe showcased a political system that theoretically upheld a multiparty system but nominally held regular elections since 1980, and fell short of the motions of reform for deepening democracy in the country. This undemocratic practice transcends Zimbabwe to other states in Africa. As seen in Zimbabwe during Mugabe's administration, political institutions were merely established as a make-belief of the country's readiness to embrace democracy but in reality, it was just a decoy because democratic consolidation was not in Mugabe's agenda. In Zimbabwe, the separation of powers only existed on paper, it was not in practice. Democracy's power resides with the people but Mugabe ensured that the people never took hold of it rather; he usurped all political powers and reigned as an emperor rather than a democratically elected president. Thus, In Mugabe's administration, power revolved around his personality and the ZANU-PF. This was contrary to the idea of deepening democracy and consolidating democratic culture.

For the consolidation of democracy in Zimbabwe, political authority and power must be unbundled. As president, Robert Mugabe played the role of a traditional autocratic strongman with far-reaching powers and control. He did not allow the executive to flourish rather, he used authoritarian structures and practices to contain protests and disenchantment during his administration but there is no assurance that this “artificial construct” would not implode in future. Zimbabwe needs institutionalised guidelines and procedures for succession and restricted terms for the presidency.

Recommendations

Robert Mugabe’s 37 years in power as the president of Zimbabwe prevented the deepening of democratic culture. To forestall a recurrence, this paper is offering the following recommendations:

- There is a need for extensive political and civic education to address pervasive intolerance. A combination of separation of powers and consensual constitutional reform would provide a structure for more tolerant values while fostering a spirit of collectivism and solidarity in the society.
- There will also be the need to revisit the electoral system and strive for a mix of first-past-the-post (FPTP) and proportional representation (PR) systems to provide better representative parliament.
- To effectively consolidate democracy in Zimbabwe, international organizations like the Southern African Development Community (SADC), African Union and European Union need to form a synergy with nation-states like the United States, China and South Africa to upturn some of the democratic tenets destroyed by Mugabe and his government.
- Post-Mugabe transition may be heavily problematic except if there is a coalition or workable alliance between Mugan Tsvangirai and Mujuru so they can both overcome the desperate acts of securocrats.

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