Editorial: Sovereignty, Democracy & Zimbabwe's Tragedy

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# Sovereignty, Democracy & Zimbabwe's Tragedy

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Many of the contributions to this issue, ranging over a wide variety of concerns, also examine aspects of African sovereignty and democracy. These two issues have been at the heart of Africa's struggle for development almost since the birth of African nationalism. The issue of sovereignty was central to Nkrumah's call to arms against neo-colonialism. Without a genuine independence, it was argued, without the ability of African states to chart their own strategic direction, the continent had little chance of escaping from the worst features of dependence and underdevelopment and would always be at the mercy of international economic interests and events. So it has proved. The ravages of debt, instability and globalisation have made African independence, if anything, even more fragile and thus more important than it was a generation ago. The problem of establishing and defending national sovereignty has been a familiar theme in the pages of this journal and in the widespread concern in Africa that there is a process of 're-colonisation' going on under the ideological cloak of globalisation and structural reform. Democracy, too, was a central idea of African independence. Indeed, for many it was synonymous with sovereignty. Political movements claimed national independence in the name of democracy, in terms of the rights of Africans to decide their own political destinies. Democracy was the legitimating principle of African sovereignty (just as it had been for the bourgeois revolutions of nineteenth century Europe and Latin America and twentieth century India). If independence meant anything it meant the right of Africans to choose their own governments as free citizens.

A generation later, these concerns remain as vital as before. Now, however, their achievement is undermined by the ravages of debt and crisis and by the largely unchecked expansion of the imperial state power on which globalisation rests. That imperial power, and particularly the control of global oil resources that it covets is the concern of the colloquium of ACAS scholars featured in this issue. The trajectory of globalisation, and the organisation of the international trade regime emerging out of the Uruguay Round and the World Trade order are the subject of Peter Gibbon's analysis. Assessing the effects of this developing order on Africa's economies, and particularly on the clothing and horticulture sectors, Gibbon argues that certain aspects of the current international trade regime create opportunities for Africa to play a more prominent role in the world economy in these sectors. However, he suggests, the emergence of global 'contract manufacturing' and imposition of process-based food safety standards, implies that the main winners will be large transnational firms rather than African producers.

The relationship between the power of these international interests and emerging local petty bourgeois predatory elites – which has been the subject of a number of recent contributions to this journal (see, for instance: Bush, 2000; White and Taylor, 2001; Storey, 2001; Zack-Williams, 2001 and Power, 2001). It is also the concern of

Joseph Hanlon's analysis of the nature and role of banking in the transition from socialism in Mozambique. The sector, Hanlon shows, has been characterised by serious levels of corruption (and even of murder) involving the loss of more than $400 million from the banking system. Hanlon argues that banks in Mozambique were first used to build socialism, then to keep the country running during war, and then to promote local business in the capitalist era as a means of limiting foreign control of the economy. But the combination of the old socialist banking institutions and the transition process created conditions under which powerful individuals with presidential patronage could use the banking sector for personal accumulation. Using the formulation of Peter Evans (2000) he describes a struggle within the ruling elite between those who support a 'predatory state' and those seeking to promote a 'developmental state'. In this struggle, the international financial institutions, as agents for global capital, adopt a doctrinaire opposition to any serious role for the state and thus choose to support the 'predatory state'. Moreover, he concludes, the IFIs are content to accept 'a culture of corruption' as the price of implementing the neo-liberal agenda. Notwithstanding donor demands for anti-corruption 'governance reforms', economic liberalisation has intensified the upward spiral of corruption in Mozambique as in the rest of Africa (Szeftel, 2000). Donors have, in Hanlon's words, been happy to 'look the other way' too because many careers depend on pretending that Mozambique is a World Bank and donor 'success story'.

If these writers emphasise the ways in which contemporary capitalist development limits African autonomy and subordinates mass needs to elite interests, both foreign and local, other contributions give more attention to dimensions of democratic struggle. In a trenchant critique of current claims made on behalf of the democratising properties of 'civil society' in Egypt, Maha Abdel Rahman argues the idea of civil society among academics and policy-makers alike owes more to ideological conviction than to empirical evidence or rigorous analysis. Far from being the panacea for curing problems of state-led development or the means for producing democracy and justice, she suggests that civil society is more often conflictual and reactionary. In Egypt, says Rahman, the state is no longer the single source of authoritarianism; instead, civil society has become an arena for political conflict and its organisations are controlled by representatives of competing political programmes who frequently employ violence and repression to suppress other groups.

In contrast, the analysis of human rights abuses in the Somali Region of Ethiopia by Khalif and Doornbos emphasises the dreadful record of successive Ethiopian regimes where a succession of atrocities have been committed against civilians, specifically community and political leaders including members of the Somali state legislature. Even the famine of 2000, they suggest, was 'deliberately choreographed' for political reasons and so constitutes a human rights issue. Moreover, the discovery of natural gas deposits in the region resulted in human rights abuses being inflicted on the Somali region's population by state agents, foreign interests and local or neighbouring elites. Democratic struggles in this region would seem to involve the need to develop an effective and autonomous 'civil society' to defend the local Somali population; the issue of controlling the worst elements of that society seems to be one for a still distant future.

Not all democratic struggles are situated at the level of political economy, as the contributions by Hilary Burns and by Judy El-Bushra and Chris Dolan attest. El-Bushra and Dolan argue that the capacity of performance art to mobilise popular enthusiasm has led politicians and NGOs alike to view them as both 'a threat and an opportunity' because of their subversive and mobilising potential. They examine the

ways in which such actors have sought to direct or neutralise such popular expression and assess the extent to which these efforts threaten the integrity of so-called 'indigenous' performance art. Using Uganda as a case study, they examine ways in which governments, political activists and NGOs have appropriated the form for their own purposes and the extent to which such external actors manipulate the content of apparently 'authentic' local performance. Arguing that the distinction between local and external forms of cultural activity is not sustainable, they conclude that the subversive elements of 'indigenous performance' are likely to be resistant to manipulation from outside, not least because they are responses to specific circumstances and communicate within a given population rather than speaking to outsiders. Efforts by external actors to manipulate such activities are often undermined by their inability to grasp the messages contained in such indigenous theatre. Thus the ideas of government of NGOs 'are no more likely to be absorbed uncritically than those of the colonisers'.

Most of the contributions to this issue treat problems of African autonomy and problems of democratic rights as aspects of the same struggle. Globalisation imposes on African states and African citizens alike a shrinking policy arena. Crisis imposes on both a diminishing field in which purposive action is possible. Just as they were a generation ago, the principles of sovereignty and democracy seem part of the same agenda of struggle. And yet, as the various articles imply (and those by Khalif & Doornbos, Rahman and El-Bushra & Dolan make explicit), there is a tension between government and people, between sovereign state and democratic society, which cannot be subsumed easily into the global discourse of anti- imperialism and anti-globalisation. Nowhere is this tension, even antagonism, between the two principles more starkly manifest at present than in Zimbabwe.

## Zimbabwe: Sovereignty & Democracy in Opposition?

This issue went to press in the immediate aftermath of Zimbabwe's bitter presidential elections of March 2002. These elections were themselves the culmination of more than two years of violent political conflict (stretching back to the campaign for the parliamentary elections of 2000) between the ruling ZANU-PF and the opposition MDC. The last decade of Zimbabwe's economic and political decline and crisis is documented in the article by Sachikonye. He lays out very clearly the historical pattern of decline, the many errors of economic mismanagement and political judgement made by Zimbabwe's leaders and he begins to chart the dreadful consequences of authoritarian government. Certainly since the parliamentary elections of 2000 (and before that time too) the conflict has produced widespread and systematic electoral corruption, violence, murder and intimidation, abuses of human rights, the abandonment of constitutional rule, the reduction of the judiciary and police to instruments of the ruling party, the use of state terror against citizens, and hunger in the wake of the collapse of agricultural production. Just as ZANU-PF's electoral victory in 2000 owed much to widespread intimidation of voters, so too did Mugabe's victory this year. Not surprisingly, therefore, there has been widespread condemnation of the behaviour of the Mugabe government, condemnation so fierce that it has itself become controversial, dividing international opinion, the Commonwealth, Africa and Zimbabwe itself. In the process, the Zimbabwean case serves to focus attention anew on the problematic interaction of ideas about national sovereignty and democratic citizenship. How those tensions are resolved or reconciled will exercise much influence on the direction that Africa is to take in the new millennium. The disputes surrounding the elections mean that it has now gone well beyond being a local matter.

The crisis in Zimbabwe, at least in its political and ideological aspects, has placed discourses about sovereignty and democracy in opposition to one another. On the one hand, the Mugabe government has condemned its international critics as meddlers seeking to undermine the country's national sovereignty and re-impose their imperialist control over the country. Local and international interests, it asserts, oppose the popular programme of land redistribution which strikes at the heart of their control of the economy and so seek to replace them with stooges they have financed. Their attack on this opposition is therefore an anti-imperialist struggle to defend the sovereignty of the nation. It is to this concern in the South in general that the ZANU leadership has appealed in justifying its actions and its treatment of its opponents. On the other hand, the MDC and much of Zimbabwe's rising urban and civil society have condemned the authoritarianism, inefficiency and corruption of twenty years of rule by the Mugabe government and call for political change. They argue that government needs to be accountable to its citizens and limited in its actions by the democratic will. They are supported by powerful friends in the West who insist that Zimbabwe must develop pluralist forms of government, respect for human rights and the rule of law, and honesty and accountability in government – in short, the trappings of liberal democracy. It has become a struggle between an old nationalist patronage politics and an emerging, mostly urban, society. For the present, possession of the state apparatus guarantees the survival of the old order in power.

About the general nature of the events that occurred during the last two or more years, there can be little dispute. Although information is patchy and not always reliable, and there has been much exaggeration and hysteria on both sides, the sheer volume of reports of widespread, calculated and brutal electoral corruption and thuggery – overwhelmingly perpetrated by the government and its supporters – is such that there can be no question but that the election campaign was a stain on the country's political history and that it has added substantially to Africa's disgraceful record of abuses of human and political rights. One reputable accredited observer based in Africa, listed no fewer than thirteen forms of electoral malpractice. These included: the military and police 'voted early and voted often' through unsupervised postal ballots and sometimes under the supervision of commanding officers providing perhaps 100,000 votes for ZANU-PF; some 2 million Zimbabwean citizens abroad, most assumed to support the MDC, were not allowed to vote unless in the military and civil service; ballot boxes were stuffed in remote rural constituencies where MDC polling agents were not allowed in to supervise the electoral process; MDC was literally prevented from campaigning in the rural areas; violent intimidation was normal in the rural areas over two years; of 15,000 independent *local* election monitors proposed by the Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network, less than 600 were accredited by the government thus excluding them from entering a polling station; many of the heads of international observer delegations were cronies or political allies of President Mugabe (including Libyan 'observers' who actually campaigned for ZANU-PF); monitors from the European Union, and from most of the individual countries in the EU, and from the US (except for the NAACP delegation) were barred; in Harare and nearby townships the number of polling stations were reduced significantly compared with the 2000 parliamentary elections so that voters queued for up to 36 hours during which time they were subjected to intimidation by roving youth gangs; in contravention of a High Court order the government held mayoral and council elections at the same time as the presidential election, thus requiring two voters' rolls to be checked and slowing the process to a crawl; although ordered by the High Court to open polling stations in Harare and Chitungwiza for a full extra day only half a day's extra voting was allowed; the only TV or radio stations

allowed to operate were the state-owned mouthpieces of the ruling party; state-controlled newspapers disseminated government propaganda and in rural areas it was difficult or dangerous to read an independent paper; most international media were banned from reporting inside Zimbabwe.

On the ground, what this meant was that MDC officials and critics of the government within civil society were terrorised, kidnapped, tortured and even murdered. There are reports of at least one person being beheaded with a machete and of others suffering genital mutilation and castration. Since the start of the parliamentary election campaign in 2000, farm workers and their families have borne the main burden of state-sponsored terrorism, including cases of rape, individuals being set on fire and workers being evicted from their homes and forced to hide in the bush. This prevented many of them voting in 2000 and again in 2002, thus delivering a number of rural constituencies to the government. Recent reports indicate that revenge attacks against opposition members and human rights campaigners in the aftermath of the vote has forced many of them into hiding; the turmoil has not ended with the elections.

Violence and electoral fraud made widespread election rigging easy – indeed that was its main purpose. One effect of intimidation was that some polling stations were unmonitored during the elections, allowing further intimidation and ballot stuffing. The shamelessness of the process was often breathtaking. It achieved electoral turnouts of over 70% in rural Mashonaland's ZANU strongholds and reduced voter turnout in Bulawayo and Harare to around 40%. In Tsholotsho constituency in Matabeleland North (where Mugabe almost doubled his share of the regional vote), monitors calculated some 12,000 voters had turned out but the turnout announced was 21,000 and Mugabe won by 60 votes. This was despite the unpopularity of ZANU-PF in the region worst affected by the activities of the Fifth Brigade in the eighties. One local observer was quoted as saying: 'Mugabe should not get one vote in that area. The result was a joke' (*The Times*, London, 14 March 2002). There were reports of ballot rigging in rural Mashonaland and Midlands too. In Mudzi, some 30,000 registered voters gave Mugabe 33,858 votes and Tsvangirai 4,226. In Chikomba, although observers estimated about 15,000 had voted, Mugabe took some 24,000 votes. Moreover, after the registrar-general of elections had announced that 2.4 million people had voted, he subsequently stated that the 'correct' figure was a turnout of 2.9 million. For some foreign observers it was evidence of election rigging; as one of them put it: '[Mugabe] suddenly had another 500,000 votes to play with. We knew then that he was going to win.'

The calculated effect of all this, and the extent to which Mugabe's strategy was successful, can be seen in the share of votes obtained by Mugabe and Tsvangirai. The intention of the government's strategy, of course, was to discourage voters from voting, which it achieved. But while the aggregate vote fell, the *share* of the total vote obtained by the president *rose*. As the table shows, in every one of the 10 regions of the country, Mugabe's *percentage* of votes obtained in 2002 rose when compared with ZANU's proportion of the vote in 2000. In every one of the ten regions, Tsvangirai's proportion of the vote in 2002 was lower than the proportion obtained by the MDC in 2000. Nothing illustrates the success of the government's campaign better than this. Deprived of actual votes in its urban strongholds, the opposition also saw its share of the vote fall everywhere.

**Comparison of percentage votes won in 2000 & 2002 by Robert Mugabe/ZANU-PF & Morgan Tsvangirai/MDC**

| Electoral region | Deaths from political violence Jan - Mar 2000 | Proportion of votes won by ZANU-PF 2000 & Mugabe 2002 | | Proportion of votes won by MDC 2000 & Tsvangirai | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | ZANU 2000 % | Mugabe 2002 % | MDC 2000 % | Tsvangirai 2002 % |
| Mashonaland Central | 3 | 76 | 80.1 | 19 | 15.6 |
| Mashonaland East | 4 | 56 | 69 | 32 | 29.3 |
| Mashonaland West | 2 | 64 | 64 | 20 | 24 |
| Harare | 3 | 21 | 24.3 | 75 | 74.6 |
| Manicaland | 2 | 43 | 47.9 | 49 | 47.8 |
| Masvingo | 7 | 56 | 69 | 32 | 29.3 |
| Midlands | 3 | 55 | 60 | 49 | 47.8 |
| Bulawayo | 4 | 13 | 17 | 83 | 80.7 |
| Matabeleland North | 4 | 20 | 31.9 | 71 | 63 |
| Matabeleland South | 0 | 34 | 44.3 | 59 | 50.9 |

***Source***: Collated from *The Times*, London: 14 March 2002

## Perception & Reality

Throughout the turmoil in Zimbabwe, the strategy pursued by the government was made easier by the reluctance of African politicians to join with EU states in condemning the violence. The failure of Commonwealth countries to produce even the most modest reproof meant that sanctions were never a possibility and also that Mugabe could represent his position as one of anti-colonial struggle and avoid defending his poor record on democracy; he could depict his critics as colonialists or their stooges rather than as democrats or reformers. There is no doubt that African and Commonwealth leaders contributed enormously to creating a diplomatic climate which protected Mugabe as he pursued his strategy. It was predictable, therefore, that the election results would be defended by African politicians and condemned by EU governments. Most official African observer delegations and African governments quickly endorsed the elections, the head of the South African observer team calling them 'legitimate' and others, including the presidents of Zambia and Kenya hailing them as 'free and fair'. At the same time, the election results were dismissed as fraudulent in Brussels, London and Washington. A detailed report by the Norwegian Election Observation Mission was critical of virtually every aspect of the elections and an additional report deplored the post-election attacks on opposition members. Media accounts of the election aftermath reinforced this image of a world community and a Commonwealth divided racially.

The Pan African Congress of South Africa also adopted this view of events, accepting ZANU's claim that the election had been about land distribution and that opposition had reflected colonial interests. Congratulating Mugabe on his 'deserved victory', the PAC observed that he had 'shown that determination will win against all colonial odds and artificially created roadblocks and tricks by imperialist tricksters. The colonial garbage and debris of accusation about the freeness or not of the elections is dull noise in the ears of land-hungry Africans.' The statement also poured scorn on 'prophets of doom like the European Union observers and their colonial cousins the Norwegian observer mission'. The ANC, while more restrained in tone, congratulated 'the people of Zimbabwe' for a successful election and argued that 'the high voter turnout in both rural and urban areas' showed 'how the people of Zimbabwe

value democratic processes'. Congratulating Mugabe, it asserted that 'the people of Zimbabwe have spoken' and pledged support for reconstruction. Finally, the new Zambian president, Levy Mwanawasa, speaking as head of the OAU to African, Cuban, Palestinian and Saudi Arabian diplomats in Lusaka called the elections 'free and fair' and urged the world to rally behind Zimbabwe:

> *I wish to reiterate our congratulations to the people of Zimbabwe who exercised their will by conducting their elections in an atmosphere of calm and peace and in which President Robert Mugabe emerged victorious. The wishes of the Zimbabwean people should, therefore, be respected.*

Yet this view of a racially polarised diplomatic community is misleading. There was widespread (and in the circumstances, fearless) criticism of the conduct of the elections from Zimbabwean election monitoring organisations. It is an indictment of media professionalism and of OAU integrity that their views have received so little attention and that many of them have been victimised by ZANU. But even the diplomatic community was not divided on simple racial grounds. Whatever their leaders were saying, the observer mission representing the SADC Parliamentary Forum, was categorical that the elections were held in a 'climate of insecurity [which] was such that the electoral process could not be said to adequately comply with the norms and standards for elections in the SADC region.' Equally critical remarks came from Commonwealth observers. As a result, and however reluctantly, the political leadership was forced to suspend Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth for a year.

Clearly, in the tension between sovereignty and democracy, most African leaders have chosen to defend Zimbabwe against international (and especially Western) criticism rather than to try to defend Zimbabwe's citizens against their government's repression. In some cases, this response is understandable. The endorsement of Kenya's Daniel arap Moi comes from a leader widely regarded as knowing a thing or two about rigging elections. And Zambia's Mwanawasa's recent election was characterised by widespread electoral irregularities. Indeed, it is worth asking if his MMD party is engaged on a programme to abolish the electorate altogether as successive voter registration drives have produced decreasing numbers of voters. Yet this passivity is less predictable or sensible for other governments or organisations. The South African government, led by a party that only yesterday called on international solidarity in the struggle for democracy in South Africa, felt unable to take a stand, perhaps because it has already alienated much domestic support through neo-liberal policies and its stance on HIV/AIDS. It is likely to find that its international moral authority has been diminished. The Commonwealth, too, has been tarnished.

The collusion of African regimes in their support for Mugabe's abuse of power is an indictment of African governments' failure to relinquish power despite having little popular support. Instead, they cling to office until state coffers are drained in the support of governing class strategies for capital accumulation. It needs to be restated, as it was recently in this journal by David Beetham, that democratic consolidation needs to pass the 'two election' test. For while this test is not in itself an adequate indicator of the robustness or effectiveness of democracy it is crucial where regimes have become indistinguishable from state structures. The transfer of power is a crucial indicator of a movement towards democracy; 'democracy is consolidated when a government that has itself been elected in a free and fair contest is defeated at a subsequent election and accepts the result'. Here, of course it is not the winning of office that counts – it's the losing and the ability, and integrity of political elites and

their followers, to accept the will of the majority. This is important because it 'demonstrates that powerful players, and their social backers, are prepared to put respect for the rules of the game above the continuation of their power' (Beetham, 1994:160) and we might add, class position of accumulation for spoils. This does not ensure or guarantee democratic politics but where leaders refuse to shift from office because they prefer the benefits that accrue from it they must be shunned by local political forces and the international community. This has not been enough to stop Mugabe's destruction of a democratisation in Zimbabwe and African governments have failed to take a lead seeing the recent election as a chance to promote political liberalisation rather than push it further back.

The failure of African states to condemn what has happened in Zimbabwe is likely to carry a heavy price for Africa in the next decade or so. First, it is likely to have serious negative aid and investment consequences for what are essentially neo-colonial regimes. Second, the Zimbabwean conflict has introduced a dangerous process of institutional disintegration into what was previously an efficient state. The lesson that when in trouble, a political faction or clique can simply tear up the constitution and rule by force already has too many adherents on the continent. And third, recent events have undermined the pressing need for wealth redistribution and land reform in Africa. Instead of these being promoted as part of a coherent programme based on a democratic mandate, instead of them being promoted to expand a democratic constitutional space, they have been hijacked by demagogues for purposes of narrow power and factional patronage.

The lesson of Zimbabwe is that the principle of sovereignty becomes a bogus one when it is divorced from principles of democracy. Sovereignty without a democratic character and popular mandate is no more than naked dictatorship. The claim that it is necessary to brutalise one's own citizens because they are being misled by foreign interests is insulting and shameful. While there are always those who will defend any injustice simply because it is opposed by international imperialism, such a position is not tenable morally or tactically. Authoritarianism is not a defence against external interference; on the contrary, it tends to invite such interference and to confer legitimacy on it in the eyes of an oppressed citizenry. Nor is it honest always to accuse external critics of being racists; that is itself a racist argument and in Zimbabwe it has been used to deny citizenship to commercial farmers and farm workers alike. As the crises of African independence have gathered and increased, the discourses of sovereignty and democracy have become ever more separate and even, as in this case, opposed. There is a need to get beyond the misuse of the idea of sovereignty as a way of furthering private wealth accumulation and to get past the idea of democracy as the adoption of some formulaic liberal prescriptions. Africa's struggles depend on the achievement of an independence that rests on a democratic mandate that will give governments the means to negotiate more effectively with the forces of global capitalism.

(Editorial continued on page 20)

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