On Power in Zimbabwe

Tony Reeler, Senior Researcher

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“In passing by the side of Mount Thai, Confucius came on a woman who was weeping bitterly by a grave. The master pressed forward and drove quickly to her; then he sent Tze-Lu to question her. “Your wailing”, he said. “is one who has suffered sorrow on sorrow.” She replied, “That is so. Once my husband’s father was killed here by a tiger. My husband was also killed, and now my son has been killed in the same way.” The master said, “why do you not leave this place?” The answer was, “there is no oppressive government here.” The Master then said, “Remember this, my children: oppressive government is more terrible than the tiger.”

Bertrand Russell’s 1938 analysis was very much a child of its time, concerned with visible power in all its manifestations. Contemporary analyses see power in a more nuanced way. Concerns about priestly power, kingly power, naked power, and the like, have been supplanted by examinations of political economy, and, more insistently, power as purely economic. But these remain epistemologies with a broad brush, and mostly concerned with the macro. Analyses of power in more micro perspectives might have much to inform the macro.

More recent formulations of power as visible, hidden, and invisible allow us to see the more subtle picture, and may give us tools to think about power at the macro levels. Visible suggests things that can be seen, are overt, and are capable of general understanding. The overt manifestations of the state – the police, teachers, doctors and nurses, civil servants, etc. – are all visible, but less so the rules and instructions according to which they act. The regulatory power of the state is hidden to most people: it can be discovered by active exploration and, in many countries, can be easily found, and even made available to the curious citizen. This may be less the case in more authoritarian countries such as Zimbabwe, where not only may the state obfuscate the regulatory framework, but the regulators frequently flout the regulations. For example, the Police Act [Chapter 11:10] in Zimbabwe specifically prohibits policemen from holding political party positions, even prohibits

policemen from expressing any political party affiliation, but this is ignored completely by the police, led by the most senior policeman in the country, the Commissioner-General of Police.

So, hidden power can be discovered by active citizens, but it can equally be that the state works against inquiry and active citizenship, sometimes through its ability to cover up or obfuscate through regulation. The power of bureaucracy to foil the best intentions and desires of citizens should not be underestimated, but, in many countries, these barriers to citizen’s understanding are largely passive blockages, and rarely resist their uncovering by diligent citizen activity. In South Africa, for example, a highly active citizenry consistently and continually defies the state’s attempts to keep power hidden, and combinations of legal action and investigative journalism, backed and supported by direct citizen action, reveal the government’s misdemeanors, forcing much that is hidden into public light. This is the reasoning behind legislation about access to information in most democracies. But invisible power, by definition, is the hardest to discover or deal with: no longer kings and barons plotting in secret places, but a virtual world in which power is still secret, often offshore, frequently beyond the reach of governments, often facilitated by governments, and certainly beyond the reach of local communities.

The paradigm for understanding power developed by John Gaventa (2006), and referred to above, can be very helpful in unraveling the ways in which power operates in Zimbabwe. And, in particular, the ways in which these forms of power operate at the macro and meso levels of Zimbabwean socio-political life to facilitate the continuance of one particular regime in political power. Additionally, I seek to demonstrate how these forms of power facilitate violence through the use of state power.

Applied to Zimbabwe at the macro level, it becomes interesting to see how power may be working in a state that is more terrible than the tiger, or, more appropriately in Zimbabwe, the crocodile. And here the concern in taming power is with the most serious manifestation of government power, the legitimate use of violence, as well as the even more serious manifestation of that power, the illegitimate use of violence. Here the reference is to the epidemics of political violence and intimidation that have accompanied elections in 2000, 2002, and 2008, and, to a much lesser extent, in 1995, 2005, and 2013. One could also include the violence during the Gukurahundi between 1982 and 1987, as well as the mostly implicit violence in Operation Murambatsvina in 2005. However, the country’s history, both before and after Independence in 1980, is a history of violent political problem-solving, captured so well by Lloyd Sachikonye in his recent book.

When Bratton and van de Walle (1994) produced their incisive analysis on neopatrimonialism in Africa, Zimbabwe was regarded as one of the few African countries that could be described as a multiparty polyarchy, and not a neopatrimonial regime: there were opposition political parties, regular elections, and a good, functioning civil service, albeit one honed to provide for a minority, and in need of transformation to the needs of the majority of citizens. This characterization would probably not apply to current Zimbabwe, where the regime has systematically captured all the institutions of the state, and the powers of the executive have

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3 Reference to Muagbe quote here.

4 Sachikonye, L (2011), *When a state turns on its Citizens: 60 years of Institutionalised Violence in Zimbabwe*. JOHANNESBURG: JACANA.

increased near-exponentially, even under the new constitution that came into being in 2013\(^6\). And, in this transition from polyarchy to a neo-patrimonial regime, power has become increasingly opaque.

Visible power in present day Zimbabwe resides in a wide range of state agents; the police, the army, and the Central Intelligence Organisation are primary amongst these. They are supplemented by a wide range of other government agencies; traditional leaders, local government officers, and even government officials such as teachers, headmasters, and the like. This network of government agencies and agents are locked together through the simple device that virtually all State institutions are wholly partisan to one political party, ZANU PF, and expressed allegiance to ZANU PF is a virtual pre-requisite for employment in the government. This is despite the new Constitution of Zimbabwe and existing legislation, such as the Police Act, or the Traditional Leaders Act, that enjoins police or traditional leaders to act in a non-politically partisan manner. It is common for media reports of government officials unashamedly stating their support for ZANU PF\(^7\), most recently by the President of the National Council of Chiefs\(^8\). The partisan nature of these overlapping agencies and bodies has been continually challenged by civil society in Zimbabwe, with repeated calls for the restoration of state institutions\(^9\).

This network of overlapping agencies and agents provides a remarkable system of political control, and is documented in myriad reports by Zimbabwean civil society. This is attested to also by the documentation of the participation of all of these agencies and agents in the commission of gross human rights violations\(^10\). All of this is visible every day for the ordinary Zimbabwean citizen, and an everyday reminder of the power of the state and its potential for inflicting violence. But, in addition to these visible, ostensibly legitimate, forms of power, is a whole network of proxy forces that can be called in to undertake the violence and intimidation: “war veterans”, youth militia, ZANU PF Youth, and ZANU PF supporters are the most frequent perpetrators of the violence and intimidation, but, at most times, this power is latent, only called into visibility when occasion – such as an election – demands\(^11\).

For the citizen, the visible forms of power are supplemented by a network of hidden agents, directing the government officials and agents described above. Ostensibly, this is the government, acting through the executive and its ministries, but it is also evident that the president alone wields enormous power in many different ways: through appointments to executive and government posts, as well as through the use of presidential powers. These last are not trivial, and one study indicated that the president had exercised his personal power a total of 450 times through the Presidential Powers (Temporary Measures) Act, and other powers, from 1989 up to mid-2000\(^12\), and undoubtedly many more times since, including the unconstitutional promulgation of electoral law for the 2013 elections.

\(^7\) See, for example, Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum (2007), Their Words Condemn Them: The Language of Violence, Intolerance and Despotism in Zimbabwe, May 2007, HARARE: ZIMBABWE HUMAN RIGHTS NGO FORUM.
\(^8\) http://researchandadvocacyunit.wordpress.com/2014/09/05/from-guided-democracy-to-guided-succession/.
\(^10\) Here see the many reports of the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, the Solidarity Peace Trust, and the Zimbabwe Peace Project. For a more detailed analysis of the overlapping relationships of all these government agencies and agents, see Anatomy of Terror. [Available at http://www.sokwanele.com/node/2334/];
\(^11\) See, for example, CSVR (2009), Subliminal Terror? Human rights violations and torture in Zimbabwe during 2008. June 2009. JOHANNESBURG: CSVR.
\(^12\) Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum (2001), Enforcing the Rule of Law in Zimbabwe. September 2001. HARARE: ZIMBABWE HUMAN RIGHTS NGO FORUM.
The President of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, in particular exercised his powers in matters concerning local government – Rural District Councils and Urban Councils – a total of 183 (41%) times, which seems to show a strong interest the affairs of local government, generally the vector of most concern for citizens and importantly affecting the delivery of public goods and services. This tendency to regulate local government is one that has been assiduously continued by the Minister for Local Government as the hand of visible power, but it seems likely that there may well also be the hidden hand of the President, since he has power over the appointments of both traditional leaders and governors – now “Resident Ministers” – and, furthermore, much of the important legislation for local government requires the assent of the President.\(^\text{13}\)

However, the relationship between the visible and the hidden in Zimbabwe is sometimes confusing. Take, for example, the role of District Administrators [DA] who wield enormous power in their Districts: Chiefs are known to consult the DA as to which meetings they might attend or call themselves. But is wholly unclear what are their powers in law, nor on what legal basis DAs are appointed. As RAU has pointed out:

> While District Administrators appear to be public officials whose appointments are thus made by the Public Service Commission and authorised by the Public Service Act 45, no other provisions appear to govern their appointment. Yet these individuals wield enormous power and have been described as acting on behalf of the Ministry of Local Government as “chief implementers, government regulators and monitors” of Ministerial policy in the districts to which they are assigned.\(^\text{14}\)

So, a District Administrator, unlike his colonial predecessor, the District Commissioner, is an obvious visible power, but it is not clear on behalf of whom he exercises his delegated power: it might even be that the DA by-passes the Provincial Administrator, reporting directly to the Minister, or even local political powers.

Additionally, and shown so clearly in an analysis of the operation of repressive power in 2008, every District is under the almost-feudal control of a local elite, most probably under control in turn by a central elite.\(^\text{15}\) This local (hidden) elite controlled, and probably still controls, all the forces described above, often organized around a “base”, with a network of subsidiary bases set up when the occasion – like an election – demands this. There is also the very sinister network of what are termed the “maguta” bases, places to which regular soldiers from the Zimbabwe National Army [ZNA] were deployed initially in 2005 to bolster agricultural production.\(^\text{16}\) It does not appear that this initiative has ever been stood down, and the deployment of the military into communities in times of peace raises many questions, and must be seen in the context of the increasing role of the military in civilian affairs in Zimbabwe.\(^\text{17}\) Thus, whilst the military are clearly visible, and deployed for a civilian goal – increasing agricultural production – they are subject to hidden power, and, as many reports show, become visible sources of violence at key times: in 2008, the ZNA was alleged to be the third most common perpetrator of political violence.\(^\text{18}\)


\(^{17}\) Chitiyo, K (2009), *The Case for Security Sector Reform in Zimbabwe*. Occasional Paper. ROYAL UNITED SERVICES INSTITUTE.

\(^{18}\) CSVR (2009), *Subliminal Terror? Human rights violations and torture in Zimbabwe during 2008*. 
But it is *invisible* power that is always the most problematic as Gaventa points out. In Zimbabwe this revolves wholly around the Presidency, the charismatic role of President Mugabe, and the insidious and relentless rhetoric of the Liberation War. Timothy Scarnecchia has even commented that, in Zimbabwe, this all resembles another “fascist cycle”. Other analysts have pointed out how resistant liberation movements are to reform and to transforming themselves into bona fide civilian political parties: the “commandist” processes of governing and the glorification of violence seem deeply imprinted in the psyches of those that led liberation movements. Examining the Arab revolts in 2011, and comparing these with the revolts in Eastern Europe in 1989, Lucian Way notes the power of liberation movements, pointing out that violent struggles for freedom generate strong partisan ties, even immutable moral convictions, amongst the protagonists. Even more worrying, and it seems wholly the case for Zimbabwe, there seemingly always remains strong affiliation between politicians and soldiers in former liberation movements:

Finally, and perhaps most important, revolutionary struggle frequently creates strong ties between the political rulers and the security forces. Having emerged out of the revolutionary struggle, security forces are often deeply committed to the survival of the regime and infused with the ruling ideology—all of which enhances discipline. Violent revolutionary struggle tends to produce a generation of leaders with the “stomach” for violent repression.

This characterisation applies no less to Zimbabwe, and indeed to virtually all Southern African countries. Furthermore, it seems evident that the continuation of the liberation movement ideology into post-struggle government is a specific factor in what researchers now term “predatory states”, and is identified as such for Zimbabwe as a predatory state by Bratton and Masunungure. A predatory state may be defined by its features as follows:

- a high degree of political power concentrated in personal rule, mediated through, and sustained by, what is in effect a narrow ‘predatory coalition’, without traditional, ‘customary’ or coherent ideological justification or legitimacy;
- the use of this power to control economic resources, accompanied by wide discretion in their use or distribution;
- the failure to use such resources for any observable developmental purpose;
- the absence of any plausible or practical evidence of a vision or commitment to promote long-term and sustainable growth, development or the systematic provision of public goods;
- a ruthless application of coercion and repression to gain and especially maintain power;
- the use of a mixture of fear and reward as a means of retaining the loyalty of immediate followers and supporters;

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the use of often considerable brutality and exclusion as the means for punishing opponents or competitors;
• the systematic erosion of both public institutions and the rule of law, and the transgression of customary institutions;
• a consequent degradation of the economy.  

Bratton has more recently extended this analysis into a fully detailed analysis of Zimbabwe as a predatory state, and makes frequent reference to the entitlement that the Liberation War has brought to ZANU PF’s claims to power.  

There are two aspects to the problem of liberation movements as invisible power. The first lies in the (now) frequently commented upon nature of liberation movements: their authoritarian and commandist structures, their penchant for secret policy making, internalized self-criticism, and their concentration of power in the hands of elites.  

Effectively, liberation movements in government increasingly resemble a state within a state, and, in Zimbabwe, this was an explicit aim at the outset of independence in 1980, and the drive towards a one-party, Marxist-Leninist state. This did not disappear after 1990, and the push for centralised power engendered by the creation of an executive presidency (and its immense powers) continued unabated, but even less visible than it might have been.

But the second problem, which might be called “liberation theology”, lies deeper than all of this, and exists in the creation of a psychological fixedness of attitude. As Christopher Clapham (2012) best puts this:

Liberation struggles arise under very different circumstances and take very different forms, and in some degree leave correspondingly different legacies to the regimes that they form on their eventual succession to power. There is, however, a central and common theme that runs through these regimes, found more than anything else in the mentalities of those who come to power through struggle. This human legacy of struggle is at the same time both strangely difficult to pin down – why do people think in one way rather than another, and why can’t they be induced to think in a different and more ‘constructive’ way? – and also extremely difficult to change. Participation in the struggle is for most of those who go through it a life-defining experience. It changes who you are and how you think. Even long after the struggle has ended, and its former participants have achieved leading positions in government, it remains extraordinarily vivid in the minds of former fighters.

Thus, dealing with invisible power in Zimbabwe and Southern Africa is not merely a matter of changing the ways in which structures operate – making them open to scrutiny, and becoming more transparent and accountable – but rather, as Gaventa points out, it requires the changing of minds, deeply ingrained feelings, and behaviours. Liberating Zimbabwe was clearly a moral struggle,

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24 Bratton, M (2014), Power Politics in Zimbabwe. LONDON: LYNNE RIENNER.
25 Ronning, H (2010), Democracies, Autocracies or Partocracies? Reflections on What happened when Liberation Movements were transformed to Ruling Parties, and Pro-Democracy Movements Conquered Government. Paper for the Conference Election Processes, Liberation Movements and Democratic Change in Africa, Maputo April 8-11, 2010, organised by IESE and CMI; Melber, H (2010), The legacy of anti-colonial struggles in Southern Africa: Liberation movements as governments. paper was presented to the Election Processes, Liberation Movements and Democratic Change in Africa conference, organised by the Instituto de Estudos Sociais e Económicos (IESE) and the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), Maputo, April 8-11, 2010.
and violence (with all it entailed) a necessary course of action in dealing with an illegitimate and pariah state. However, as all commentators (Clapham. 2012; Ronning.2010; and Melber.2010) observe, the mindset necessary for de-colonisation is not necessarily the mindset needed to achieve democratization and development: actually, it increasingly appears that the two mindsets are antithetical.

It is the invisible power that is most difficult to deal with as John Gaventa points out, which extends the point made by Clapham:

Probably the most insidious of the three dimensions of power, invisible power shapes the psychological and ideological boundaries of participation. Significant problems and issues are not only kept from the decision-making table, but also from the minds and consciousness of the different players involved, even those directly affected by the problem. By influencing how individuals think about their place in the world, this level of power shapes people’s beliefs, sense of self and acceptance of the status quo – even their own superiority or inferiority. Processes of socialisation, culture and ideology perpetuate exclusion and inequality by defining what is normal, acceptable and safe. Change strategies in this area target social and political culture as well as individual consciousness to transform the way people perceive themselves and those around them, and how they envisage future possibilities and alternatives.27

Here, we must note not only the mindset of those that came to power through the liberation struggle, but also their continuous attempts to ensure that their ideology remains at the forefront of all interpretations of political life. In Zimbabwe, this does not merely mean the endless reference to the liberation war, but the characterization of all dissent as “sellouts”, placing land and indigenization as part of the “uncompleted” de-colonisation project, and, most damaging of all, the very determined drive to suborn the youth of Zimbabwe into a “new” (but really old) liberation struggle – the “Third Chimurenga”. The most disturbing manifestation of this ideological assault on the youth has been the National Youth Service training scheme, strongly allied to the re-invention of the “war veterans”, together a determined effort to overcome the attraction of the youth, now mostly remote from the Liberation War and Rhodesia, to opposition political parties.28

Thus, returning Zimbabwe to a democracy will require more than the restoration of institutions and the replacement of a predatory state, but will require a psychological revolution in transforming mindsets, and, in particular, the mindsets of the youth. It will require re-writing history, as Lloyd Sachikonye29 has done, ensuring that all understand what actually has happened in the past. This is not trivial. For example, it is distressing when ordinary citizens comment that things were better under the colonial regime of Ian Smith, merely because the economy seemed more functional, ignoring the more obvious problems that most of the population faced, the denial of their full citizenship, and the everyday humiliations of being a second-class person.

Primary in this project will be the confrontation of the invisible power by an appropriate story about the Liberation War. It means changing what we teach our children, and how we

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teach them. It means that we need truth above all, for speaking truth to power may be the only way that we can confront the invisible power of liberation theology.