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Zimbabwe: Why Reconciliation Failed

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Introduction

“If yesterday I fought you as an enemy, today you have become a friend and ally with the same national interest, loyalty, rights and duties as myself. If yesterday you hated me, today you cannot avoid the love that binds you to me and me to you. The wrongs of the past must now stand forgiven and forgotten.” The words are those of Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe’s first post-colonial leader, and the time 17 April 1980, a few months after white Rhodesian rule ended. They mark the beginning of the so-called Politics of Reconciliation. Victor de Waal has called Mugabe’s attitude a “miracle” and “a demonstration of human maturity so far rarely equalled in our world”. It put him, many observers said, in the company of other African reconciliation-minded statesmen - Léopold Senghor of Senegal, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia and Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya.

Mugabe was speaking about the future relationship between white and black citizens of his country. He wanted, he said, to draw a line through the past - a past of colonialism in general and of the liberation war of the 1970s in particular. He put much less emphasis on the question of reconciliation within the black community where two groups had fought bitter conflicts, both in the far past and as rivals in the liberation movement. This second conflict is based on three interrelated divisions:

- Ethnic -- majority Shona versus minority Ndebele.
- Regional -- North and South Matabeleland (predominantly Ndebele country), versus most of the other regions.
- Political -- diverging visions of how to build the country after independence.

The two dimensions of post-colonial inter-communal relationships - white-black and inter-black - have taken different courses. After a brief honeymoon period the officially declared reconciliation between the black and the white population has turned sour. In recent statements Mugabe has declared the Politics of Reconciliation completely dead. Within the black population reconciliation has remained, at best, politically motivated coexistence, all too regularly interrupted by violent confrontations.

This case study poses the following questions:

- Why did the relations between the (heirs of) the white settlers and the black Zimbabweans not become the success story they initially promised to be?
- What factors are responsible for the lack of inter-black reconciliation?

The Failure of White-Black Reconciliation

Since the late 1990s relations between the Mugabe government and the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) on the one hand, and most of the white citizens on the other, have sunk to their lowest point since the coming of independence. The compulsory, often aggressive, government acquisition of white commercial farms is its most visible sign. It is clear enough that ZANU-PF’s partisan and electoral strategies are a crucial factor in current developments.

The issue of land reform - giving the black population back the resources that were theirs before the white settlers came - is a crucial tool in the process of staying in power. But other, less recent, aspects of the Politics of Reconciliation are at least as important. This policy was from the very beginning built on sand: it was almost exclusively based on political and economic imperatives, weakened by the triple culture of amnesia, impunity and contentment (or easy satisfaction), and imposed from above.

The Context of the 1979 Peace Agreement

On 11 November 1965 a Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) by the white rulers of Rhodesia disrupted 75 years of British colonial rule. The armed struggle of black liberation movements started less than six months later. The war that followed was cruel. The Rhodesian Army committed many human rights violations in the country itself and in the border zones with Mozambique and Zambia. The rebel movements, too, perpetrated atrocities, often during internal conflicts.

After two failed conferences convened by the United Kingdom in 1976 and 1977 in Geneva and Malta, increasing international pressure finally led to the 1979 “constitutional conference” at Lancaster House in London. By this time the white minority government had conceded nominal power to Bishop Abel Muzorewa, leading a black civilian government elected in a non-racial election in which the liberation movements did not participate as a result of a combination of self-denial and exclusion. This failed to end the war, but for the UK and the West it created a “recognizable” Rhodesia–Zimbabwe. In these circumstances a constitution was reluctantly accepted and a ceasefire concluded between the liberation movements and the Muzorewa regime on 28 December 1979. (Ironically the UK, under whose ultimate colonial legal authority most of the land had been alienated, was able to cast itself in the role of arbitrator and mediator at Lancaster House. Lord Carrington and his team earned much praise for their use of “dominant third-party mediation”. This enabled Britain to avoid any further formal responsibility for reconciliation in Zimbabwe.)

The Lancaster House Agreement created a constitution for an independent Zimbabwe, based on majority rule. However, it granted the white Zimbabweans significant minority rights: 20 seats out of 100 in the first parliament and, even more important, a strict and detailed protection of commercial farmland. Rhodesian perpetrators of human rights violations were allowed to go unpunished. All this came in the name of reconciliation.

Essentially, political and economic considerations lay at the heart of the willingness of the liberation movement’s leaders to accept and initially respect the peace agreement and the constitutional deal on which peace was to be based (although Mugabe did not disguise his disappointment at having to lose in the peace agreement that which he was convinced could be won by war - the land). But the power of the white Rhodesians had not completely disappeared. The UK and the United States put considerable pressure on, and made significant unwritten promises to, the black negotiators. There was also the weight of states such as Mozambique and Zambia, emphasizing the need for stability in the region and fearing that a radical, revolutionary or vengeful Zimbabwe would give South Africa’s apartheid regime the ideal argument to destabilize the post-colonial states in the region. (The destruction of Mozambique by the South African-sponsored Mozambique National Resistance Movement (RENAMO) in the 1980s underlined this point.) Economic pragmatism also played a major role. The white community remained extremely important economically. The black leaders knew that a lack of flexibility had caused serious economic problems in Mozambique when, soon after independence, thousands of qualified white people fled the country, leaving a deliberately uneducated population to run it.

The Cultures of Amnesia, Impunity and Contentment

Pragmatism is not of itself necessarily a source of weakness in a policy of reconciliation, but it is never a sufficient foundation. Circumstances are likely to change and political and economic imperatives lose force, as they did in Zimbabwe. By the 1990s apartheid was at an end, and the constitutional barriers to parliament abolishing the clauses protecting the land expired. More urgently, the liberation government faced, for the first time, the prospect of electoral defeat in the wake of economic liberalization, which had brought unemployment, strikes and demonstrations against increasing signs of corruption. At this stage the reality of reconciliation faced its first real test.

Reconciliation has to be based on more than pragmatism and rhetoric. A public acknowledgement of what went wrong in the past, a minimum of retribution and redress and, above all, progress towards economic justice are needed. These crucial factors were not sufficiently developed in post-colonial Zimbabwe.

Amnesia

Amnesia, by which we mean here an officially imposed form of forgetting, was included as a constituent element in the Lancaster House Agreement. Silence about the past, it was argued, was what the newborn country needed. Searching for the truth would constantly reopen old wounds and damage the politics of reconciliation. This strategy drew a veil over the human rights violations of the Rhodesian secret service, army and police. It was, at the same time, appreciated by the leaders of the liberation movements because it meant also closing the books on their violence against civilians in Rhodesia and against their rivals in the training camps in Mozambique and Zambia.

Information about the colonial and liberation war atrocities was not completely lacking. Domestic NGOs such as the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Rhodesia and the Catholic Institute for International Relations have documented torture, resettlement and eviction in the 1970s. Amnesty International has published reports on war crimes in Rhodesia. Women members of the liberation movements have spoken out about sexual assaults by their male companions in the camps. But any official acknowledgement of the horrors of the past has consistently failed to materialize.

Amnesia has its institutional expression in legal immunity and amnesty. It thrived in both Rhodesia and Zimbabwe, and the consequence is a culture of impunity.

Impunity

The pattern of impunity in pre-independence Rhodesia and post-colonial Zimbabwe consists of many elements: erosion of the independence of the judiciary; political manipulation of the police; and silencing independent media and human rights organizations. But by far the most forceful instrument is the recurrent use of indemnities, amnesties and pardons.

Granting an amnesty to the Rhodesian police and military personnel for human rights violations was a tradition long before the liberation war was at its height and the Indemnity and Compensation Act of 1975 sanctioned this tradition. The key provision of the Act was granting indemnity in advance: it proclaimed that members of the army, the police, the Central Intelligence Organization, the government or the civil service who had committed crimes “in good faith” could not be prosecuted. In accordance with the Lancaster House Agreement, Lord Soames, the British Governor for the transitional period, passed the Amnesty Ordinance of 1979 and another General Amnesty Ordinance in 1980, pardoning both sides of the liberation war. Initially the Mugabe government was confronted by an embarrassing situation when its Secretary General, charged with the murder of a white farmer, successfully used the 1975 Act to escape conviction. The Act was repealed, but

the political utility of immunity was underlined and surfaced in the form of the repeated use of the executive's power of pardon and ad hoc clemency orders. Furthermore, the ZANU-PF government also retained, and has reinforced, most elements of the previous state of emergency (giving it, among others, the power to detain without trial).

Contentment

The white population gratefully believed Mugabe's promise in April 1980 of reconciliation. That there was no enforced redistribution of land in the first decade after independence was the ultimate proof to them of his reliability. Observers have noted that this belief lulled many Rhodesians into a false sense of economic security. The maintenance of their pre-independence privileges was seen as absolutely normal. Prejudices and the destructive social relations they generated were kept alive. Explicit acceptance of responsibility for the past and for the future was an exception, not the rule. This "culture of contentment" led to the persistence of serious economic and social inequality, most visible in the skewed distribution of land and in the wealth that is so obvious in the white suburbs of cities like Harare.

Reconciliation Imposed from Above

The various parties in the negotiations that led to Zimbabwe's independence imposed the Politics of Reconciliation on the black population. It was a project conceived and developed at the level of the elite. There was no society-wide debate or involvement. Victims and survivors were not consulted, but rather watched powerlessly as many perpetrators of human rights violations went unpunished and even took on key roles within the Zimbabwean Army and secret services. As a consequence the need to forgive and forget was not internalized by the general public. Such unaddressed resentment explains in part why Mugabe's actual "economic revolution", aimed primarily at taking over white commercial farms, attracts a popular following. Imposed reconciliation fed, rather than eased, the unresolved grudges.

The Failure of Inter-Black Reconciliation

Historians disagree about the origins of the antagonism between the Shona and the Ndebele. Some have argued that it goes back to the arrival of the Ndebele in what is now Matabeleland somewhere in the mid-nineteenth century. The Ndebele were feared because of their raids on Shona villages. Some observers also point to the deliberate fostering of their rivalry by the white settlers as an instrument of "divide and rule". Others believe that these ethnic identities were created more recently in the process that deepened the political and regional divides in the liberation movement of the 1960s.

In 1963, controversies led to a split within Joshua Nkomo's Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), then the main movement. A rival group, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), was set up by Ndabaningi Sithole. Robert Mugabe became its leader in 1966. Initially the split was not based on ethnic or regional differences or composition, but gradually it became significantly tribal in nature because ZANU and ZAPU campaigned and recruited in different areas - ZAPU mainly in Matabeleland, ZANU in the Shona-populated areas. The rift deepened into serious conflict between the armed wings of the two movements - the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) linked with ZAPU whilst the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) was the armed wing of ZANU. ZIPRA and ZANLA differed in outlook, training and ideology: the former was Russian-trained, the latter Chinese-trained. Fighting between them occurred in training camps in Mozambique and Zambia, in certain combat zones and, shortly after independence, in the assembly points for former guerrillas.

The Matabeleland Atrocities

ZANU-PF obtained 57 of the 100 parliamentary seats in the February 1980 elections, and Nkomo's ZAPU 20 (including all 15 Matabele seats). Mugabe formed the new government, inviting Nkomo and two other ZAPU leaders to become ministers. This move towards black-black reconciliation was short-lived. Antagonism reached a new level in 1982 following allegations (partly fostered by apartheid South Africa) of a ZIPRA plot to overthrow the ZANU-PF government. ZAPU leaders in the government of national unity were dismissed. Conflict and mutiny in the new army broke out; ex-ZAPU commanders were arrested, and some charged with treason and detained without further trial after being cleared of the charges. Dissidence continued, predominantly in Matabeleland and parts of the Midlands, culminating in what could be called undeclared civil war between 1983 and 1985.

The government's reaction to incidents and unrest in these areas was harsh. The 5th Brigade, a North Korean-trained and Shona-composed part of the army, committed a multitude of human rights violations which it justified as revenge for the nineteenth-century Ndebele invasions. Thousands of civilians were killed, tortured or forcibly relocated. The events caused profound trauma in these regions and their predominant Ndebele population. They also increased ethnic awareness, hardening the divide between Ndebele and Shona.

From 1985 onwards the government's policy towards the people in the Ndebele regions took a less violent course: aggression was replaced with neglect and discrimination. This policy change is attributable mainly to the fact that ZAPU's leaders had yielded to military pressure and agreed to "unite" and become part of ZANU-PF. The Unity Accord, signed in December 1987, marked the start of a period of (uneasy) coexistence between the rival groups. But essential dimensions of a reconciliation process - trust and empathy, a democratic sharing of power and growing equality (other than at the elite level of the former ZAPU leadership) - failed to materialize.

The Effects of Amnesia and Impunity

After the Matabeleland events and in the face of widespread demands from civil society, the ZANU-PF government set up the Chihaniakwe Commission of Inquiry. Its report was never made public. There was and remains no official acknowledgement of guilt, no apology, and only extremely limited redress. Just as in colonial times, amnesia was now the preferred strategy. In the mid-1990s NGOs, like the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe, tried to break the silence by collecting massive amounts of data on the events. The Catholic hierarchy, which had initially promised to publish the data, was so shaken by its findings that publication of the report was postponed and finally cancelled, resulting in an "unauthorized" publication.

The culture of impunity, originally conceived to deal with the human rights violations of the liberation war period, also became a driving force. A Clemency Order of 1988 pardoned all violations committed by all parties between 1982 and the end of 1987 - thus covering the Matabeleland atrocities. The Amnesty International report of 2002 on impunity in Zimbabwe notes that a 1995 presidential amnesty "officially excused the politically-motivated beatings, burning of homes and intimidation perpetrated by supporters of ZANU-PF during the 1995 elections, by granting amnesty to those liable to criminal prosecution for, or convicted of, these crimes. This set a further precedent for yet another presidential pardon for political violence, Clemency Order of 2000, which was declared after the June 2000 parliamentary elections. Once again, those involved in human rights violations - such as kidnapping and torture, but excluding murder, rape and fraud - were placed beyond the reach of the justice system".

Many of these acts of violence were perpetrated against men and women in Matabeleland and the

Midlands, but increasingly also against the “disloyal” urban-dwellers in central Mashonaland who voted against ZANU-PF.

Concluding Remarks

A stable democracy in Zimbabwe will remain a distant dream as long as the sad legacy of violence and discrimination against an ethnic/regional minority is not dealt with in a genuine and thorough process of reconciliation. This will need to be historically all-encompassing and deal with issues of justice across a range of political, social and economic acts, involving not only the communities and races in Zimbabwe, but also the global and colonial actors implicated in this drama over the past century.

There were, no doubt, very good reasons to avoid explicit retributive justice in the Zimbabwe of the early 1980s. However, other less menacing strategies were available to the new elites: a fair degree of truth-seeking, forms of restorative justice, reparation of the damage inflicted to the victims, and the fight against economic inequality. The white heirs of the Rhodesian regime and the black leaders preferred to impose a shallow, “cheap” form of reconciliation without historical, restorative or economic justice. Cheap, imposed and based (for whatever pragmatic reasons) on amnesia and impunity - in such a form, reconciliation can only damage fundamentally the prospect of a viable, peaceful and inclusive Zimbabwean democracy.

References and Further Reading

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