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ALTERING LANDSCAPES OF LOCAL
GOVERNMENT IN POST-2000 ZIMBABWE**

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DISCUSSION PAPERS

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Disrupting Democracy? Altering Landscapes of Local Government in Post-2000 Zimbabwe¹

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the changing landscape of rural local government since the start of Zimbabwe's current political and economic crisis in 2000. The paper questions the liberal-democratic assumption that casts the period 'before the crisis' as some kind of mythical Eden of normal government and well-functioning democracy. At the same time, it recognises that the scale, terms and intensity of the post-2000 disruptions denote a dramatic era of altering politics and practices of government that require close attention. It further argues that local government is not just a front for national processes of state making and rule. Rather, it has its own localised sets of conditions and dynamics which, when articulating with national projects of power, production and accumulation, necessarily produce diverse, unpredictable and often unstable results.

Introduction

In February 2002, two years after 'the Zimbabwe crisis' is said to have started, an article in Zimbabwe's former independent daily newspaper, *The Daily News*, summarised what it saw as the profound undermining of 'normal' practices of government by the actions of 'so-called war veterans'. This gave voice to a fairly widespread public fear that Zimbabwe had entirely lost its bearings:

The grim reality...is that *we haven't got a normal government* in Zimbabwe. Whatever the so-called war veterans say is what goes. They can sack teachers, nurses, and district council officials, order the transfer of magistrates, district administrators and senior police officers, close down schools, clinics and rural district council offices. They can disrupt any court proceedings. And, with absolute impunity, they can harass, torture or order anybody's arrest.²

The article went on to argue that the farm invasions that began two years earlier in February 2000 were far from "peaceful demonstrations against the government for its slow pace in land acquisition and redistribution" as officially claimed. Rather, they were "the beginning of the anarchy which has now become a national curse: *the tragedy of government by war veterans*".³

¹ This paper was invited for publication by the Crisis States Research Centre. Thanks to Donald Moore for critical provocations related to initial ideas in this paper, and to Blair Rutherford, Jeremy Gould, Eric Worby, Stig Jensen and Brian Raftopoulos for comments on related drafts. Responsibility for all errors in judgment remains mine alone.

² *The Daily News*, 2 February 2002, emphasis added.

³ *The Daily News*, 2 February 2002, emphasis added. See also JoAnn McGregor, 'The Politics of Disruption: War Veterans and the Local State in Zimbabwe', *African Affairs*, 101 (2002), pp 9-37.

In late May and June 2005, another form of ‘abnormal’ and ‘anarchic’ government was played out, as hundreds of thousands of the urban poor were made homeless and destitute by the abrupt demolition and burning of so-called illegal dwellings and informal trading structures in all of Zimbabwe’s urban areas, forcing people into the countryside. Yet while this was being condemned worldwide as inhumane and seen as clearly linked to destroying opposition supporters concentrated in urban areas,⁴ the President and his ministers were representing the ‘clean-up campaign’ as necessary to stamp out disease and crime and restore hygiene and ‘orderliness’ to the cities.⁵

Consistently since 2000, a quite different interpretation of events to that presented by the independent media has been produced by President Mugabe’s ruling Zanu (PF) and its various allies.⁶ The regime’s version asserts that what has been underway since 2000 is the ‘*Third Chimurenga*’: the final stage of nationalist revolution that will culminate in finally reclaiming Zimbabwe’s ‘lost lands’, combating recolonisation and completing ‘the war against imperialism’, wresting economic control from minority white settlers and placing it in the hands of indigenous black Zimbabweans, and establishing a form of authentic African governance. Within this framework, concern for human rights, democracy, press freedom and the independence of the judiciary are dismissed as “a smokescreen to maintain the colonial grip on Zimbabwe”.⁷ In fact anyone challenging Zanu (PF)’s account of patriotic history, ideals of sovereignty and authentic African governance, or self-proclaimed role as the sole bearer of national liberation, is defined as a traitor.

As Zimbabwe prepared for new parliamentary elections on 31 March 2005 under conditions of entrenched authoritarian rule, sustained political violence, the politicisation of food, and deepening economic and humanitarian crisis,⁸ ‘normal government’ (in the liberal-democratic sense implied by *The Daily News* report) had certainly not been restored, if indeed it had ever existed.⁹ Yet responsibility for its ongoing disruption was acknowledged by then as extending well beyond war veterans to include the entire Zanu (PF) party-state machinery, including the army and police, the ruling party youth militia, state bureaucrats, and chiefs and headmen.¹⁰ On the other hand, the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), emerging as it had from a combination of the labour movement and a wide spectrum of civil society

⁴ See ‘Zimbabwe’s cleanup takes a vast human toll’, *New York Times*, 11 June 2005; ‘How Mugabe is burning opponents out of their homes’, *Independent (UK)*, 12 June 2005.

⁵ See ‘Siyaso Demolished’, *The Herald*, 31 May 2005; ‘State to relocate informal traders’, *The Herald*, 2 June 2005.

⁶ See Wendy Willems, ‘Peasant Demonstrators, Violent Invaders: Representations of Land in the Zimbabwean Press’, *World Development*, 32:10 (2004), pp.1767-1783.

⁷ *The Herald*, 9 December 2003, quoted in Ian Phimister & Brian Raftopoulos, ‘Mugabe, Mbeki and the Politics of Anti-Imperialism’, *Review of African Political Economy*, 101 (2004), pp.127-143.

⁸ See, for example, Solidarity Peace Trust, *Subverting Justice: The Role of the Judiciary in Denying the Will of the Zimbabwean Electorate Since 2000*, Johannesburg: Solidarity Peace Trust, 2005; ‘Zimbabwe. Not Eligible: The Politicization of Food in Zimbabwe’, *Human Rights Watch*, 15:17A (October 2003); Brian McGarry, ‘The Zimbabwe Economy in 2004’, *Zimbabwe Review*, 05:1 (February 2005).

⁹ Kriger challenges representations of any of Zimbabwe’s so-called multi-party elections as “either a democratic system or one that was amenable to democratization” (Norma Kriger, ‘Zanu (PF) Strategies in General Elections, 1980-2000: Discourse and Coercion’, *Africa*, 104:414, (2005), pp.1-34).

¹⁰ See, for example, ‘Air Force officers order new farmers off property’, *Daily Mirror (Zimb.)*, 14 February 2005; ‘Mugabe henchmen on the warpath’, *IWPR*, 25 February 2005; ‘Police officers forced to attend ideological re-orientation course’, *Zim Online (SA)*, 28 September 2004; ‘Chief pledges to weed out MDC supporters from area’, *Zim Online (SA)*, 10 Oct 2004; ‘Back Zanu PF or starve, chiefs tell villagers’, *Zim Online (SA)*, 8 February 2005; ‘Mugabe using traditional leaders, says MDC’, *Sapa*, 26 March 2005.

groupings, had established itself explicitly in opposition to violence and in favour of the rule of law, and was “offer[ing] itself as the way to return to normality”.¹¹

Yet while *The Daily News* report fell far short of a comprehensive analysis of what was unfolding in Zimbabwe at the time, it nonetheless highlighted the dissolution of familiar forms of order that constituted a significant part of the crisis. Among other things, it raised interesting questions about competing notions of normal government and changing modes of rule during very abnormal times.

A particular focus of the Crisis States Research Centre has been on the relationship between deepening processes of globalisation and liberalisation over the past few decades and emerging patterns of crisis, breakdown and state collapse in developing countries.¹² Although the crisis in Zimbabwe can certainly be explained in part by these trends, not least the effects of adopting structural adjustment policies in the early 1990s,¹³ it has a far more complex provenance and interweaving set of trajectories and effects. The present paper focuses primarily on the dimension of state making and changing modes of rule. Specifically, it examines the ways in which the landscape of local government, especially rural local government, has been changing since the start of the crisis.

The paper begins by outlining the overall background and nature of Zimbabwe’s current crisis. The three following sections examine in turn the contested search for ‘normal’ government, the growing normalisation of violence as a technology of rule, and shifts in the practices of traditional authorities towards their constituents resulting from intensified partisan politics. The paper then provides an overview of the making of post-independence rural local government before examining the various threats and challenges to this system emerging under present conditions of crisis, and the possible consequences this has for democratic governance and development in the future.

Tracing the Crisis

The onset of the Zimbabwe crisis is generally associated with the watershed constitutional referendum held in February 2000, in which key constitutional amendments proposed by the Zanu (PF) government, in a far from democratic process, were rejected by a majority ‘no’ vote. Among the key contentious issues were proposals to: absolve government from having to pay compensation for any expropriated land if Britain did not make funds available; increase executive powers with respect to military intervention within or outside Zimbabwe; introduce compulsory national service; and to allow for an unlimited presidential term of office for the present incumbent.¹⁴ In addition, according to Brian Kagoro, “it was a protest vote against the manner in which the constitution-making process had been carried out by the

¹¹ Suzanne Dansereau, ‘Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Zimbabwe’s Development Impasse’, in Henning Melber (ed.), *Zimbabwe – the Political Economy of Decline*, Discussion Paper 27, Uppsala: Nordisk Afrikainstitutet, 2005.

¹² James Putzel, ‘The Political Impact of Globalisation and Liberalisation: Evidence Emerging from Crisis States Research’, *Crisis States Discussion Paper*, 7, London: Crisis States Research Centre, LSE, 2004.

¹³ See E.A. Brett, ‘From Corporatism to Liberalisation in Zimbabwe: Economic Policy Regimes and Political Crisis (1980-1997)’, *Crisis States Working Paper*, 58, London: Crisis States Research Centre, LSE, 2005; also Brian Raftopoulos & Ian Phimister, ‘Zimbabwe Now: The Political Economy of Crisis and Coercion’, *Historical Materialism*, 12:4 (2004).

¹⁴ See Brian Kagoro, ‘Constitutional Reform as Social Movement. A Critical Narrative of the Constitution-Making Debate in Zimbabwe, 1997-2000’, in Brian Raftopoulos & Tyrone Savage (eds), *Zimbabwe. Injustice and Political Reconciliation*, Cape Town, Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, 2004, pp.236-256

government”, as well as “an angry protest against the performance of the government and parlous state of the economy”.¹⁵ This unprecedented defeat of the ruling party by an opposition it saw as being backed by white commercial farmers and the West appeared to precipitate the largely state-sponsored land invasions,¹⁶ political violence, institutional interference and economic decline that were to follow, although there was of course a much longer and more complex history behind these trends.¹⁷ The present crisis has often been represented by opposing sides of a deeply polarised political divide as *either* a ‘land crisis’ (this mostly by Zanu (PF) and old-style nationalists) *or* a ‘governance crisis’ (by the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and a broad spectrum of civil society groupings).

However, as Hammar and Raftopoulos have argued, “the crisis is not about a single issue, neither is it rooted in a one-off event or single historical trajectory”. Rather it emerged from, and is sustained by, a dynamic pattern of “simultaneous, incomplete and competing projects of transformation, legitimation and resistance” that involve a range of differently positioned actors in shifting combinations of alliance and animosity. Among the most salient of these projects since independence in 1980 are those connected to three interweaving analytical and empirical arenas: “the politics of land and resource distribution; reconstructions of nation and citizenship; and the remaking of state and modes of rule”.¹⁸

Of course, these need to be considered within the context of, among other things: Zimbabwe’s long settler-colonial history of embedded inequalities in land and civic rights, which were deeply racialised as well as gendered and class-based; the nationalist guerrilla struggle during the 1970s; an inherited bureaucracy at independence with strong technocratic, centralising and authoritarian tendencies; the positive expansion of public services and infrastructure during the 1980s and initial economic growth, followed by economic decline and the adoption of standard structural adjustment policies in 1991 whose complex and mostly negative impacts were exacerbated by drought; the end of the Cold War and global shifts in both ideological paradigms and trade and aid parameters; declining state legitimacy in the 1990s, reflected in growing labour strikes and public protests towards the late 1990s, culminating in both a broad-based constitutional challenge driven by civil society and the formation of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) as a formal opposition party in 1999; further challenges to the state and ruling party by war veterans in 1997, and added economic strains caused by Zimbabwe’s entrance into the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1998; and the failure of the new land reform initiatives of the late 1990s.

At the same time, the crisis and its varied effects have deepened and mutated on multiple levels since 2000. By early 2005, following the forced eviction of over 4000 white

¹⁵ Kagoro (2004), p.249.

¹⁶ For distinctions between these and the spontaneous occupations of the late 1990s, see Jocelyn Alexander, ‘Squatters’, Veterans and the State in Zimbabwe’, and Nelson Marongwe, ‘Farm Occupations and Occupiers in the New Politics of Land in Zimbabwe’, in Amanda Hammar *et al.* (eds), *Zimbabwe’s Unfinished Business: Rethinking Land, State and Nation in the Context of Crisis*, Harare: Weaver Press, 2003.

¹⁷ See, for example, Brian Raftopoulos & Lloyd Sachikonye (eds), *Striking Back: The Labour Movement and the Post-Colonial State in Zimbabwe 1980-2000*, Harare: Weaver Press, 2001; Patrick Bond & Masimba Manyanya, *Zimbabwe’s Plunge: Exhausted Nationalism, Neoliberalism and the Search for Social Justice*, London: Merlin Press, 2002; Hammar *et al.* (2003); Terence Ranger (ed.), *The Historical Dimensions of Democracy and Human Rights in Zimbabwe. Volume Two: Nationalism, Democracy and Human Rights, Nationalism, Democracy and Human Rights*, Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 2003.

¹⁸ Amanda Hammar & Brian Raftopoulos, ‘Zimbabwe’s Unfinished Business: Rethinking Land, State and Nation’, in Hammar *et al.* (2003), pp.2-3.

commercial farmers and hundreds of thousands of farm workers and their dependents, there had been a substantial decline in commercial agriculture.¹⁹ This had precipitated major losses in export earnings, widespread unemployment in both rural and urban sectors – estimated to be above 70 percent – and a dire threat to national food security.²⁰ At the same time, the anticipated stimulation of successful small- and medium-scale capitalist farming as a result of the ‘fast track’ resettlement programme had not materialised due to, among other things, the government’s failure to deliver critical farm inputs, technical services, infrastructure and security to new settlers. Consequently there has been a remarkably low uptake of plots – acknowledged by President Mugabe himself to be as low as 44 percent in some places – as well as very low productivity levels on those plots that are being worked.²¹ This is set against the apparently extensive distribution of ‘liberated’ white farms to the political, business and bureaucratic elites,²² often resulting in the violent eviction of those impoverished ‘new settlers’ who were at the forefront of the state-supported land invasions.²³ Mines have also become the target of partial if not total nationalisation.²⁴

Added to the above, environmental destruction has been widespread, threatening biodiversity in all land tenure areas including national parks, undermining in particular a once thriving wildlife-based tourist industry critical to the generation of foreign currency.²⁵ All of this – exacerbated by drought in 2002/03, and ongoing conditions of political violence and instability – has contributed to a dramatic fall in GDP and rise in foreign debt,²⁶ soaring inflation and collapsing currency, substantial decline in investment,²⁷ shortages of fuel, food and foreign currency, diminished public sector capacity, rising rates of HIV/AIDS,²⁸ and increased scales of poverty overall. Much of this assessment has been denied through the state-controlled media. For example, in April 2005 *The Herald* quoted the president of the Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries – speaking to a visiting delegation of Japanese investors – bemoaning the fact that Japan, among other countries, “has been fed with negative reports on Zimbabwe which distorted the prevailing economic environment”.²⁹

In terms of the consequences for justice and democratic rights and practices, the crisis has both exposed and generated patterns of authoritarian repression, almost all of which have been targeted at, or applied selectively to, people claimed by government to be

¹⁹ See McGarry (2005).

²⁰ Food shortages, verging on famine in some areas, have turned Zimbabwe from a former ‘bread basket’ into a country in which over half its population are said to be dependent on food aid. See ‘Zim faces famine’, *Mail and Guardian (SA)*, 28 April 2004.

²¹ See ‘White land grab policy has failed, Mugabe confesses’, *Daily Telegraph (UK)*, 3 March 2005.

²² See, for example, Edward Lahiff, ‘The Politics of Land Reform in Southern Africa’ *Sustainable Livelihoods in Southern Africa Research Paper* 19, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2003; Robin Palmer, ‘Land Reform Highlights in Southern Africa, 2003-4’, *Independent Land Newsletter*, Oxford: Oxfam (UK), 2004.

²³ See ‘Top Zanu PF officials snatch farms’, *Zim Online (SA)*, 2 October 2004; ‘More settlers evicted from commercial farms’, *IRIN (UN)*, 27 September 2004.

²⁴ Dansereau (2005).

²⁵ See ‘Wildlife sanctuary now a hunting ground’, *Daily Telegraph (UK)*, 14 August 2004.

²⁶ By late 2002, GDP was said to have fallen by 24% and foreign debt had risen from 2% to 30% of GDP. See ‘Zimbabwe’s agony as Mugabe avoids crunch’, *The Times (UK)*, 28 October 2002; also International Crisis Group, *Zimbabwe at the Crossroads: Transition or Conflict?*, Brussels: ICG, 2002.

²⁷ Foreign direct investment was calculated to have dropped from USD 436 million in 1998 to USD 4.5 million in 2001. In March 2002, the World Economic Forum rated Zimbabwe the least competitive economy out of 75 countries surveyed (cited in ICG, ‘Zimbabwe: What Next?’, *Africa Report*, 47 (June 2002b)). The IMF estimates that the economy shrunk by 30% between 1999 and 2004.

²⁸ See ‘Zimbabwe in crisis as Aids kills 300 a day’, *The Times (UK)*, 5 December 2002.

²⁹ ‘Japanese keen to invest in Zim’ *The Herald*, 21 April 2005. See also ‘Mugabe harvests lies as Zimbabwe faces shortages’, *Times (UK)*, 9 July 2004.

members/supporters of the political opposition. This includes: the introduction of draconian legislation that severely restricts political freedom (especially the Public Order and Security Act, POSA) and freedom of expression more generally (Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, AIPPA), resulting in the closing of political space and the closing down of independent newspapers and persecution or expulsion of independent journalists; persistent political violence, including torture and rape, exacerbated by the establishment of a loyalist youth militia;³⁰ the undermining of the independence of the judiciary and uneven application of the law;³¹ deprofessionalisation of the bureaucracy, politicisation of the security services and armed forces, and militarisation of everyday life;³² compulsory introduction into educational syllabi of ‘patriotic history’ and ‘Mugabeism’;³³ and the inculcation of an ethic of suspicion and fear amongst ordinary citizens.³⁴

Associated with the extremes of both economic and political decline since 2000, there has been widescale internal displacement and severe impoverishment especially of ex-farm workers and also, increasingly, of opposition supporters. In addition, there has been a mass exodus of citizens as both political and economic refugees to countries within the southern Africa region, particularly South Africa, and further afield, particularly to Britain.³⁵ The Zimbabwe government itself has estimated that out of approximately five million potentially productive adults, 3.4 million are outside Zimbabwe, constituting a remarkable 60 to 70 per cent of productive adults. This has created a substantial brain drain of Zimbabwe’s professionals and its most educated. At the same time, many of the several million exiles now in South Africa are illegal and living under conditions of extreme distress and vulnerability;³⁶ and even where their numbers are fewer, it is creating local as well as diplomatic tensions between Zimbabwe and her neighbours.³⁷

Not surprisingly, the Zimbabwe crisis has increasingly taken on a significant regional and global dimension.³⁸ For South Africa in particular, Zimbabwe has become a key factor in both its foreign policy and domestic agendas, with President Mbeki being named by US President Bush in 2004 as his ‘point man’ on Zimbabwe. Britain, on the other hand, has reduced its public critique of Zimbabwe, having previously played into Mugabe’s anti-colonial rhetoric with its initial over-emphasis of the plight of white farmers. Much of President Mugabe’s diplomatic successes in certain non-Western quarters have been stimulated by his revival of Pan-Africanist liberation politics and use of anti-imperialist discourse.³⁹ However, his

³⁰ See Amnesty International, *Zimbabwe: the Toll of Impunity*, London: Amnesty International, 2002.

³¹ See Solidarity Peace Trust (2005).

³² See Martin R. Rupiya, ‘Contextualising the Military in Zimbabwe Between 1999 and 2004 and Beyond’, in Raftopoulos & Savage (2004), pp.79-98.

³³ Terence Ranger, ‘The Uses and Abuses of History in Zimbabwe’, Keynote speech at the international conference *Looking to the Future: Social, Political and Cultural Space in Zimbabwe*, Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, Sweden, 24 May 2004.

³⁴ For an excellent overview of many of these dimensions of the crisis, see Raftopoulos & Savage (2004),

³⁵ See ‘Zimbabwe’s missing millions’, *Mail and Guardian (SA)*, 4 December 2002.

³⁶ Solidarity Peace Trust, *No War in Zimbabwe: An Account of the Exodus of a Nation’s People*, Johannesburg: Solidarity Peace Trust, 2004.

³⁷ ‘Zimbabwe crisis spills over border’, *BBC News*, 31 March 2004.

³⁸ For different perspectives, see Ben Cousins, ‘The Zimbabwe Crisis in its Wider Context: The Politics of Land, Democracy and Development in Southern Africa’, in Hammar *et al.*(2003), pp.263-308; Phimister & Raftopoulos (2004); Sam Moyo, ‘The Politics of Land Distribution and Race Relations in Southern Africa’, *Identities, Conflict and Cohesion Programme Paper Number 10*, Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2004.

³⁹ See Brian Raftopoulos, ‘Nation, Race and History in Zimbabwean Politics’, in Raftopoulos & Savage (2004), pp. 160-175.

attempts to divide the world between a mainly black nationalist ‘us’ and a primarily white/Western (and black ‘sell-out’) ‘them’, and to mask his regime’s attacks on a black opposition, have gradually begun to be challenged by Africans in the region. The challenge has been led by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), subsequently joined by the South African Communist Party (SACP) as well as church and human rights organisations. There have also been outspoken individual critics such as Nobel Peace Prize winner, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, as well as occasional popular support.⁴⁰ Both COSATU and SACP are tripartite alliance partners in the ANC-led South African government, which has otherwise followed a path of ‘quiet diplomacy’ widely criticised for providing the Mugabe regime with ongoing support and legitimacy.⁴¹

In Search of ‘Normal Government’

Implicit in the critique of the ‘collapse’ of standard practices of government is a longing for the return of some kind of ‘normality’ to Zimbabwe. This has become a common refrain in everyday life. But what exactly is being longed for, and by whom? And what kinds of politics and practices are involved in constructing and naturalising the different ideas of normal government in Zimbabwe?⁴² What is evident is that the kind of normal government envisioned within a broadly liberal-democratic framework is not the same ‘normal’ being claimed and created through President Mugabe’s present political and economic projects, although there are certain overlaps and echoes between the two.⁴³

Within the liberal framework, normal government assumes a democratically elected, transparent and accountable ruling body that upholds the constitution and the rule of law, protects the independence of the judiciary, respects the independence of the media, sustains the professionalism of state agencies including the police and army, protects basic human rights, ensures all citizens equal security and protection under the law, and, most notably, protects private property and investments. Somewhere amidst all this, the state is also expected to provide public goods and services and deliver or facilitate economic growth and ‘development’. While some appropriately caution against the idealisation of liberalism,⁴⁴ current longings for this ideal – expressed as much by those noticeably disadvantaged as privileged under pre-crisis conditions in Zimbabwe – denote nostalgia for a mythically stable situation prior to February 2000. Zimbabwe was not only already in economic and political decline long before this date, but the assumed rights and security inherent in this ideal were persistently unevenly applied. For example, hundreds of thousands of farm workers had long been on the receiving end of ‘illiberal’ practices;⁴⁵ and the sacred cow of liberalism – namely private property – has itself been responsible for decades if not centuries of dispossession in both colonial and postcolonial states, as well as much earlier in European history.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ See ‘Concerts, marches at Zim border’, *Sapa*, 13 March 2005.

⁴¹ See Ian Phimister, ‘South African Diplomacy and the Crisis in Zimbabwe. Liberation Solidarity in the 21st Century’, in Raftopoulos & Savage (2004), pp.271-291.

⁴² The varied practices involved in normalising government and the state are explored in rich ethnographic and theoretical detail in Thomas Blom Hansen & Finn Stepputat (eds), *States of Imagination. Ethnographic Explorations of the Postcolonial State*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2001.

⁴³ For a sense of these overlaps, see Eric Worby, ‘The End of Modernity in Zimbabwe? Passages from Development to Sovereignty’, in Hammar *et al.* (2003), pp.49-81.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Mitchell Dean, ‘“Demonic Societies”: Liberalism, Biopolitics, and Sovereignty’, in Hansen & Stepputat (2001), pp.45-64.

⁴⁵ Blair Rutherford, ‘Belonging to the Farm(er): Farm Workers, Farmers, and the Shifting Politics of Citizenship’, in Hammar *et al.* (2003), pp.191-216.

⁴⁶ E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, New York: The New Press, 1991.

Certain ideals of liberalism formed the basis of the political compromises forged at the Lancaster House conference in 1979 that ended Zimbabwe's liberation war. Many of these ideals were officially upheld as part of the assumed norm during the first two post-independence decades. This was necessary to sustain Zimbabwe's international credibility and ensure access to development aid and investment, albeit with the dubious advantage of leading to the adoption of structural adjustment policies in the 1990s. However, their actual application was patchy and erratic. In practice, liberal principles had to coexist within the same ideological and political space as the self-consciously non-liberal vision of rule of the then incumbent prime minister, now president, Robert Mugabe. Despite conceding to don the cloak of liberal democracy in the tense moments of transition from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe in 1980, Mugabe's Marxist-Leninist leanings were widely known. He expressed an explicit commitment to ending imperialist exploitation, reversing decades of colonial racist bias in economic and civic life, ensuring redistribution of wealth through more equitable ownership of natural resources, especially land, and more generally promoting participation in ownership of the economy by the state and (indigenous) nationals.⁴⁷

Mugabe's speeches and writings in the early years, while largely conciliatory and pragmatic, were nonetheless explicit about a nationalist, socialist vision for Zimbabwe, one he has claimed he was forced to abandon by Britain, the former colonial power, but which he has since resurrected with religious zeal. The uneasy weave of ideologies this produced was evident in his foreword to the Transitional National Development Plan (TNDP) of 1982:

The Plan [...] recognises the existing phenomenon of capitalism as an historical reality, which [...] has to be purposefully harnessed, regulated and transformed as a partner in the overall endeavour to achieve set national goals. Accordingly, while the main thrust of the Plan is socialist and calls for a greater role by the State through the instrumentality of State enterprises, worker participation, and socialist cooperation, ample room has been reserved for performance by private enterprise.⁴⁸

In addition to the proposed interweaving of these competing ideas, there was also the question of Zimbabwe's (contested) history of traditional authority and customary laws that had to be worked into the new and evolving state's policies and practices of government and development. This has been a dynamic process of continuous surges and retreats, reflecting a region-wide pattern.

Establishing a one-party state was, and has remained, a key ambition and pillar of Mugabe's philosophy of rule and his vision for the transformation of government since well before independence. Although frequently challenged, this project has underpinned some of his most overtly political policy reforms, such as decentralisation,⁴⁹ as well as his pattern of punishing political dissent. However, it suffered a blow in ideological credibility and political support after the collapse of Soviet communism at the end of the 1980s, which in turn unleashed a

⁴⁷ Lawrence Tshuma, *A Matter of (In)Justice: Law, State and the Agrarian Question in Zimbabwe*, Harare: SAPES Books, 1997.

⁴⁸ Government of Zimbabwe, *Transitional National Development Plan 1982/83 – 1984/85*, Harare: Government Printers, 1982.

⁴⁹ John Mw. Makumbe, *Democracy and Development in Zimbabwe: Constraints of Decentralisation*, Harare: SAPES Books, 1998.

broad 'wave of democratisation' in Africa during the 1990s that was difficult to ignore.⁵⁰ Initially these new global conditions prompted various smokescreens in attempts to disguise Zanu (PF)'s ongoing drive towards a *de facto* one-party state. But with the emergence in 1999 of the MDC as a politically viable opposition party, a new set of rules defining politics and the practices of government had to be constructed.

For Mugabe and Zanu (PF) this has entailed a constant discursive reassembling of diverse regimes of truth and selective traditions, be these in the form of revolutionary nationalism, democracy, tradition, or various alternative visions of modernity.⁵¹ Within this ever-changing kaleidoscope, one finds juxtaposed assertions by Mugabe and his spokespeople of holding free and fair elections and maintaining law and order (despite all evidence to the contrary), while portraying liberal democracy as a tool of Western imperialism and anathema to Zimbabwe's historically legitimate land revolution. One has heard populist declarations that only the 'deeply rural', that is, those who adhere to their 'traditional roots in the village' and who are still in possession of their totems, can be considered 'true' citizens of Zimbabwe. At the same time, both actual war veterans from the liberation struggle of the 1970s, and the new Zanu (PF) youth militia, have been required to abandon alliances with their own historical traditions, namely their links to chiefs, kinship or locality, in favour of loyalty to Zanu (PF).⁵² The promised reward has been their redefined status, along with a narrow political elite, as super-citizens.

Normalising Violence and Reconstituting War Heroes

In this strange landscape of smoke and mirrors, what has been witnessed is the production of the norm of violence; that is, the process by which violence – including the rapid spread of direct physical violence such as torture, rape, kidnapping, intimidation and sometimes murder, as well as a range of other forms of social, economic, emotional, cultural and sexual violence – has become normalised as an everyday mode of rule and technology of government. In the deliberate absence of official state intervention to protect its citizens from acts of violence, and in many cases the direct participation in such acts by state agents themselves, there has been a strategic move by the ruling party to decriminalise, and hence legitimise, violence against a specifically targeted yet abstract category of (non)citizens, namely opposition supporters.

According to a recent biography of Robert Mugabe, violence has been a consistent personal creed of his. Martin Meredith quotes a radio broadcast in 1976 from Mozambique, at the height of the liberation war, during which Mugabe summed up his view of electoral democracy as follows:

Our votes must go together with our guns. After all, any vote we shall have, shall have been the product of the gun. The gun which produces the vote should remain

⁵⁰ Peter Geschiere & Josef Gugler, 'Introduction. The Urban-Rural Connection: Changing Issues of Belonging and Identification', *Africa*, 68:3 (1998), pp.309-319.

⁵¹ Concerning Zimbabwe's 'contradictory terrain of development', see Christine Sylvester, *Zimbabwe: The Terrain of Contradictory Development*. Boulder: Westview, 1991. For nuanced reflections on the notion of alternative modernities, see Worby (2003).

⁵² This was not uniformly so. As Alexander and McGregor note for Matabeleland, for example, locally based war veterans and Zanu (PF) militants were constrained by their links to familiar local networks. On the other hand, they and others cite examples of a Zanu (PF) strategy of importing outsiders to undertake acts of violence and terror. Jocelyn Alexander & JoAnn McGregor, 'Elections, Land and the Politics of Opposition in Matabeleland', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 1:4 (2001), pp.510-533.

its security officer – its guarantor. The people’s votes and the people’s guns are always inseparable twins.⁵³

Meredith points out that Mugabe and his close supporters have consistently used extremes of violence to overcome many of the political challenges they have faced, not only during the liberation struggle but also since independence in 1980.⁵⁴ In the run-up to parliamentary elections in June 2000, Mugabe boasted of having “a degree in violence”, while a close political ally and minister in his cabinet, Nathan Shamuyarira, noted publicly that violence was an area where Zanu (PF) has had “a very strong, long and successful history”⁵⁵.

The ruling party’s references to a ‘successful’ history of violence have performed a double-act of memory work. On the one hand, the reference to the *Second Chimurenga* reaffirms the status of Zanu (PF) as the legitimate liberator of Zimbabwe from colonial rule, through ‘the gun’ (although in effect the enforced Lancaster House agreement in 1979 deprived Mugabe of an all-out military victory). At the same time, it is a coded reminder of the price of dissent to those who suffered brutally under Mugabe’s Korean-trained Fifth Brigade in Matabeleland and Midlands during the 1980s.⁵⁶ It is not by chance that the state-supported land occupations, disruptions of local government institutions and of selected private businesses, and violent attacks on all forms of opposition including the independent media since 2000, have been defined within the same metaphorical code as the *Third Chimurenga*. Not only does this discursively locate the present moment along (or at the end of) a narrowly defined historical trajectory of (unfinished) struggle against colonial injustice – the final phase of national liberation – but quite pointedly locates it along a continuum of violent struggle, even ‘war’.⁵⁷

In December 2001, at the Zanu (PF) party congress, Mugabe extended the notion of war to include a national ‘war on terror’. This capitalised on the post-September 11 discourse on terror, much as other authoritarian states have done since then, to defy growing international criticism and further legitimise his anti-democratic practices. Artfully deflecting the evidence stacked against his own party, he accused the MDC of deliberately hatching “a campaign of violent intimidation” and of posing “a real terrorist threat to the country which will not be allowed to go unchecked”.⁵⁸ Further reinforcing this rhetoric, the cabinet sworn in August 2002 was described by Mugabe as “a fully-fledged war council set up to fight the country’s economic problems”, and as “a political war cabinet which will take into account actions

⁵³ Martin Meredith, *Our Votes, Our Guns: Robert Mugabe and the Tragedy of Zimbabwe*, Oxford: Public Affairs, 2002, p.225.

⁵⁴ Besides the *Gukurahundi* state-led massacres of the 1980s, there are numerous examples of smaller-scale violence (including previous electoral violence and ongoing structural violence) used by the state against its own citizens since independence. See, for example, Jocelyn Alexander, JoAnn McGregor & Terence Ranger, *Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the ‘Dark Forests’ of Matabeleland*, Oxford: James Currey, 2000.

⁵⁵ Cited in Meredith (2002), p 225.

⁵⁶ For analyses of this period see for example Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace/Legal Resources Foundation, *Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace. A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands 1980 to 1988*, Harare, CCJP/LRF, 1997; Katri Pohjolanen Yap, *Uprooting the Weeds. Power, Ethnicity and Violence in the Matabeleland Conflict 1980-1987*, unpublished PhD thesis, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, 2001; Alexander *et al.* (2000); Shari Eppel, ‘*Gukurahundi: The Need for Truth and Reparation*’, in Raftopoulos & Savage (2004), pp.43-62.

⁵⁷ As Kriger notes for the period up to 1987, “the ruling party’s impressive power had been built to a significant degree on violence, guerrilla privilege, and symbolic appeals to war”. Norma Kriger, *Guerrilla Veterans in Post-War Zimbabwe. Symbolic and Violent Politics, 1980-1987*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p.187.

⁵⁸ Based on author’s personal transcript of Mugabe’s speech delivered at the Zanu (PF) party congress in Victoria Falls, 13 December 2002, broadcast live on Zimbabwe radio.

being taken by Britain and its allies against Zimbabwe”.⁵⁹ Such language and its (re)structuring effects on political, institutional and social practices, set the scene for a parallel, deadly politics of identity and belonging now at play. This is a politics that attempts to redefine those entitled to belong: to the land, as legitimate sons and daughters of the soil; to the state, as valid and loyal citizens; and to the nation, as either racially, ethnically or politically ‘pure’ insiders, set against an ever-expanding category of dangerous Others now tainting the national body.⁶⁰ This seems consistent with what Geschiere and Gugler observed elsewhere in Africa during the 1990s:

Now that elections have real meaning again, the fear of being outvoted by ‘strangers’ – whatever their origins or the precise definition of their otherness – has evoked an obsession with roots and origins.⁶¹

In the present times in Zimbabwe, there has been a replacement of the more classic autochthony trope by a different and even narrower version of authenticity and insiderhood, that of *liberation-war credentials*.⁶² This has powerfully revalorised actual war veterans from the *Second Chimurenga*, whose growing disenchantment with the state and ruling party by the late 1990s was in urgent need of rechannelling into some kind of unifying ‘nationalist’ project.⁶³ This was especially so after President Mugabe, in 1997, personally acceded to forceful demands for compensation and pensions by war veterans, who had mobilised themselves very effectively through the new and powerful Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association (ZNLWVA). At a time of waning support for the party, these concessions bought Mugabe and Zanu (PF) a degree of loyalty from an important symbolic constituency, which they subsequently harnessed to great effect in their simultaneous campaigns to ‘destroy the world of the white farm’,⁶⁴ crush the opposition, and reinvent the terms of rule and practices of government. But as McGregor observes, veterans “brought their own economic and political interests to the alliance, which have sometimes threatened central party control”.⁶⁵

War veterans – who were part of two distinct liberation armies, Zanla and Zipra, attached to Zanu-PF and ZAPU respectively during the struggle – are far from being a seamless category of homogenous social actors sharing a common past or present. Their multiple differences in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, spatial origin, ideological orientation, and party and leadership affiliation, translated into different experiences of the liberation war itself, and also into differential levels of accumulation and marginalisation in the post-independence years.⁶⁶ According to McGregor, those in active alliance with Zanu (PF) “have been drawn overwhelmingly from the ranks of the unemployed or poorly remunerated, who lack

⁵⁹ ‘Mugabe sees new cabinet as ‘war council’’, *Financial Times* (UK), 26 August 2002.

⁶⁰ For chilling echoes from elsewhere, see Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers. Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.

⁶¹ Geschiere & Gugler (1998), p.313.

⁶² Richard Werbner, ‘Smoke from the Barrel of a Gun: Postwars of the Dead, Memory and Reinscription in Zimbabwe’, in Richard Werbner (ed.), *Memory and the Postcolony. African Anthropology and the Critique of Power*, London & New York: Zed Books, 1998, pp.71-102.

⁶³ However, war veterans who have become MDC supporters are no longer accorded this hero status. In the context of the *Third Chimurenga* they have been recast by Zanu (PF) as ‘sell outs’ and counter-revolutionary. Consequently they have been victimised by, among other things, being denied land in the new ‘fast track’ resettlement programme, while having their ex-combatants’ pension benefits terminated (see *Zimbabwe Independent*, 18 October 2002).

⁶⁴ See ‘Land reform a cover for Zanu war on opposition’, *Business Day* (SA), 23 August 2002.

⁶⁵ McGregor (2002), p.10. See also Kriger (2003).

⁶⁶ Kriger (2003).

education and prospects”.⁶⁷ Yet it is primarily those from these same ranks who suffered the betrayal of the party, in many cases being neglected for months on the farms they dutifully invaded, but worse still, being evicted from these farms to make way for ‘private’ ownership by the party elite.⁶⁸

Not surprisingly, cracks began to appear in the political façade of the ZNWLVA.⁶⁹ Queried about alleged defections of some veterans from his organisation, the secretary-general, Andy Mhlanga, dismissed the allegations, asserting that “anyway, true war veterans remain loyal to Zanu PF and President Mugabe because we fought the liberation war together. It is a marriage for life”.⁷⁰ Yet it has been a rocky marriage. In early 2005, President Mugabe (illegally) fired the elected chairman of ZNWLVA, Jabulani Sibanda, apparently “after he complained that commercial farms seized from whites were being given to Mugabe’s cronies rather than to war veterans as promised”. However, there were also allegations of an alliance between Sibanda and Mugabe’s out-of-favour, and soon-to-be-dismissed former Minister of Information, Jonathan Moyo. The overall effect was that the ZNWLVA, “once the blunt instrument of Mugabe’s politics of intimidation who played a key role in the previous two elections”, during the 2005 election campaign was “nowhere to be seen”.⁷¹

Echoing some of the tensions from earlier periods, internal differences between war veterans manifested themselves in organisational splits in 2000, for example with the setting up in May 2000 of an alternative to the ZNLWVA, the Zimbabwe Liberators Platform for Peace and Development. As noted by Alexander and McGregor, those who formed this group explicitly distanced themselves from political violence and condemned the farm invasions. In addition, they “spoke out angrily against what they saw as the exploitation of veterans by a weak and unpopular party”.⁷² Others became active members of the opposition MDC or joined smaller opposition parties. Such acts of ‘treachery’, in the logic of Zanu (PF), cancel out their war hero status and hence their political authenticity.

Yet the potential loss by Zanu (PF) of a substantial proportion of its seemingly natural constituency was effectively countered by a strategic expansion of the category of war veterans. By defining the present ‘revolution’ as the *Third Chimurenga*, the party was able to reclassify the recently-formed Zanu (PF) youth militia as legitimate ‘war liberation’ heroes. This was confirmed by President Mugabe in his speech to mark Heroes Day in August 2002, in yet another shrewd reworking of the terms of his critics, in this case rebuffing those who queried the authenticity of ‘so-called’ war veterans spearheading ‘the land revolution’. While paying tribute to the past heroes of the country’s struggle for independence, the President noted that even those accused of being too young to have fought with the guerrilla forces were entitled to be called war veterans. After all, he noted, they were the *new* war veterans; not impostors but genuine fighters for their land. This representation allowed the regime to further legitimise them through their partial integration into the army in 2004, and in turn to use them to assist in ‘administering’ the 2005 parliamentary elections.

⁶⁷ McGregor (2002), p.11.

⁶⁸ See ‘Government evicts resettled villagers to pave way for Shiri’, *The Daily News*, 18 September 2002; ‘Zanu PF moves to rein in war vets’, *Daily Mirror* (Zimb), 18 December 2004.

⁶⁹ In 2002, members of an alleged war veterans breakaway party, the New People’s Party (NPP), accused Zanu (PF) of ‘forgetting’ them, leaving them out of the land redistribution exercise (‘War vets split from Zanu PF party’, *The Standard*, Sunday 14 July 2002).

⁷⁰ ‘War vets split from Zanu PF party’, *The Standard*, Sunday 14 July 2002.

⁷¹ ‘A not-so-subtle rigging job’, *Star* (SA), 23 March 2005.

⁷² Alexander & McGregor (2001), pp.514-515.

Traditional Authority and Partisan Politics

In contrast to the attention given to the role played by war veterans, Zanu (PF) youth militia and state security agencies during the post-2000 crisis, there has been relatively little focus in the literature on the position and practices of traditional leaders. Historically there have been recurring ambivalences and contradictory policies by successive states, colonial and postcolonial, with regard to the role of traditional leaders within Zimbabwe's system of governance.⁷³ In the past two and a half decades, there have been alternating measures introduced to either undermine or revive the authority of traditional leaders. Measures to curtail especially the authority of chiefs and headmen over land allocation and the administration of local justice, characterised the immediate post-independence period when one of the key stated aims of the new state was to establish a more democratic, decentralised form of local government. Yet already by the mid-1980s, initially just prior to the 1985 parliamentary elections, there were reversals of this trend, with concessions on control over community courts being made by then Prime Minister Mugabe.⁷⁴ By the time of the Rural District Councils Act of 1988, chiefs were included (albeit as *ex-officio* members) in the anticipated new local councils.

Measures to revalidate chiefly authority intensified especially during the second half of the 1990s, as both state and ruling party legitimacy began to slip even in rural areas. Here, especially in the Communal Lands, customary laws (sanctioned formally by state legislation), and hence traditional leaders, continued to hold sway to varying degrees in different localities with respect to certain social, symbolic and material domains. They represented potential allies to support a waning party and state in recovering sovereignty at a very crucial time. This, far more than any substantial pressure from an organised traditionalist lobby – largely absent in Zimbabwe, unlike that in South Africa⁷⁵ – led to the passing of the Traditional Leaders Act in 1998. While the Act sustained a level of ambivalence over such key domains as land allocation authority – to be undertaken 'in consultation' with the Rural District Councils – it nonetheless implied a stronger official validation of the authority of traditional leaders. This intensified in the post-2000 period as the opposition challenge to Zanu (PF) from the newly-formed MDC grew. In response, the ruling party began to recruit not only *new* 'soldiers' (youth militia, in addition to war veterans) in its war against the opposition (represented publicly as a war against colonialism and imperialism), but equally began to draw on both the symbolic and territorial authority of an *old* guard, namely chiefs and headmen.

⁷³ For pre-independence periods, see, for example, Terence Ranger, 'Democracy and Traditional Political Structures in Zimbabwe, 1890-1999', in Ngwabi Bhebe & Terence Ranger (eds), *The Historical Dimensions of Democracy and Human Rights in Zimbabwe, Volume One: Pre-colonial and Colonial Legacies*, Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 2001, pp.31-52; and Terence Ranger, 'Tradition and Travesty: Chiefs and the Administration in Makoni District, Zimbabwe, 1960-1980', in John D.Y. Peel and Terence O. Ranger (eds), *Past and Present in Zimbabwe*, (Special Issue of *Africa*), Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983, pp.20-41. For post-independence, see Jocelyn Alexander, 'Things Fall Apart, the Centre Can Hold: Processes of Post-War Conflict in Zimbabwe's Rural Areas', in N. Bhebe & T. O. Ranger (eds), *Society in Zimbabwe's Liberation War, Volume Two*, Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1995, pp.175-191.

⁷⁴ Jocelyn Alexander, 'Chiefs and the State in Independent Zimbabwe', unpublished paper presented at Conference on *Chieftaincy in Africa*, St Antony's College, Oxford, June 2001, p.3.

⁷⁵ Jo Beall, Sibongiseni Mkhize and Shahid Vawda, 'Traditional Authority, Institutional Multiplicity and Political Transition in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa', *Crisis States Working Paper*, 48, London: Crisis States Research Centre, LSE, 2004.

While there was initially less involvement by traditional leaders in explicitly partisan acts of violence or intimidation, by at least early 2004 reports began appearing of a more active role being taken by some chiefs and headmen in various parliamentary by-election activities. In February 2004 in Gutu District, Masvingo Province, some chiefs and headmen were reported to have been actively campaigning for ruling party candidates. They were said to have 'banned' the MDC from campaigning in their areas, and additionally to have been physically present at polling stations checking names of voters and intimidating them to vote for the ruling party. One villager was quoted as saying: "The chief told us that if we didn't vote for Zanu PF we would be evicted from our homesteads". In the same article, a chief who spoke on condition of anonymity informed reporters that Zanu (PF) officials and the local war veterans' leadership had warned them that "we would be stripped of our titles and allowances if people in our areas voted for the opposition".⁷⁶ The electoral 'success' of these tactics in Gutu inspired the ruling party to employ them again just a month later in another by-election in Lupane District in Matabeleland North.⁷⁷

Such practices were actively extended across the country in the build-up to the March 2005 parliamentary elections, with evidence of many chiefs and headmen taking on explicitly partisan roles in forcing constituents to attend Zanu (PF) rallies and vote for the ruling party.⁷⁸ In the northern town of Hurungwe in Mashonaland West, the MDC named chiefs who they claimed had tried to block an opposition campaign rally, and had threatened to evict residents who voted for the opposition and to deny them agricultural aid. In the same area, the new Vice President, Joyce Mujuru, was quoted as announcing at public rallies that chiefs and other traditional leaders "should shepherd their subjects to polling stations on voting day" to ensure that they cast their ballots.⁷⁹ Some villagers experiencing such threats from their traditional leaders explained this in terms of the regime having provided chiefs and headmen in recent years with increased salaries, vehicles and in some cases land.⁸⁰ In addition, of the thirty parliamentary seats that President Mugabe can appoint directly, ten of these are reserved for chiefs. However, responding to the allegations that chiefs were forcing their people to attend Zanu (PF) rallies and vote for the ruling party, the Interior Minister, Kembo Mohadi, asserted:

Ours is a peaceful party. Our people hold their chiefs in high regard and, naturally, [we] get worried when such accusations are made against them. We cannot deny our people the right to choose their own leaders when we fought so hard [during the liberation struggle] to bring them human rights, freedom and social justice.

Those organisations alleging violence and human rights abuses by the ruling party and their allies, he argued, were "subversives who are western-funded".⁸¹

Particularly disturbing were reports of some chiefs and headmen threatening starvation to their own communities if they supported the opposition, echoing a much wider practice of the use of food as a political weapon by Zanu (PF).⁸² These were far from idle threats, particularly under conditions of extreme hunger when over half of Zimbabwe's population were estimated

⁷⁶ 'Chiefs intimidate voters', *The Daily New*, 3 February 2004.

⁷⁷ 'Zanu PF targets chiefs in Lupane campaign', *Zimbabwe Standard*, 1 March 2004.

⁷⁸ 'Mugabe henchmen on the warpath', *IWPR*, 27 February 2005.

⁷⁹ 'Mugabe using traditional leaders, says MDC', *Sapa*, 26 March 2005.

⁸⁰ 'Mugabe gives hungry masses food for thought', *Sunday Independent (SA)*, 20 March 2005.

⁸¹ See 'Mugabe henchmen on the warpath', *IWPR*, 27 February 2005.

⁸² See, for example, 'Mixing politics with food', *IPS*, 27 September 2004; 'Back Zanu PF or starve, chiefs tell villagers', *Zim Online (SA)*, 8 February 2005; 'Zanu PF candidate threatens voters with starvation', *Zim Online (SA)*, 11 March 2005.

to be in need of (scarcely available) food aid, and international food agencies had been barred from the country. Alongside Zanu (PF)'s absolute control over trade and the distribution of subsidized maize through the Grain Marketing Board (GMB), chiefs became critical gatekeepers for accessing such grain:

To be allowed to buy cheaper-priced maize from the government's Grain Marketing Board, starving villagers must be on a food assistance register kept by the chief. Chiefs also issue letters authorising the GMB to sell maize to their subjects...According to opposition officials, chiefs in Tsholotsho, Umzingwane, Insiza and other constituencies in the province have told their subjects to attend Zanu PF campaign rallies only, with those who defy the order or attend MDC rallies being removed from the food register.⁸³

The increasingly explicit alliance between traditional leaders and the ruling party prompted Zanu (PF) to arrange for youth militia to act as security guards to protect them in Midlands and the two Matabeleland provinces in late 2004. This is somewhat unprecedented, certainly in post-independence Zimbabwe. As one media report noted, "Chiefs have traditionally never required protection from their subjects".⁸⁴ But the need for such guards may have been less about any real threat to the safety of these leaders and more related to Zanu (PF)'s attempts to have chiefs and headmen identified as its allies in rural areas, but also to give the impression of the MDC as violent and threatening. But while there were few if any reported cases of opposition attacks on pro-Zanu (PF) chiefs and headmen, there were several reports of violent attacks on traditional leaders viewed as sympathetic to the MDC.⁸⁵

Yet beyond what this explicitly partisan alliance between traditional leaders and the ruling party means in the immediate sense – in terms of political intimidation through threats of expulsion and starvation – it raises broader questions about changing modes of rule in Zimbabwe under present conditions of crisis and its implications for democracy. Clearly, one cannot ignore the continuing if uneven significance of traditional authorities in various parts of Africa, and not only in rural contexts,⁸⁶ nor in isolation from a range of other key institutions and processes. As Alexander has noted:

Chieftaincy is of particular interest because its fate is intertwined with those of other local authorities, with socio-economic and political change and with the goals of governments.⁸⁷

One might also wonder to what extent the cooptation of traditional leaders by Zanu (PF) into its current political project reflects claims of 're-traditionalisation' in many parts of Africa.⁸⁸ Certainly, such cyclical practices are not new on the continent. As already noted, there is a long history of dynamic, contradictory and contested relationships between governments and traditional authorities in southern Africa, much of which has depended on tactical perpetuations (from both sides) of the discursive dichotomy between 'tradition' and

⁸³ 'Back Zanu PF or starve, chiefs tell villagers', *Zim Online (SA)*, 8 February 2005.

⁸⁴ 'Government militia to guard chiefs', *Zim Online (SA)*, 27 September 2004.

⁸⁵ 'Zanu PF youths strip headman of status', *The Daily News Online Edition*, 25 August 2004.

⁸⁶ For a challenging account of the role of chieftainship in contemporary urban South Africa, see Jo Beall, 'Exit, Voice and Tradition: Loyalty to Chieftainship and Democracy in Metropolitan Durban, South Africa', *Crisis States Working Paper*, 59, London: Crisis States Research Centre, LSE, 2005.

⁸⁷ Alexander (2001), p.1.

⁸⁸ Beall *et al.* (2004).

‘modernity’, even where this has long ceased to be valid in practice.⁸⁹ However, this history does not detract from the importance of tracing the specific ways in which these relationships are being played out in contemporary African settings, and of reflecting on the critical challenges this poses for ‘democratic consolidation’.⁹⁰ For the moment though, this paper focuses more on the militarisation of rule during the present crisis, and specifically on the disruption of local government by war veterans and others.

Tensions in the Terms of Rule

In the context of growing militarisation in almost all aspects of political, economic and social life in Zimbabwe, one might be tempted to conclude that Mugabe and Zanu (PF) have shifted away from using ‘power’ as the basis of rule – in the Foucauldian sense of governing by ‘acting upon the actions of others’, which requires the freedom of its governed subjects – and replaced it with ‘domination’, which requires force against subjects who refuse to be governed. Ironically, under the former Rhodesian regime, the present war veterans were the archetypal ungovernable subjects, overtly resisting settler-colonial domination. Now these same subjects have been reworked by the present postcolonial regime, albeit in an elastic version that incorporates the youth militia, to provoke and empower them to crush a new category of ungovernable subjects: ‘aliens’ or ‘foreigners’ in Mamdani’s terms;⁹¹ those constituting a real or imagined political threat to the ruling party.

Yet there are very few conditions under which absolute domination is possible, or easily sustained. With reference to – but moving beyond – Foucault, Dean argues that “the exercise of government in all modern states entails the articulation of a form of pastoral power with one of sovereign power”.⁹² Here, pastoral power, or biopolitics, describes a politics and practice of government concerned with the ‘administration of life’. It works at the level of ‘the population’, through measurable phenomena such as health status, sanitation, birth-rate, mortality, environment, race, genetics, housing, levels of employment, patterns of migration, standard of living, and so on. Sovereignty, on the other hand, “is characterised by a power of life and death”, having as its main instruments “laws, decrees, and regulations backed up by coercive sanctions ultimately grounded in the right of death exercised by the sovereign”.⁹³ All modes of rule, argues Dean, be they liberal or authoritarian, are compelled to address both biopolitics and sovereign power. What distinguishes modes from each other is the distinctive way in which they assemble and apply this combination of elements, some more concerned with the use of power to foster life, others to deny it.

According to such an approach, President Mugabe would ultimately be constrained in his attempts to construct a new normality of rule and government in Zimbabwe based purely on assertions of sovereignty. Rather he would have to conjure up an image of the *caring* sovereign, concerned as much with the pastoral care of his subjects as with sustaining discipline and domination through force. Indeed, this is an intrinsic part of his rhetoric of restoring the lost lands through a ‘land revolution’. By reinventing the legitimate forms and spaces of citizenship – by renaming (as internal ‘enemies’) those subjects no longer entitled to pastoral care – he might go some way towards reducing such constraints on his expressions of

⁸⁹ Alexander (2001).

⁹⁰ Beall (2005).

⁹¹ Mamdani (2001).

⁹² Dean (2001).

⁹³ Dean (2001), pp.47-49.

sovereign power, but he can never entirely eliminate them. Yet unlike the sovereign or the state (including the police and security services to some extent), militant war veterans, in their present (partial) constitution as the vanguard of ‘the revolution’, are not bound by the demands of pastoral care, at least not in the short term. As such, their initial work has been that of disruption, disorder and domination. Specifically in relation to rural local government institutions such as Rural District Councils, schools and clinics, it has been the work of violently undermining the existing mechanisms and processes through which biopolitics – the ‘politics of life’ – have so far been constituted and practiced. But will this localised mode of rule-by-force persist, or will war veterans eventually be confronted with local, national or even international pressures that alter the new terms of rule they appear to be setting?

This partly depends on what constitute the underlying projects and powers of the war veterans themselves. Are they (alongside their younger militia counterparts, and to a lesser extent chiefs and headmen) mere pawns in a partisan project of anarchic destruction on behalf of Zanu (PF), aimed at eliminating the presence of the opposition in key nodes of governmental power? Does their involvement have certain ‘revolutionary’ qualities in terms of genuine attempts at transforming the direction, framework and practices of postcolonial rule? To what extent does their extensive disruption of the multiple spaces and practices of government, as previously identified by *The Daily News* article, constitute ‘government by war veterans’? What defines the limits of their interventions, and what will be their longer-term effects on the sphere of local government, and on their own political status and future trajectory? It is with these kinds of questions in mind that the remainder of this paper considers the significance of local government and its present disruption by war veterans. Why, in addition to the other key targets of attack since February 2000 – the commercial farms, but also businesses, the judiciary, non-governmental organisations, the independent media, and opposition party structures and individuals – have local authorities and associated institutions been so violently disrupted? What is fundamentally at stake in the current struggles over, and within, local government in Zimbabwe?

The Making of Rural Local Government

Rural local government is a particularly significant if somewhat ambivalent arena of public authority, being in many ways at the frontier of state sovereignty and ruling party hegemony, while equally being engaged with the specific dynamics of local politics. As a concept, local government denotes simultaneously a space and a mode of rule. On the one hand, it implies a distinction from central or national government, represented as a ‘lower-tier’ of government. This is often reflected in organograms and other institutional mapping technologies whose boxes, circles and arrows on a page confidently assert well defined administrative boundaries and clear linear hierarchies of bureaucratic authority and accountability. Similarly, formal flows (or absences) of public finance between ‘levels’ of government confirm patterns of power within this framework. Such symbolic borders are frequently challenged by the actual mobilities of bodies, resources and ideas.⁹⁴ Nonetheless, the discursive definition of administrative boundaries has very concrete material effects, not least in terms of the actual distribution and control of public funds, or the delegation or devolution of various functions and forms of authority (over land, justice, security, movement, even citizenship) that impact in numerous ways on the everyday lives of ordinary citizens.

⁹⁴ Janet Roitman, ‘Productivity in the Margins. The Reconstitution of State Power in the Chad Basin’, in Veena Das & Deborah Poole (eds), *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*, Sante Fe and Oxford: School of American Research Press and James Currey, 2004, pp.191-224.

At the same time, images of local government as a specifically 'local' form of rule give the impression of immediacy and accessibility; of mutual legibility – perhaps even intimacy – between an otherwise distant (and apparently distinct) state and 'its' citizenry. Much of the rhetoric and policies associated with local government reform in Africa, especially decentralisation policies, in addition to their modernist claims to improving efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability in the delivery of public goods and services, often include a commitment to enhance participatory planning or even democracy by 'bringing government closer to the people'. As is most often the case, this promise, and the varied responses of citizens, is more than a little double-edged.

At independence, Zimbabwe's newly elected government was faced with an immense task of reconstruction and reinvention on all levels. With regard to rural local government, there were two parallel yet related projects to address, both inherently connected to ongoing processes of state making and securing ruling party hegemony. Firstly, there was the problem of 'development', especially in the Communal Lands which had suffered most through the many decades of colonial underdevelopment. These were followed by the years of the liberation war that left infrastructure devastated and rural development administration depleted or entirely destroyed in some areas,⁹⁵ and where popular expectations were especially high. Secondly, there was the problem of creating and legitimising a new order, through establishing new or reformed institutions and practices of local government. However, these projects were not starting in a vacuum. Not only did the new regime have to contend with the continuities of inherited colonial structures, personnel and practices, but also those generated in the countryside by the nationalist movements and armies under conditions of war.⁹⁶

It had been clear to many nationalists during colonial rule that gaining control of and changing the institutions, policies and procedures of local government was an essential step in national liberation. At the height of the war in the late 1970s, rural local government for black Africans in the racially defined Tribal Trust Lands consisted of several hundred geographically fragmented and very poorly resourced African Councils which were almost entirely dependent on – and subservient to – central government. These African Councils were interpreted by nationalists as a symbol of enforced separate development and civic exclusion, and their rejection became part of the emerging nationalist discourse. As the movement for national liberation escalated into an armed struggle in the early 1970s, the disruption if not destruction of these councils became an explicit objective of the guerrilla armies. Council offices and other local government infrastructure, including schools, were targeted throughout the war. According to former Provincial Governor of Midlands Province, "out of the 242 African Councils that existed in the mid-70s, only 22 were operating by independence in 1980".⁹⁷

At the same time, with many chiefs moving to urban areas for the duration of the liberation war – often facing suspicions and attacks themselves by both sides fighting the war for their assumed or actual collaborations – a political and institutional vacuum was being created in the countryside, which the guerrilla 'comrades' and their rural supporters attempted to fill

⁹⁵ Coenraad Brand, 'Will Decentralization Enhance Local Participation?', in Helmsing *et al.*, *Limits to Decentralization in Zimbabwe. Essays on the Decentralization of Government and Planning in the 1980s*, Harare: University of Zimbabwe and The Hague: Institute of Social Studies, 1991, pp.79-96.

⁹⁶ Jocelyn Alexander & JoAnn McGregor, 'Democracy, Development and Political Conflict: Rural Institutions in Matabeleland North After Independence', in Ranger (ed.) (2003), pp.113-133.

⁹⁷ Interview with July Moyo, Harare, 15 July 1999.

with alternative structures of governance.⁹⁸ In effect, these were local party committees and cells that were critical to supporting a bush-based guerrilla struggle, but whose authoritarian practices would partly pervade future rural local institutions and politics.⁹⁹ However, according to the former Governor of Midlands, the vision for these structures – which were expected to be based on elected representatives – was that they would provide for a combination of “development, security and democracy” in a newly liberated Zimbabwe.¹⁰⁰

A whole flurry of policies and programmes were introduced soon after independence to address the most pressing administrative and political challenges in the local government system, with the more economic and social aspects constantly lagging behind.¹⁰¹ The District Councils Act of 1980 primarily tackled the problem of fragmentation of African Councils, facilitating their consolidation from over two hundred to fifty-five ‘more viable’ District Councils. However, these remained severely marginalised, under-resourced and dependent on central government. The Act was also instrumental in formally stripping chiefs and headmen of both their judicial and land allocation powers. This was a symbolic political act, which did not translate evenly into altered local governance practices but rather deepened the ambiguities in localised authority that have persisted since independence. Subsequent directives, legislation and policies in the mid-1980s focused more specifically on decentralisation. In combination, these measures detailed the new local government hierarchy, including the composition and functions of councils and committees from village to ward to district to provincial levels.¹⁰² In addition, they established a comprehensive range of local government cadres to operate the system. On the one hand, there were elected members of Village and Ward Development Committees, and ward councillors who constituted the elected membership of the District Council. On the other hand, there were central government-employed Village Community Workers (VCWs), Local Government Promotion Officers (LGPOs), District Administrators (DAs), and the various deconcentrated departments of central government ministries.

In principle, in terms of administrative (re)form and practice, these changes were geared towards altering the size and boundaries of villages and wards, introducing ‘integrated and coordinated’ rural development planning, and facilitating ‘popular participation’. These were consistent with both the post-independence rhetoric of state-building on new terms, and the dominant developmentalist discourse of the 1980s reflecting a global consensus in ‘good governance’.¹⁰³ Within the bureaucracy itself, a strong public administration ethos and professionalism characterised many of those responsible for designing and implementing the relevant policies and procedures.¹⁰⁴ At the same time, one has to take seriously Makumbe’s assertion that “the decentralisation structure was primarily conceived for the purposes of creating the one-party state”.¹⁰⁵ Brand suggests that there was “deliberate (con)fusion of political and administrative structures at the district and local level”, signalling “an important

⁹⁸ Terence Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerilla War in Zimbabwe*, London: James Currey, 1985.

⁹⁹ Alexander & McGregor (2003).

¹⁰⁰ Interview with July Moyo, Harare, 15 July 1999.

¹⁰¹ See Naison Mutizwa-Mangiza, ‘Decentralization and Local Government Administration. An Analysis of Structural and Planning Problems at the Rural District Level’, in Helmsing *et al.*, (1991), pp.51-78.

¹⁰² Helmsing *et al.* (1991).

¹⁰³ See World Bank, *World Development Report*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

¹⁰⁴ My experience working in or with the Zimbabwe state between 1983 and 1997, much of it engaged with local government, confirms an initial professionalism that was gradually undermined both by the changing conditions associated with structural reforms in the 1990s, and increasingly by overt politicisation as party and state legitimacy started fading.

¹⁰⁵ Makumbe (1998).

step towards the one-party state".¹⁰⁶ In addition, he observed that the "various administrative tiers of decentralisation were explicitly designed to parallel those of the party structures".¹⁰⁷ Village and Ward Development Committees, for example, bore a close resemblance to former village- and ward-level party structures.

The post of LGPO, a key frontline field worker, was filled with recently demobilised political commissars from the liberation armies, bringing not only valuable political mobilisation experience from the war to the project of 'development', but enhancing the revolutionary credentials of the new government. These posts did not last the decade, giving way instead to the more technocratic sensibilities and recentralising tendencies within the bureaucracy. However, the initial shift from liberation struggle to regular public administration at independence posed some interesting and awkward challenges for local government. As one former Permanent Secretary for Local Government observed just a year before the land occupations and local government disruptions of the current crisis began:

In 1980, when we started, we were administering with the emphasis on power. The rationale was that it was a government system that came about through a war situation, and so a military type of approach was in place. It derived from the Party. The threat to the newly-won independence through hostile forces, both external and internal, required government institutions that would demonstrate change.... If you're dealing with a power situation you have to use power to reverse it. We've developed since then. The manner in which I was running my office has changed. I'm looking now at a system conscious of people's rights. There were no people's rights before.¹⁰⁸

Towards the late 1980s, the emphasis of decentralisation policies was primarily on creating a unified rural local government system, through amalgamating the existing Rural Councils that served mainly white Large Scale Commercial Farming Areas, and the still under-resourced District Councils serving mainly the Communal Lands. The ongoing split reflected the government's retention of two distinct rural property regimes – communal and freehold – which, as William Munro argues, not only accepted the "different concepts of rights that accrued to those regimes", but equally "underwrote different conceptions of social being and citizenship" that had a direct bearing on the practices and politics of local government.¹⁰⁹ Yet even if the retention of a private property regime (for the first post-independence decade) was one of the conditions of the Lancaster House constitution, there is little to suggest that had it not been so there would have been any substantive merging of the two tenure systems or any serious attempt to reform or reverse the communal tenure system. Both the 1994 Land Tenure Commission report, and the 1998 Land Reform and Resettlement Policy proposals (neither of which were actually implemented), underscored the positive value of retaining various 'traditional' structures inherent in such a system. In many ways, perpetuating the communal lands – with its numerous ambiguities in relation to both land and authority – has allowed sustained political leverage and control by the party-state over a large majority of Zimbabweans. This has been well demonstrated in recent years. Yet while the bifurcated tenure regime and overall agrarian structure was to remain in place, the Rural District

¹⁰⁶ Brand (1991), p.92.

¹⁰⁷ Brand (1991), p.85.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with former Permanent Secretary for Local Government and National Housing, Mr. F. Munyira, Harare, 29 January 1999.

¹⁰⁹ William A. Munro, *The Moral Economy of the State. Conservation, Community Development and State Making in Zimbabwe*, Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1998.

Councils Act was passed in 1988 to facilitate institutional and political amalgamation of the councils. Among other things, it was designed (technocratically) to enhance autonomy and devolve powers and resources from central government agencies to the new local authorities.

It took five years before the actual amalgamation was implemented, a period during which there was intense debate, experimentation and negotiation within government itself concerning the meanings and modes of decentralisation. Both the amalgamation process itself, and the deepening of decentralisation, raised fears and objections in many quarters. The resistance was not only from the mainly white and relatively well-to-do Rural Councils afraid of merging with black, under-resourced District Councils, but equally from various line ministries anticipating the loss of control over personnel and resources. In addition, there were tensions in the 'parent' ministry responsible for implementing the RDC Act, the then Ministry of Local Government, Rural and Urban Development, emanating not least from the uncertainties and 'demotion' faced by District Administrators (DAs), who had until then been *de facto* Chief Executive Officers of the District Councils.

With a worsening economic crisis by the end of the 1980s and the growing hegemony of neo-liberalism, in 1991 the government introduced standard economic structural reforms. Decentralisation had become an important component of associated public sector reforms being promoted by the World Bank and other donors, and the push towards implementing the RDC Act was thus intensified. Consequently there was fairly robust financial support during the early- and mid-1990s for a range of local government policy-development and capacity-building initiatives. Eventually, then, the new unified rural local government system came into being, and in 1993 the first Rural District Council elections were held. The process of amalgamation was inevitably messy and complicated, a fact acknowledged by all parties and accepted as the basis of a conscious 'learning by doing' approach to capacity building. It nonetheless signified a moment of great optimism, at least in official spaces, especially for more efficient and effective delivery of services. At the time, there was an unusually high level of political commitment to the process expressed in the upper echelons of government. Both a Cabinet Committee on Decentralisation and a special committee of Permanent Secretaries were formed in the mid-1990s to 'guide' and give political weight to the decentralisation process.

The Unma(s)king of Local Government

Yet the reality for many of the new RDCs, especially those in the rural margins, was that they were assuming their authority at a moment of national economic decline, reduction in public sector spending, and growing popular discontent with government in general. The increasing pressure on RDCs to generate local revenue for their own administration and local development activities placed severe strains on them,¹¹⁰ and in some cases brought them into direct competition and often outright conflict with their constituencies,¹¹¹ arguably reflecting the tension between sovereignty and biopolitics.

In addition to the revenue dilemma facing RDCs, there was a growing unease around the question of authority itself. Local political tensions mushroomed as the ruling party's hegemony waned and it feared losing its grip on local councils long dominated by Zanu (PF).

¹¹⁰ Emery Roe, 'More Than the Politics of Decentralization: Local Government Reform, District Development and Public Administration in Zimbabwe', *World Development*, 23:5 (1995), pp.833-843.

¹¹¹ Amanda Hammar, "'The Day of Burning": Eviction and Reinvention in the Margins of Northwest Zimbabwe', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 1:4 (2001), pp.550-574.

Where Zanu (PF) local officials, including those elected as district councillors, exhibited questionable loyalty to the party, efforts were made to have them removed from their posts and to have them replaced by the party's preferred (but unelected) candidates.¹¹² This was not much different from practices in the 1980s, especially in Matabeleland where, in certain local council elections, the ruling party sometimes went to great lengths to impose its own candidates on the electorate in order to counter opposition from ZAPU.¹¹³ Such practices were justified by a senior government minister and then Secretary General of Zanu-PF, the late Maurice Nyagumbo, in the following terms: "Ever since elections started, Zanu has won straight out. You can't have two bulls in a kraal".¹¹⁴

But there were also direct challenges to RDCs and to the state from ordinary citizens. Recounting the tale of her community's forced eviction by the Gokwe North Rural District Council at a public gathering in 1999, and reaching a crescendo of exasperation at the violent betrayal exhibited by the RDC, one woman evictee demanded to know "where does the council get its power". This overt questioning of rule – this refusal by conscious citizens to be governed solely on the RDC's terms – underscored the persistent yet paradoxical struggle between the making and unmaking of local government. One of the key paradoxes of decentralisation in particular is its parallel role in both discipline and democracy. As Hansen has noted for India, while democracy was envisaged and promoted through greater decentralisation of local government, this same process in fact facilitated a channel for greater control and discipline of populations.¹¹⁵ Scott suggests that while decentralisation enhances the legibility (and hence susceptibility) of populations, it equally expands the opportunities for people to pressurise the developmental state to actually deliver 'development'.¹¹⁶ More than that, it is often a battleground for contestations over authority, and over definitions of citizenship and the obligations, rights and resources associated with it.

Yet whatever democratic principles and visions of local government were espoused within the official framework of decentralisation reforms during earlier decades, since 2000 they have been largely abandoned in practice in favour of an overtly partisan project of domination and control of Rural District Councils by Zanu (PF). This has occurred not only through disruption and occupation by loyalist war veterans and later also by party youth militia (known as 'green bombers'), but in collaboration with the party leadership and the bureaucracy itself.¹¹⁷ One might note, for example, the intimidatory remarks made by Zimbabwe's Vice President Joseph Msika at the biennial conference of the Association of Rural District Councils (ARDC) in July 2001, when "stunned officials" attending the meeting were "ordered ...to openly declare their support for President Mugabe by a show of hands":

¹¹² Hammar (2001).

¹¹³ See Alexander & McGregor (2003).

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Alexander & McGregor (2003), p.126.

¹¹⁵ Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

¹¹⁶ James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. See also James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development", Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994; and Tania Murray Li, 'Compromising Power: Development, Culture, and Rule in Indonesia', *Cultural Anthropology*, 14:3 (1999), pp.295-322.

¹¹⁷ See for example 'Gokwe council offices turned base for attack on opposition', *The Daily News*, 8 June, 2000; 'War veterans chase out Chivi rural council boss', *The Daily News*, 1 May, 2002; 'Mugabe loyalists to run opposition stronghold', *The Guardian (UK)*, 7 January, 2003; 'Green Bombers to run council elections', *Zimbabwe Independent*, 1 August, 2003.

‘Those of you who support him must raise your hands’, Msika said to deafening silence from the hundreds of delegates attending the third biennial congress of the Association of Rural District Councils. He then challenged those who do not support the President to also identify themselves, saying Zimbabwe would never have another Mugabe. Almost immediately afterwards, the delegates raised their hands to pledge their support for Mugabe.¹¹⁸

The ARDC initially rejected this type of political interference, but such an explicitly critical stance was rapidly curtailed, and more general commentary by the ARDC on the extensive council disruptions has since been muted. This is despite the fact that the very survival of RDCs has been substantially threatened in several ways: their human resource capacity; their revenue base, for example from unit taxes in commercial farming areas and from wildlife tourism in marginal agricultural areas; their ability to deliver services; or their hold over their legislated authority, including land allocation authority ‘in consultation’ with traditional leaders.

The response to war veterans’ interference by councils themselves varied. Those demonstrating direct support for the opposition MDC, or more specifically where MDC candidates were voted in as councillors, paid a severe price in terms of the extent and degree of violence involved in attacks both before and after elections.¹¹⁹ However, as noted specifically for Matabeleland North, some RDCs tried to resist through council resolutions to reinstate officials and councillors, or by demoting the council chairman who was seen as being ‘too close to the war veterans’.¹²⁰ But given the high levels of support for the war veterans’ actions by the party and bureaucracy, ultimately ‘accommodations had to be made’. Both RDCs and District and Provincial Administrators (DAs and PAs) were forced to:

take the war veterans’ demands seriously, even though the demands were illegal, circumvented existing channels for presenting complaints and ignored procedures for dismissing and recruiting public servants.¹²¹

In addition, the growing conflation of party and state roles played by DAs and PAs, especially in relation to the new land committees and implementing the ‘fast track’ resettlement programme, produced even greater ‘confusion of authority’ at district and provincial levels.

It was more difficult for Zanu (PF) and war veterans to sustain overt disruption of the mainly MDC-dominated urban local authorities, although violent attacks have taken place there too.¹²² However, verbal attacks and ministerial interference by the Minister of Local Government, Public Works and National Housing, Ignatius Chombo, have become legend.¹²³ In one widely publicised case, Harare City Council’s strenuous efforts to counter corruption and inefficiency were repeatedly undermined by the minister’s intervention on partisan

¹¹⁸ *The Daily News* (Harare), 31 July 2001.

¹¹⁹ Binga RDC, for example, experienced severe ‘punishment’ for MDC success in the area, as did ordinary inhabitants who were terrorised and deliberately denied food aid by the ruling party and government. See ‘Zanu PF militants threaten Binga council chief with death’, *Financial Gazette (Zimb)*, 24 October 2002; ‘Green Bomber assault Binga council chief’, *Financial Gazette (Zimb)* 13 March 2003.

¹²⁰ McGregor (2002).

¹²¹ McGregor (2002), p.34.

¹²² See ‘MDC mayoral candidate escapes petrol bomb attack’, *The Daily News (Zimb)*, 27 June 2002; ‘Harare mayor fears for his safety’, *ZWNEWS*, 18 April 2004.

¹²³ See ‘Chombo flexes muscles’, *The Daily News*, 4 April 2002; ‘War on Zim mayors’, *News24 (SA)*, 29 April 2004.

grounds.¹²⁴ This contrasted sharply with the complete lack of protection provided by the state to large numbers of government employees attacked for allegedly supporting the MDC. These included staff in local government institutions throughout the country, as well as ‘dissident’ central government employees and chiefs and headmen, subjected to countless acts of intimidation, humiliation and violence, in some cases murder, allegedly at the hands of known Zanu (PF) militants.

The attacks on rural school teachers, viewed by Zanu (PF) as a key constituency of the MDC, were particularly extensive and severe. Thousands of acts of violence and intimidation against teachers have been recorded since 2000. Abductions, torture, beatings, murder, intimidation, illegal dismissals and extortion for ‘protection’, have all been reported, with little if any response from the relevant ministries, the Public Service Commission, or the police. Thousands of teachers have been forced to flee their posts. Much as elsewhere, teachers constitute perhaps the largest group of decentralised local government employees. As such, they are important “bearers of the designs of the state”,¹²⁵ acting as frontline workers in the formation of subject-citizens. Despite their sometimes ambiguous position in rural communities – being at times highly respected for their knowledge and at others resented as arrogant outsiders – they nonetheless occupy a potentially influential position in relation to both current and future generations of voters, a fact not lost on any political party. In addition, the rural school itself is “an emblem that demarcates the territory effectively governed by the state, an institution that relays ideas about state, nation, and citizen”.¹²⁶ In rural Zimbabwe, with few brick-built structures, it also acts as a multi-purpose community centre. Occupation of these spaces by Zanu (PF) supporters – and especially the youth militia – further limited the capacity of the MDC to campaign, or independent civic organisations to hold meetings. In addition, schools often act as important feeding centres in times of drought. In the context of an impending famine in late 2002 and again in 2005, the removal of ‘opposition’ teachers would allow the ruling party even more control over the political distribution of food for millions of Zimbabweans.

With regard to Rural District Council elections at the end of September 2002, the intimidations and terror campaigns were persistent and widespread, and explicitly targeted at MDC candidates. With less than one month to go before the elections, in one province alone, Midlands South, at least 36 MDC candidates had reportedly withdrawn, “fearing for their lives after being threatened with violence by Zanu PF supporters”.¹²⁷ In Chegutu District in Mashonaland West, eight out of eleven MDC candidates attempting to register their nominations were chased away by Zanu (PF) youths, while MDC officials assisting them were allegedly assaulted or detained, “in the presence of the police”.¹²⁸ In Manicaland and Masvingo, the police allegedly assisted in both the intimidation and false arrest of MDC candidates to prevent them from standing in the elections.¹²⁹ Elsewhere, police in uniform were said to have directly participated in assaulting MDC candidates and supporters.

¹²⁴ See *The Daily News*, 14 August 2002.

¹²⁵ Fiona Wilson, ‘In the Name of the State? Schools and Teachers in an Andean Province’, in Hansen & Stepputat (2001), pp.313-344.

¹²⁶ Wilson (2001), p.313. Since the mid-90s, funding and responsibility for rural schools in Zimbabwe have been devolved from the Ministry of Education directly to the RDCs.

¹²⁷ ‘36 MDC candidates pull out of poll after threats’, *The Daily News*, 2 September 2002.

¹²⁸ ‘Zanu PF supporters detain MP’, *The Daily News*, 6 September 2002.

¹²⁹ ‘Zanu PF militia impose ‘curfew’ in Buhera’, *Zimbabwe Independent*, 19 July 2002; ‘17 MDC members arrested in Chipinge’, *The Daily News*, 7 August 2002.

Recapturing the frontiers of rule, in which rural local government is key, has been a central project of Zanu (PF) since independence, just as it was a key goal of the liberation forces fighting colonial rule. At first this was about the newly independent government countering ‘the spreading tentacles’ of the former settler-colonial state with its own territorialising practices. This was, and continues to be, an attempt by the postcolonial state to mark itself in ways that deepen both its physical and its imagined presence, and that extend the authority of its varied and often ambiguous agents through their access to and control over natural resources and human populations. However, the present drive to reoccupy these frontiers is portrayed by Zanu (PF) as part of the new war against recolonisation by whites and the West through their so-called proxy agent, the MDC. For the ruling party, party militants in general and war veterans in particular are not only critical of its broader hegemonic strategy, but equally of its attempts to recapture the space of local government.

War Veterans: New Gatekeepers at the Frontiers of Government?

McGregor has provided rich empirical detail and historically grounded analysis of war veterans’ systematic disruption of the institutions and independence of rural local authorities in the immediate crisis period.¹³⁰ Together with anecdotal evidence sourced from media reports and personal testimonies from across the country, the emerging pattern includes at least the following: illegal dismissal or ‘chasing away’ of council employees, councillors, and even central government employees accused of supporting the MDC, and in some cases their replacement by war veterans; death threats and cases of alleged assault and even murder of suspected MDC supporters among council staff, teachers, and traditional leaders; physical closure, occupation and in some cases destruction of council offices and property; removal of council vehicles; disruption of council meetings and routine operations; control over land distribution lists; and violent disruption of council elections. What becomes evident here is that when the disruptions first began, there was already a context, albeit spatially and historically varied, of popular dissatisfaction with some councils and ‘genuine grievances’ which war veterans could draw on to legitimise their actions.

Despite years of investment in RDC capacity building and capital development initiatives, the tide of post-amalgamation pressures on the RDCs had clearly been impossible to contain or counter. Policies and practices were adopted that seemed to exacerbate corruption and inefficiency in councils rather than curtail them, and this had already prompted interventions by the Ministry of Local Government that consistently undercut the spirit if not the word of the RDC Act. Yet even if there were serious problems in the RDCs that needed addressing, it appears that the combined and cumulative disruptions by war veterans, the central state and the ruling party have by no means resolved these. Instead, the overall effect of ‘the politics of disorder’ has been to exacerbate the councils’ problems. In the short term, experienced personnel have been forcibly removed and replaced with unqualified party loyalists, many routine council procedures have been interrupted, clinics and schools have been closed, revenues have been lost from unit taxes, forestry, tourism ventures and former donor-funded development projects, and there has been ongoing violence and a menacing atmosphere of fear.¹³¹

According to McGregor, the long-term consequences are ‘potentially devastating’:

¹³⁰ McGregor (2002).

¹³¹ See McGregor (2002). In addition, these reflections are based on personal observations and communications over the past five years, as well as the tracing of media reports.

Corruption and cynicism have become pervasive, professionalism has been undermined, local authorities have been forced to respond to an authoritarian centre and its local agents, and public confidence in the local state may be difficult to win back. The goal of decentralized, accountable local state bodies seems further away than ever.¹³²

There is no underestimating such effects. Nor can one underestimate the success of Zanu (PF) in its determined efforts to reconquer the sphere of local government in general and colonise Rural District Councils in particular, at least for the moment. But there are several factors that will necessarily temper these moves in the long run. To begin with, local government, like the state, is in a continuous process of formation through its multiple articulations with different actors, processes and politics. In this sense, one cannot view RDCs as ‘empty vessels’ devoid of their own agency, merely open to external invasion or manipulation. The same applies to traditional leaders. There is a far more complex ‘micropolitics of locality’ that makes such external interventions contingent, and constrains the pace, scope, and direction of local-level political change.¹³³ In fact the intensely and violently contested RDC elections in September 2002 were evidence of how seriously all political players take the question of control over local government.

Overlaying the politics of locality associated with the disruption of local government is a cultural politics of authority, here with reference to the specificity of war veterans as the prime agents of disruption. As demonstrated, war veterans have clearly acted as the vanguard of Zanu (PF) in its move to recapture the ‘edges of sovereignty’, but neither Zanu (PF) nor the veterans themselves are entirely in control of this project. While loyalist war veterans have actively supported the ruling party, those involved in local government disruptions seem to be less “willing clerks of the state-party”,¹³⁴ than unpredictable gatekeepers at the frontiers of government. They have their own agendas, both collectively through their identities as war veterans, and in terms of their own localised interests and power relations. Many war veterans, for example, became increasingly economically impoverished in the decades after independence, dispossessed of the ‘promised land’ they fought for during the liberation war, and often excluded from positions within the state that would facilitate accumulation. Those that had not risen up the ladder to ‘chefdom’ during the nationalist struggle were also politically marginalised, further exacerbating class differences between an expanded yet still minority political elite and the rank and file of war veterans.

These exclusions fuelled both the formation of the ZNLWVA towards the end of the 1980s, and the intensive push for compensation for their members that finally succeeded in 1997. The war veterans’ revived warrior status since 2000 has become a powerful political card for Mugabe to play in the context of his combined politics of land and anti-imperialism. However, the remarginalisation and redispossession of some war veterans in recent years, in particular those evicted from newly settled farms to make way for possession by party bosses, points to the unevenness and vulnerability of some of these accommodations.¹³⁵ Yet this precariousness could be as much a threat to the increasingly fragile party state as to war veterans themselves. As long as veterans are not fully integrated into, or controlled by, it,

¹³² McGregor (2002), p.37.

¹³³ Catherine Boone, ‘State Building in the African Countryside: Structure and Politics at the Grassroots’, *Journal of Development Studies*, 34:4 (1998), pp.1-31.

¹³⁴ David Scott, ‘Colonial Governmentality’, *Social Text*, 43 (1995), pp.191-220.

¹³⁵ Alexander (2003).

there is the potential danger of their constructing something of a ‘parallel state’,¹³⁶ especially through the medium of local government.

However, for now this is not likely. For a start, their revived political status and importance is derived quite pointedly from the present revalorisation of their heroism linked to the national liberation struggle. From experience, we know that such support can also be withdrawn. Besides this, war veterans must necessarily compete with traditional leaders and other local ‘big men’ (seldom women), whose authority emanates from a much wider spectrum of spheres of influence and control – cultural, religious, familial, economic, political. While this kind of authority may draw on translocal networks and alliances, it is often highly localised and lies ‘beyond the state’.¹³⁷ In addition, RDCs and their constituencies are engaged in constant processes of contestation and renegotiation over the terms of rule and practices of government that, even if severely constrained at present, are unlikely to disappear entirely. Those war veterans still occupying and ‘running’ RDCs will ultimately be faced with such challenges in trying to sustain their legitimacy as a local authority: the challenge of combining sovereignty and biopolitics; and of retaining authority and legitimacy while delivering services and security, democracy and development. Given these various contingencies and constraints, one needs to be somewhat circumspect about the assertion made by *The Daily News* that Zimbabwe has reverted to ‘government by war veterans’.

Reshaping Government, Remaking Citizens

What have been naturalised for many years as the formal and normal workings and institutions of local government in Zimbabwe – such as councils, schools, legislation, policies and procedures – can no longer be taken for granted. In recent years, new forms of irregular, unregulated, and ambiguous authority have emerged to disrupt not only the physical structures and routine practices of local government, but also the normative liberal notions of local government itself. The ongoing crisis and the (partial) production of disorder have undeniably altered the shape and texture of political space and the overall mode of rule. Within this context of chaotic, multi-layered transformation, the attacks on the local government system are contributing to the radical reconfiguration of who governs in which spaces, who is being governed, to what extent, and by what methods, all of which provide fertile ground for further investigation.

Reflecting in August 2002 on the challenges that lay ahead in the sphere of local government, the then newly appointed Permanent Secretary for Local Government, Public Works and National Housing, Vincent Hungwe – described as ‘one of the regime’s rising young stars’ – was quoted in the media as saying: “We may have to take this whole system back to zero before we can start it up again and make it work in a new way”. The report concluded by suggesting that many Zimbabweans “already have a taste of what he means by zero”.¹³⁸ Such cynicism may be well placed, nonetheless there are important questions to consider regarding what this ‘new way’ might incorporate. The Secretary’s implied (though unspecified) version of authentic, sovereign government, seemed intent on defining itself on the basis of quite different notions of normality than those associated with anything ‘colonial’ or even ‘Western’. This is consistent with Mugabe’s sustained discourse of anti-imperialism, radical redistribution and genuine African government. There is much to commend such a vision in

¹³⁶ Thom Keuhls, *Beyond Sovereign Territory. The Space of Ecopolitics*, Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

¹³⁷ Boone (1998).

¹³⁸ *The Sunday Times* (UK), 11 August 2002.

itself. Indeed it is hardly the intellectual property of one man, or even one political party.¹³⁹ But this is part of the trick and tragedy of the present political moment in Zimbabwe, namely that the narrative of historical injustice and the critical project of correcting it – through radical land reform and economic redistribution – have been both simplified and monopolised by Mugabe and Zanu (PF). In the process, the vision has become privatised and the only valid currency of exchange is membership of Zanu (PF). All other actors are violently excluded from the vision and its bounties, or from buying into them at all.

In fact, Zanu (PF)'s current vision of redistribution and authentic African government is radically partisan and partial, and rests on dramatically altered and narrowing boundaries of national citizenship and belonging. A senior Zanu (PF) official, Didymus Mutasa, revealed this in unapologetically stark terms. Responding to widespread accusations that the government was trying to starve to death close to half its population of over twelve million in the face of impending famine – and primarily those perceived as opposition supporters – he was quoted as saying: “We would be better off with only 6 [million] people, with *our own people* who support the liberation struggle”. Referring especially to farm workers, who are viewed by the ruling party as both foreign and disloyal to ‘the nation’, he nonchalantly quipped: “We don’t want all these extra people”.¹⁴⁰

The resonance of Mutasa’s infamously stated desire to discard surplus populations with historical precedents such as National Socialism in Nazi Germany and its implied translation into routinised governmental practices of exclusion and annihilation, is too obvious and ominous to ignore. The political space granted to Zanu (PF) politicians and supporters to voice such inflammatory views reflects an intensification of authoritarian nationalism in Zimbabwe.¹⁴¹ Nonetheless, Dean counsels us against a too-complacent distinction between authoritarian and liberal governmentality. Certainly one should expect and value the conditions of a mode of rule in which the state acts as the guarantor of democratic rights, security, justice, access to livelihoods, health and education, for all its citizens. Yet we are advised to consider the growing spread of “illiberal components of liberalism”, and hence to reflect on:

the dangers of not calling into question the self-understanding of liberalism as a limited government acting through a knowledge of the processes of life, yet, at the same time, safeguarding the rights of the political and juridical subject.¹⁴²

Furthermore, we need to remain attentive to both the historical precedents and future potential for violent exclusions and dispossession – whether inflected through race, class, gender, generation or ethnicity – associated with upholding core liberal principles, not least that of private property.

This cautionary note is not intended to underplay or legitimise acts of violence and torture, forced displacement and dispossession, and the wide range of other unconstitutional practices being perpetrated in Zimbabwe in the name of a renewed war of national liberation. Clearly, as Hansen and Stepputat assert, “one can and should criticise specific forms of governance, undesirable institutions, and oppressive state practices”. However, the result of such critiques should not be “visions of the absence of government or the state as such, but rather the

¹³⁹ Patrick Bond, ‘Radical Rhetoric and the Working Class During Zimbabwean Nationalism’s Dying Days’, in Brian Raftopoulos & Lloyd Sachikonye (eds) (2001), pp.25-52.

¹⁴⁰ *The Sunday Times* (UK), 11 August 2002, emphasis added.

¹⁴¹ Brian Raftopoulos, ‘The State in Crisis. Authoritarian Nationalism, Selective Citizenship and Distortions of Democracy’, in Hammar *et al.* (2003), pp.217-241.

¹⁴² Dean (2001), pp.60-61.

possibility of other, more humane and democratic forms of governance”,¹⁴³ or what poet Adrienne Rich envisions as “a democracy without exceptions”.¹⁴⁴

Conclusion

Unlike in many other countries in Africa in which the state has been ‘rolling back’ in past decades under the universalising pressures of liberalisation, the Zimbabwe state (or more accurately, party state) has been rolling *out*, especially in recent years, trying to extend as far as possible its territorial, political, economic and social reach and disciplinary effects. But rather than this being a response to the somewhat reversed liberal-technocratic push to ‘bring the state back in’ and to ‘build state capacity’ as part of revived attempts at implementing sustainable development – as might have been the case during the 1990s – in post-2000 Zimbabwe it has been about something else. This intensification and reformulation of the ‘state project’ has been driven by the symbiotic needs of party and state to reclaim sovereignty and sustain political hegemony (under the guise of nationalist revolution), combined with the accumulation projects of those privileged and protected by the current regime.

As such, the selectively reinvigorated party state has been working hard to narrow if not entirely close down alternative spaces of public authority (and public voice more generally) that potentially challenge its stranglehold over representation, resources, and redistribution. Yet paradoxically, because of its extensive loss of legitimacy during the 1990s even among its strongest constituencies in rural areas, the party-state conglomerate has been forced to rely on semi-autonomous authorities such as war veterans, traditional leaders and even Rural District Councils to try and re-establish its hold. To some extent these have provided the regime with a wider range of political, cultural and institutional resources to draw upon. However, as has been noted in this paper, there is nothing automatic, even or particularly stable in such alliances, especially under conditions of extreme crisis. Relationships between the party, state and various alternative public authorities are complex and constantly being reworked, posing serious challenges to any post-Mugabe government, be this MDC-led or under a reformed Zanu (PF).

In the meantime, broader questions persist about how to prevent Zimbabwe moving closer towards state failure or even collapse (in terms of Milliken and Krause’s continuum),¹⁴⁵ from currently being a state in the process of failing. Clearly, while not completely failed or collapsed, the Zimbabwe state continues to fail dismally to deliver to its (politically and economically differentiated) citizens either what is expected of a ‘modern state’ in liberal-democratic terms, or in terms of the revived promises of economic and social justice framed within a national liberation discourse. In thinking about strategies of reversal and recuperation, we may do well to take heed of Putzel’s warning of the dangers of “the failure to examine the political requirements for economic reform and the failure to consider the potential impact of reforms on the structure and practice of politics”.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Thomas Blom Hansen & Finn Stepputat, ‘Introduction: States of Imagination’, in Hansen & Stepputat (2001), pp.1-38.

¹⁴⁴ Adrienne Rich, *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*, New York & London: W.W. Norton and Co, 1993.

¹⁴⁵ Jennifer Milliken & Keith Krause, ‘State Failure, State Collapse, and State Reconstruction: Concepts, Lessons and Strategies’, *Development and Change*, 33:5 (2002), pp.753-774.

¹⁴⁶ Putzel (2004), p.11.

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