The Roots of Political Violence in Zimbabwe

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The Urban Roots of Democracy and Political Violence in Zimbabwe: Harare and Highfiled, 1940-1964

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Violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores self-respect', argued Frantz Fanon in his popular book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. That work became a handbook for revolutionaries. Likewise, Timothy Scarnecchia's *The Urban Roots of Democracy and Political Violence in Zimbabwe* is every scholar and activist's dictionary, giving meaning to various pages and vocabulary in the Zimbabwean book of violence. In other words, if you have always sought to find out the author of Zimbabwe's violence, you have the answer in the pages of Scarnechia's clear, concise and explosive exposé. Many of us have always argued that Zimbabwe's violent nature was scripted in the years leading to the struggle for independence. We did not always have the evidence or data to support these claims. Now, we have a well-researched study that takes the reader back to the early formations of democratic spaces in Zimbabwe and how those spaces were eventually closed to make way for violence, manipulation and elite formation by the state.

There are many works on Zimbabwe that touch on the subject of violence, such as Blair (2002), White (2003), Kriger (2003) and Moore (2005), among others. None of these, however, delves as deeply into the history of violence in Zimbabwe as does Scarnecchia, whose book has the dual elements of timeliness and timelessness. It is appropriate for the period under study, but it will also remain relevant even after the current consociational form of governance in Zimbabwe is past. It is an all-time reference book. Throughout all transitions in Zimbabwe, violence has remained its defining feature. Now there is a point at which it was scripted into the discourse and practice.

Two groups in the 1940s and 50s are critical for understanding the history of Zimbabwe and the contemporary forms of violence. The first group, led by Charles Mzingeli and others, represented township organisations and trade unions. These saw themselves as the true representatives of township residents. They challenged racial segregation and economic exploitation by the white rulers and by elite Africans. The second comprised of elites educated in mission schools. These founded the Southern Rhodesian Bantu Congress (SRBC). Because of their status, they defended their elite position, in particular their education and property. These were viewed as qualifications for voting and citizenship. Mzingeli's group therefore found itself fighting not just the white establishment on such legislative measures as the Urban Areas Act (1946) and the Subversive Activities Act (1950) but the Africans in SRBC.

These tensions and differences would continue to characterize relations between trade unions and the elite in contemporary Zimbabwe. In 1957, the demands 'shifted to nationalist notions of colonial rhetoric' of 'sellouts' and 'imperial stooges' (Scarnecchia 2008:14). This rhetoric would become a constant feature of the body politic in Zimbabwe. Mzingeli was also criticized for defending the achievements of the local organisations. Nationalists saw this as a stumbling block towards nationalism. However, through his status in the township, Mzingeli gained popularity among the elites in the early 1950s. Emerging as a mediator in the 1948 general strike, Mzingeli gained legitimate recognition for himself and his constituency from the government (Scarnecchia 2008: 70). This earned him the hatred of the SRBC.

I refer to three aspects of the book that help illustrate how violence took over democracy. The first is the formation of institutions and their subsequent transformations. Charles Mzingeli's Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICWU) was later transformed into the Reformed Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (RICWU). The Salisbury City Youth League was transformed into the Southern Rhodesian African National Congress (SRANC), then into the National Democratic Party (NDP), later becoming the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), before splitting into ZAPU and Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) Patriotic Fronts in 1963. George Nyandoro, who was

Mzingeli's student and RICWU's treasurer, was instrumental in developing the youth league's tactics. During the 1957 Advisory Council elections, Nyandoro used the language of 'sellouts' to attack Mzingeli and RICWU leaders. Here, the intransigent behaviour of Mzingeli and his attackers is illustrated and so began character assassinations. Mzingeli would be sidelined in 1956 by the new generation of leaders.

The second is the conflict between trade unions and the nationalist parties, particularly between Joshua Nkomo's ZAPU and Rueben Jamela's Southern Rhodesia Trade Union Congress. At Dr Parirenyatwa's funeral, ZAPU youths attacked Jamela and burnt his car. This pattern has not changed today. The use of youths to settle political differences thus goes back to Jamela and his Trade Union Congress youths often clashing with Nkomo's youths. Note also that Nkomo and Jamela were once leaders of the Southern Rhodesia Trade Union Congress, a formation that weakened the RICWU.

The third is the revelation that both ZAPU and ZANU were getting financial support from international sources, in particular from the US State Department while at the same time accusing Jamela and his trade union of being 'imperial stooges of the West' for getting support from the same sources, including AFL-CIO. It is in this period that the discourse of 'sellouts', 'puppets' and 'stooges' is concretised and becomes a major part of the mainstream discourse. It still dominates the political narrative and contestations today. The same language that was used by ZAPU PF leaders, including Robert Mugabe, against Jamela and others was used against Mugabe and others when they split from ZAPU PF. Nkomo and his colleagues, in particular James Chikerema, accused the US of masterminding the split. This kind of politics was in fact perfected whenever power was threatened. Today, Mugabe has become adept at this discourse: whenever his power is threatened, he is quick to brand the opposition as puppets of the West.

Again, the violence that was directed against Jamela and his trade union colleagues was redirected towards ZANU PF and its members. There was a feeling among Nkomo's group that ZAPU PF was the major inspiration behind the nationalist movement since the majority of them had been in the SCYL and in the Congress. Others like Mugabe were considered as having been 'collected from the wayside at a later stage' (Scarnecchia 2008:140). The violence by Nkomo's group was undertaken in the belief that it was better to 'destroy the snake inside (ZANU PF) before the one outside' (*ibid*.: 145). Hence two slogans were developed – one for ZAPU PF and the other for ZANU PF. If one did not recite the right one, one immediately got into trouble. One might well think that this was 2009, and not the 1960s.

Clearly, the tactics employed in contemporary Zimbabwe have their roots in this period. Even the closure of space such as the media has its roots in the 1960s. In 1964, for example, the *Daily News* was banned for having become the mouthpiece of the nationalists. Is it surprising then that in post-independence Zimbabwe, the *Daily News* was banned again in 2003 for having become the mouthpiece of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC)?

This book dispels the myth that violence in Zimbabwe is a recent phenomenon only associated with elections. In a historical-political analysis, Scarnecchia's research outlines the beginnings of a democratic tradition in the 1940s and 1950s, mainly in Mbare and Highfields, and how that democratic space was eventually closed by political violence. Although the narrative is set in the period 1940 to 1964, its findings are germane to the contemporary context. The expansion of the democratic space through Mzingeli's international links, for example with the Fabian Colonial Bureau (FCB), and his cosmopolitan connections mirror today's struggles of workers, civil society and other formations for democratic citizenry.

It is through an understanding of this historiography – the townships' social and political life and the creation of democratic political tradition and its falling prey to violence – that we can interpret the violence in Zimbabwe today. The value of this book lies in that it is a living dictionary unravelling the many facets and dimensions of violence through different phases of Zimbabwe's state formation. Although this historiography is primarily that of the urban and specifically township life, the violence that arose out in that context or the particularities of township life and the radicalism associated with the nationalism of the 1960s set the foundation for the current forms of violence and radical nationalism associated with the Third Chimurenga/Revolution centred on land reform. One can trace various forms of this violence from the 1960s through Gukurahundi in the mid 1980s to the current political stand-off between ZANU PF and MDC.

And just as violence was used as a political weapon to control township populations, it continues to be used today to discipline members of political parties and to punish opponents. Violence is also directed against activists advocating good governance and democracy. As Scarnecchia puts it, violence and rape became tools for nationalist defence. In *With the People* (1980), Maurice Nyagumbo outlines how violence was so used, apparently invoking Frantz Fanon's justification of violence as redemptive. Similarly, Nathan Shamuyarira (1965) seeks to justify the rape of women at the Carter House Women's hostel.

In this period, there is an emergence of a macho discourse that associates maleness with standing up against the state. This was clearly evident in editorials by Nyandoro. The patriarchal nature of the nationalist tradition coerced women into the political struggle but never offered them real visibility. The nationalist leaders instead conflated the nation with maleness. Violence against the state and other potential rivals was driven by such a reading of nationalism.

Physical threat was a feature of this discourse. This was very different however from the case of Mzingeli. Nationalists and the state adopted violence and used it against each other. For example, those identified as collaborators were petrol-bombed and as the state became more vicious, nationalists resorted to violence to maintain discipline. Violence was also used as a mobilization strategy.

A number of important conclusions emerge out of this book. The first relates to the changing nature of the public sphere – from the use of the press by journalists and public intellectuals and its closure by nationalists through violence and the 'rhetoric of sell outs' as well as the state's vicious response to nationalist demands for independence. It is in this context that the notions of sell out and character assassinations are developed. The preoccupation with closing spaces meant that open dialogue remained an elusive target. The second pertains to the shift from a democratic tradition to violence and the subsequent conflation of nationalism with maleness and/or violence. This has shaped the body politic of the current environment.

The third conclusion that one can draw is the international influence on national politics and the changing nature of US relations with political actors in Zimbabwe. This is very much linked to the rhetoric of stooges and sell outs. When one understands the roots of this rhetoric, it is not difficult to explain the intrusion of disciplinary politics for rivals and opponents. This represented a shift from the democratic tradition that had been set in place earlier on. Finally what Scarnecchia shows is that the struggle was more about who will lead rather than safeguarding the national interest. More research will be needed to complement this brilliant piece of work, particularly focusing on rural areas and other urban areas.

References

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