



Editors' Article Contribution:

Zimbabwe political manoeuvrings and authoritarian consolidation during the COVID-19 pandemic: Reflections on the year 2020

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Abstract

Zimbabwe, just like other countries, has not been spared by the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the number of confirmed positive cases was initially low, they increased radically, posing a serious threat to the citizens living in an already fragile economy and underfunded public health system. While focus has been mainly on the negative impact of COVID-19 on people's already precarious livelihoods, this article explores political developments in the country during the pandemic. It notes that political manoeuvrings by the main political actors escalated, and this was aided by lockdown and statutory conditions in place to minimise the spread of the virus. In the article, we argue that the ruling ZANU (PF) party used the pandemic as a cover to entrench its political power and control, while attempting to decimate the political opposition. We locate this behaviour in a historical context, showing that it is not new and has been a part of the country's post-independence political trajectory. The deployment of repressive security apparatus, the recall of opposition parliamentarians, the push for constitutional amendments, demolition of markets, threats and arrests of citizens, enforcement of travel restrictions and a curfew are some of the examples cited as representing increased repression against Zimbabwean citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: *authoritarianism, COVID-19, democracy, national lockdown, repression, Zimbabwe*

1. Introduction

In December 2019, a strange pneumonia of unknown cause was reported in Wuhan, China to the World Health Organisation (WHO). Later renamed the COVID-19 virus, it was discovered to be a new corona virus strain or SARS-COV-2 that affected humans resulting in death (Haddout et al 2020). In January 2020, COVID-19 was declared a Public Health Emergency of



International Concern due to its highly contagious nature and high morbidity and mortality rates. When COVID-19 first emerged, no one had ever envisaged that the pandemic would become one of the greatest threats to humanity and the global economy in modern history. The virus easily spread among humans and it was not long before it had spread globally. Despite China having made significant progress to contain the virus, in 2020, it hit hard on countries like the USA, Brazil, the United Kingdom, Italy, South Africa, Spain, Russia, France, Germany, Turkey and others. The context has somehow gradually changed due to the development of vaccines, yet a third wave has already hit some countries thereby making the pandemic an enduring global problem (WHO 2021).

The high number of those infected and needing intensive care, and others needing specialised care, and deaths saw advanced healthcare systems being overwhelmed and struggling to cope, especially during the peak phases. Countries had to put in place extraordinary measures to curtail the spread of the virus and these included national (and localised) lockdowns, border closures, restrictions on unnecessary movements and the operations of non-essential businesses. With western countries being ravaged by the disease, there were fears that Africa and other parts of the developing world would be vulnerable with health systems at risk of being overwhelmed (UNECA 2020). This was attributed to an ill-equipped and underfunded health care system and high levels of human contact and interaction especially in Africa's large informal sector. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the whole world has been in turmoil, as it has negatively impacted on national economies becoming more than just a public health crisis, but it has had socio-economic implications which are likely to increase poverty and inequalities at a global scale.

With COVID-19 ravaging countries and having unprecedented social and epidemiological ramifications that have exposed inequalities and vulnerabilities (see Adesina 2021, Chipenda and Tom 2021), there has been concern on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on Africa's democracy, peace and security. It is seen creating conditions that have threatened the continent's socio-economic and political architecture especially in the areas of peacebuilding, conflict and social cohesion. This is particularly important in a context where the declaration of state of emergency, lockdowns, curfews and the need for adherence to social distancing measures have necessitated heavy policing by security forces to ensure compliance. In this article, we posit that in Zimbabwe, the COVID-19 pandemic has not only posed a threat to public health and the economy but has seen political manoeuvrings by political players who have taken advantage of the lockdown situation to score political points, posing a serious threat to the country's already fragile democratic processes. In 2020, while most activities grounded to a halt due to COVID-19, political contestations in the country did not stop. We argue that the jostling for space and relevance by the main political players did not only threaten social cohesion and democracy, but it was an unfortunate development which occurred during a life-threatening pandemic. In a background where for the past two decades, the country has been politically polarised due to contestations between the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) and the opposition - the



Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), we use the figurational sociology concept to look at how contestations between the parties escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic. We provide critical insights and analysis of state-society relations to understand political manoeuvrings which occurred, and how these reflect a worrying trajectory towards authoritarianism.

This article comes in a background where in the past two years, the country has undergone a dramatic political transformation with the country's political strongman for almost four decades, the former late President, Robert Mugabe being deposed of in a 'soft coup' and being replaced by his former deputy Emmerson Mnangagwa (Chikowore and Davis 2017). With the country under a 'new administration', its political actions and responses to the opposition during the COVID-19 pandemic are of interest, and we explore these using a historical perspective as a foundation for understanding contemporary issues. The thrust of the paper is thus two-fold. Firstly, it explores political trajectories in post-colonial Zimbabwe using the concept of figurational sociology to show the emergence of authoritarianism and militarisation of the state. Secondly, it explores contemporary developments in Zimbabwe's political landscape during the COVID-19 pandemic, an area exhibiting a dearth of knowledge. In the next section, we briefly highlight the conceptual and methodological framing of the article. This is followed by a brief history of political contestation in Zimbabwe over the past two decades, COVID-19 pandemic responses by the government, political contestations during the pandemic and their implications.

2. Conceptual and methodological notes

How can one understand Zimbabwe's post-colonial political trajectories and contemporary state-society relations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic? To get insights, we used a process sociological approach that sought to understand Zimbabwe's post-independence political trajectories by way of figurational analysis. The concept of figurations was developed by Norbert Elias (1978) with the aim of overcoming the differentiation between structure and actors. It directs the analytical scrutiny towards the interdependencies that connect actors (Elias 1978, 1987). We considered the concept of figuration to be useful in understanding patterns of interaction and the network of interdependencies which are framed by individuals and groups in a society. For Elias (1987), figuration has to be understood as the constellations of actors with their relationships, processes of interaction, power asymmetries and their effects being of central concern. When it comes to politics in post-colonial Zimbabwe, we detect several layers of interdependent groups, their interactions and power asymmetries which have in different ways actively contributed to the country's political trajectory over the past decades. As shall be shown in this article, the individuals, political parties, civil society organisations, capital owners, competing groups within the political bureaucratic state apparatus, the military, legislature, judiciary and other actors have all contributed, acted and opined on Zimbabwe's political trajectory and state-building. We explore these dynamics in a context where from a figurational sociological perspective, individuals and groups compete



for power, status and capital (see Munch and Veit 2018). For the study, the concept was considered useful in providing an analytical frame. Methodologically, the paper is based on an interpretive research paradigm, and a heavy reliance on secondary literature.

The COVID-19 pandemic made research challenging as it was undertaken in 2020 with the researchers needing to observe social distancing rules and ensure strict COVID-19 control measures. Undertaking 'traditional research' especially 'face-to-face' data collection was not practical, and the researchers had to rely on secondary sources to compile the article. This entailed a heavy virtual presence and modification of data collection and analysis methods to ensure that data which were collected suited the study.

3. Zimbabwe's post-colonial political contestations: Understanding the historical context

What has been Zimbabwe's post-independence political trajectory, and has there been a steady entrenchment of authoritarianism and militarisation of the state? This was a pertinent question which confronted us as we grappled to better understand the contemporary Zimbabwean state. In this section, we extensively explore political dynamics in post-independence Zimbabwe. Since 1980, Zimbabwe has had a complicated and interesting political history. While the main focus of article is to look at political contestations during COVID-19, it is important to take note of some important political milestones in newly independent Zimbabwe which allow us to contextualise contemporary political developments. Zimbabwe was born out of a protracted liberation struggle. The liberation movements, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) pursued the liberation struggle. They purported to represent the interests of social groupings that included the peasants, women, youth, workers, students and religious organisations, and they pushed for a nationalist populist ideology (Sachikonye 1995). They promised to establish a people's state that represented the interests of different social groups hence, they waged the 'peoples struggle' (Nzongola-Ntajala 1987:75). As the nationalists waged the liberation war, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2003) notes that there emerged the Zimbabwean state ideology and dominant party-political rhetoric from hegemonic and authoritarian circumstances. This was cemented by the rise of Robert Mugabe who led independent Zimbabwe for almost four decades. Mugabe was a leader who could combine political and military attributes hence, the conflation of the operations of the nationalist movement and quasi military operations in his leadership. More importantly, in 1976, Mugabe was a leader who had a conviction that:

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 its security officer-its guarantor. The people's voice and people's guns are always inseparable twins (Zvomuya 2017).



It was this conviction that was to find expression in Zimbabwe for many years. The protracted war of liberation was settled at Lancaster House, but an estimated 80 000 Africans and 1000 whites had been killed, while 450 000 Africans suffered injuries of various intensities (Tshuma 2018). With independence, there was high expectation that the country would embark on a path where there was an expanded democratic space, the realisation of human rights, human security and the building of democratic institutions which would put people first (Alexander and McGregor 1996). Unfortunately, this was not the case as post-colonial Zimbabwe failed to break from its nationalist authoritarian past which became increasingly intolerant and brutal with militarism and violence becoming evident. Early signs, however, were promising. The Mugabe government embarked on a policy of reconciliation after a resounding victory in the 1980 elections, pledging to create a just, equitable, non-racist and violence free society (Saunders 2000). There was the amalgamation of the liberation armies and Rhodesian army to create the Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA), but there were challenges. An uneasy post-independence relationship existed between the nationalist movements despite there being a government of national unity. The relationship deteriorated following an alleged discovery of arms on ZAPU properties, which led to the party's expulsion from government as it was suspected that it intended to stage a coup. According to De Waal (1990) and Mhandara (2018), this culminated in civil war in the southern parts of the country in a period referred to as *Gukurahundi*. Civilian populations bore the brunt of the fight between the army and ZAPU aligned dissidents. Conservative estimates place the number of killings at 20 000 with atrocities like rape, torture, intimidation, sexual harassment and murder being undertaken by the ZNA's notorious North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade (CCJP 1997). Most of those who were killed were of the Ndebele ethnic group residing in the Midlands and Matabeleland Provinces. Up to today, national peace and reconciliation in the country remains elusive as the nation has still not found closure due to the *Gukurahundi* atrocities.

A Unity accord between ZANU (PF) and PF ZAPU was signed in December 1987, bringing an end to the conflict. This culminated in the formation of a government of national unity that saw an end to the *Gukurahundi* and the 'dissident problem' in the Midlands and Matabeleland provinces. However, the state had been divided. There was monolithic unity under Mugabe, which was an important legacy of nationalist authoritarianism and it saw the co-option of PF ZAPU under ZANU (PF) structures, and overnight, ZANU (PF) no longer faced any formidable opposition. For Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2003), it was a top-down authoritarian strategy that strengthened the regime and did not entrench a culture of democracy and peace. The country took a trajectory towards a 'one party state' (Saunders 2000). In its pursuit of political domination in the 1980s, some important aspects stand out as we look in retrospect. The Zimbabwean state was a product of violence and intolerance. This was due to a toxic combination of brutal settler intolerance and violence, as well as African nationalist authoritarianism and intolerance which were underpinned by populist ideology that was appealing to the populace's aspirations and interests (Bhebhe and Ranger 2003, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003).



Despite these early political challenges, it is important to note that the post-colonial government made impressive strides towards addressing inequalities which were a legacy of the brutal settler colonial regime. Investment in health education and social services went a long way in addressing inequalities and the impoverished majority benefitted. In the public services sector, there was a deliberate acceleration and advancement of Africans. The challenge, however for the new state according to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2003), was that the Zimbabwe society failed to demilitarise in line with the new political realities. This was considered essential so as to inculcate peace, democracy, the realisation of human rights and human security. It heralded the beginning of a period where the state was seen as being prepared to use the security forces and violence in particular, to crush dissent and opposition. Peace, democracy and human rights were soon to be replaced with fear, suspicion and insecurity as there was a realisation that atrocities committed in the country had the blessings of the ruling elite led by Mugabe and the then State Security Minister and now President, Emmerson Mnangagwa, and Enos Nkala, the then Home Affairs Minister (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003). Moyo (2020) has taken the argument further emphasising that in order to understand contemporary Zimbabwe's political landscape after the liberation war, there is need to understand that 'the military has never been in the barracks', and it has always been involved in politics. From a figurational perspective we need to keep in mind that the military has been a prominent 'behind the scenes' actor in the country's political trajectory.

From 1980, ZANU (PF) scored election victories in 1985, 1990 and 1996. During this period there were a number of actors who actively participated and shaped Zimbabwe's political trajectory. In the early 1990s, ZANU (PF) faced formidable opposition from the Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM) under the former ZANU (PF) senior member and former Cabinet Minister, Edgar Tekere. He was expelled from ZANU (PF) for being too vocal and critical of Mugabe's leadership and corruption. He was particularly against the country's trajectory towards a one-party state. He said '... a one-party state was never one of the founding principles of ZANU (PF) and experience in Africa has shown that it brought the evils of nepotism, corruption and inefficiency' (Tekere quoted by Samukange 2013). In the elections, Tekere managed to get 16.75% of the presidential vote while Mugabe won 83.05%. The 1996 elections were interesting as Mugabe faced his old enemies, in the form of former Zimbabwe-Rhodesia Prime Minister Abel Muzorewa of the United Parties and Ndabaningi Sithole of ZANU (Ndonga) whom Mugabe had replaced as ZANU leader during the liberation war. Sithole and Muzorewa withdrew from the election, but their names remained on the ballot box and Mugabe claimed a 90% victory, while Muzorewa got 4.80% and Sithole 2.44%. Sithole was later arrested and convicted of conspiring to assassinate Mugabe, and he died while on bail. From 1980 until the late 1990s, ZANU (PF) showed an obsession with retaining power at any cost, and it did this through reconfiguring and manipulating state institutions (particularly the security forces), constitutional amendments, and outright coercion and harassment of political opponents. Of note were arrests and detention of political leaders for



treason, violence as well as intimidation (Moyo 1992). This was in a context where the government was seen as being increasingly intolerant and authoritarian (Saunders 2000).

Emergence of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC)

It was only in the late 1990s that ZANU (PF) faced formidable political opposition with the emergence of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). The MDC was formed in 1999 as a coalition of the trade union movement led by the Zimbabwe Congress for Trade Unions (ZCTU), civil society organisations and a multiplicity of social actors who included the intellectuals, students and churches (Maroleng 2004). It was led by Morgan Tsvangirai and it arose due to disgruntlement by ZANU (PF)'s failure to address the country's socio-economic challenges. Interestingly, the labour movement had been an ally of ZANU (PF) but over the years, the relationship had deteriorated. Initially, the relationship had been paternalistic and interdependent as ZANU (PF) claimed to have the interest of workers at heart. It had ensured that there were minimum wages and the protection of workers (Alexander 2001). This relationship gradually broke down, as the ZCTU campaigned against corruption, and it successfully opposed the attempts by ZANU (PF) to create a one-party state in the 1990's (Raftopoulos 2000). Mugabe accused the trade union of being political and in later years, he refused to attend its functions.

The Zimbabwe government found itself under immense economic pressure after adopting the disastrous IMF and World Bank-sponsored Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in the 1990s, which stimulated a difficult and ever-deteriorating domestic socio-economic environment. Under ESAP, there was the abandonment of the welfarist policies and a restructuring of the country's economy, state and society. Neoliberal orthodoxy was pursued with emphasis on trade liberalisation, deregulation and public sector restructuring. It also saw budget cuts in the social sector, particularly in health and education (McCandless 2011). The adoption of ESAP negatively impacted on people's livelihoods. The emphasis on market principles saw prices of basic goods and services soaring amid increasing unemployment, inflation and poverty. It was in this context that the ZCTU emerged as a force against deteriorating conditions. For Alexander (2001), the enforcement of ESAP by ZANU (PF) showed that there was a synthesis between neo-liberalism and authoritarianism. State repression became more and more visible as the social and economic cost of abandoning welfare socialism of the 1980s began to take effect. It was therefore, not difficult for the MDC to be formed and present itself as an alternative to ZANU (PF). With the rise of the MDC, Chipato (2019) notes that there emerged a broad voice that spoke on behalf of Zimbabweans who were disillusioned by the failures of the country's once radical liberation movement that wanted socio-economic and political change. The MDC immediately had impact, and in 2000, it supported the National Constitutional Assembly to thwart attempts by the state to introduce a new constitution which sought to increase the powers of the president (Matombo and Sachikonye 2010). The rejection of the constitution marked the first defeat of ZANU (PF) in a national poll, resulting in a major reconfiguration of the country's political landscape, and



it announced the emergence of ‘new’ political actors. In the 2000s, the MDC participated in four elections, and it performed exceptionally well. Political pressure from the MDC saw the government hijacking a bottom-up initiative with peasants demanding socio-economic equity or more specifically equitable land redistribution. Overnight, there was support from the government for the cause to address the country’s ‘land question’. It managed to manipulate the land reform programme to its advantage with genuine demands for land being politicised as it sought to reassert its political dominance (Alexander 2003).

Despite being demonised as anti-land reform, a puppet party for western imperialists sponsored to reject genuine claims for land reform, the MDC continued to pose serious electoral challenges to ZANU (PF). In the 2002 Presidential elections, facing insurmountable challenges and irregularities, Tsvangirai the MDC presidential candidate won 42.10% of the vote against Mugabe’s 56.6% (EISA 2002). During this period, Zimbabwe’s political landscape changed. Makumbe (2009) argues that Zimbabwe was transformed into a ‘fascist state’ with the selective application of the rule of law. Repressive legislation like the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) of 2002, and Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) of 2002 were drafted and used against citizens. For Makumbe, this was reminiscent of the repressive colonial era legislation, and citing Ake (1981), he argued that the new political elite inherited repressive legislation which they were now using against the people they claimed to have liberated. In 2005, the MDC split after disagreements over whether to participate in the newly created Senate. In the 2005 elections which were criticised for not being free and fair, ZANU (PF) won 78 seats, giving it a two-thirds majority while the MDC won 41 seats. A rival faction led by Arthur Mutambara emerged with senior MDC officials and became known as MDC-M. The split severely weakened and fragmented the MDC and for Chipato (2019), it was a clear mark of a split between intellectuals, elites, civil society, and the trade union movement. This was at a time when the government was becoming more and more intolerant. In 2008, elections were held, and Tsvangirai narrowly beat Mugabe in the first round of elections, but he had insufficient votes to secure him the Presidency, forcing a second round of elections. The count down to the runoff was characterised by violence perpetrated by the security forces, war veterans and youths against the MDC-T. Tsvangirai withdrew from the elections arguing that they were compromised, and it was for the safety of his supporters. ZANU (PF) went on to win the election. Despite the victory, Zimbabwe faced an unprecedented economic and political crisis, forcing ZANU (PF) and the two MDC factions to enter into a government of national unity (GNU) under the presidency of Mugabe.

Lack of progress in key reforms during the GNU was to haunt the two MDC factions as they performed dismally in the 2013 harmonised elections that were won by ZANU (PF). During the GNU years, ZANU (PF) had rebuilt itself politically while there was disillusionment by the populace over the ability of the MDC to bring about change (Dorman 2016). During the GNU years, ZANU (PF) had built patronage networks, it created a parallel government and it used different strategies (including partisan land allocation and food distribution) to undermine the opposition (Kriger 2012). Following the elections, the MDC-T further split with



some of its leaders forming the MDC Renewal which further split with one of its leaders Tendai Biti, the former Finance Minister forming a new party called the People's Democratic Party, while Elton Mangoma, the former Energy Minister formed the Renewal Democrats of Zimbabwe (VoA 2015).

Reflections on post-colonial political trajectories (1980-2017)

The trajectory of Zimbabwean politics from 1980 has been extensively explored above with the aim of understanding the foundation of contemporary politics in the country, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Important highlights of the period are that from a figuration sociological perspective, the country has had different actors and interdependent groups who, in different ways, have contributed to the country's political trajectories. The post-colonial state was characterised by contestations of power, status and control. In ZANU (PF) Mugabe epitomised absolute power and control, demanding full loyalty and compliance from his comrades as he sidelined anyone whom he perceived to be a threat to his rule. Violence, intimidation, corruption, fear and mistrust were the hallmark of Mugabe's rule initially within the party, and later extended to the opposition as he pursued his vision of a one-party state. Politics in the country was ethnicised and during his rule, there was exclusion and marginalisation among the clans. Mugabe's insatiable desire to hold on to political power at all costs culminated in violence, and the undermining of constitutionalism, and was worsened by his vengeful and unforgiving character where he demanded total submission (Nkomo's ZAPU is an example). The balance and distribution of power was upset by the involvement of the oftentimes invasive security apparatus that was answerable only to Mugabe. On many occasions, they made it clear that they would not accept, support or salute '...political leaders (that did not) pursue Zimbabwean values, traditions and beliefs for thousands of lives lost in pursuit of Zimbabwe's hard-won independence' (former Zimbabwe Defence Forces Commander, the late General Zvinvashe quoted by Thornycroft and Butcher 2002). This implied non-acceptance of political leaders without liberation war credentials. It came in a context where some of the security chiefs, members of the legislature and government departments were either former liberation war fighters or unapologetically ZANU (PF) members. It was, therefore, not surprising that they favoured ZANU (PF) in the exercise of their duties, presenting an interesting conflation of interests from a figuration sociological perspective.

The 2017 coup came at a time where there was a need for urgent leadership renewal in both ZANU PF and the government. Mugabe, due to old age, had become a liability. While transition was needed, questions have arisen on the direction which the transition has taken with Mugabe being replaced by Mnangagwa, given the sense of entitlement by the ZANU (PF) political elite, and their resort to authoritarian tactics in the face of opposition. The question which then arises is the extent to which there are trajectories of change which favour Zimbabwe's political economy and its path towards democratisation. This section has been pivotal in laying an in-depth historical account of Zimbabwe's political trajectories, creating a



foundation on which contemporary Zimbabwean politics has been built. What is clear is that Mugabe left a legacy of violence, intolerance, intimidation, nepotism, patronage, rent-seeking behaviours and selective application of the rule of law and upholding of constitutionalism. It is upon this foundation that Mnangagwa's Second Republic is built, and given that the personnel of Mugabe's administration are the same personnel in the 'new' administration, can we then talk of real change? In the next section, we look at political trajectories in Zimbabwe during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. COVID-19, public health concerns and the lockdown and security nexus

Having looked at post-colonial political trajectories, we now turn our attention to the COVID-19 period, arguing that there has been the undermining of democratic processes and increased political intolerance. In Zimbabwe, the COVID-19 pandemic has had unprecedented socio-economic impact just like in other countries. At the time of the research for the paper, the country had reported 6 070 confirmed positive cases and 155 deaths (MoHCC 2020). However, these statistics have changed tremendously. For example, on 16 February 2021, cumulative cases were 35 315, while recoveries stood at 30 979 and 1 414 deaths. From March 2021, the trajectory of the statistics shows declining infection and death rates (MoHCC 2021). When WHO declared the COVID-19 a global pandemic, it necessitated the government to put in place measures to curb its spread. The government then declared COVID-19 a national disaster which was given legal effect through the Civil Protection (Declaration of State of Disaster: Rural and Urban Areas of Zimbabwe) (Covid 19) Notice 2020 Statutory Instrument 76 of 2020. This was despite the country not having recorded a single case at the time, but it was considered a precautionary measure. The country was then put into a national lockdown with restrictions being put in place on unnecessary local and international travel and public gatherings through the Public Health (COVID-19) Prevention, Containment and Treatment (National Lockdown) Amendment Order 2020 Statutory Instrument 77 of 2020 which also spelt out lockdown regulations. To show the seriousness of the government, in 2020, there was the cancellation of the country's 40th Independence celebrations set for the 18th of April 2020 and the Zimbabwe International Trade Fair scheduled for 21 to 25 April 2020. Funds for the events were to be redirected towards fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. Since April 2020, the government has put in place numerous statutory instruments aimed at managing the national lockdown as well as co-ordinating responses to the pandemic and regulations. Due to a spike in cases, an unprecedented move was made by the government to impose a 6pm to 6am curfew to limit human movement and cross infections; this was later reviewed and set from 8pm to 6am. The regulations have been amended several times, and they continue to be changed in line with situational factors and epidemiological advice. The regulations showed unprecedented legal initiatives aimed at dealing with the crisis posed by COVID-19. In as much as they are of public health concern, some of the regulations can be seen as having had negative implications on the political and everyday freedoms of citizens.



In order to ensure compliance to the regulations, the state deployed the police and the military. While it is the constitutional obligation of the police to ensure compliance with the law and to maintain order, the military was said to have been deployed to assist the police. Since the announcement of the national lockdown, the police and army have been visible in manning roadblocks and conducting patrols in residential areas to ensure public compliance with the lockdown measures (Tshili 2020). There was a justification by the country's Deputy Minister of Defence and War Veteran Affairs that this was not new as other countries that were dealing with the COVID-19 crisis and had national lockdowns in place had also deployed their security forces to assist the police in managing the situation and ensuring efficiency (Tshili 2020). Despite the government providing reasonable justification for the deployment of the security services to ensure lockdown compliance, there was concern by Zimbabwean citizens and civil society organisations that deploying the army would result in human rights abuses. Gukurume (2020) aptly sums up these concerns by pointing out that given the recent incidents of army brutality and police heavy-handedness against civilians, the deployment of the state security apparatus especially in the low-income spaces was a cause for concern. He notes that citizens were more afraid of the police and army than COVID-19 and deployment of the repressive state apparatus was seen as being an immediate threat to people's livelihoods. Gukurume's assertions have been valid as we noted that there were numerous reported incidents of state security brutality and heavy-handedness during the COVID-19 induced national lockdown.

During the research, it was reported that the police had arrested 105 000 people for violating lockdown regulations (BBC 2020). The offences which they had committed included failure to wear face masks, liquor-related offences, unnecessary movements, illegal gatherings and the opening of businesses without the requisite documentation. The number of violators, however, has continued to decline as people are getting used to wearing face masks, yet concerns are being raised over disregarding distancing as restrictions continue to be relaxed (see Herald Staff Reporter 26 March 2021). Condemnation of human rights abuses during the national lockdown in 2020 came from the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR), the Law Society of Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations, the Zimbabwe Hospital Doctors Association, ZimRights, Human Rights Watch, the European Union, the United States Embassy in Zimbabwe among others (Zenda 2020, Piri 2020). The Minister of Home Affairs and Cultural Heritage had however refuted allegations of human rights abuses, and earlier on had said that the police force was just undertaking their duties and ensuring that citizens complied with the COVID-19 measures as a strategy of protecting them from the virus. He also said he had instructed the Commissioner General of Police to ensure that security officers on deployment observed the tenets of basic human rights (Herald Reporter 2020a).



5. The informal sector and demolitions during the COVID-19 pandemic: History repeating itself?

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only posed a threat to public health but to people's livelihoods. With the national lockdown, there was a call for citizens to exercise social distancing measures and to diligently practise basic hygiene. For low-income earners, adhering to basic hygiene measures proved to be practically impossible given the squalid living conditions and inaccessibility of hand sanitisers and soaps (which for low-income earners are a luxury). This is in a context where some households could not even afford basic food and lacked access to clean water. Their precarious situation was worsened as the majority of them operated in the informal sector and have been prevented from working during the lockdown. Prospects are that their situation in the post-pandemic period is likely to worsen. This comes in a background where for the past two decades, Zimbabwe has experienced a hyper-inflationary environment and deepening poverty. The GNU brought temporary relief but when it ended, poverty and unemployment have continued and are worsening. As a survival strategy, a large number of Zimbabweans work in the informal sector and have over the years built illegal informal markets in urban areas where they operate from. During the first days of the national lockdown, urban councils, under a directive from central government and with assistance from the security forces, demolished thousands of illegal roadside market stalls and buildings (Taruvunga 2020). Some of the targeted areas included Mbare, Chishawasha, Epworth, Chitungwiza, Highfield, Glenview, Mabvuku, Dzivarasekwa, Hatcliffe and Kuwadzana. The demolitions mostly affected small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) and countless self-employed residents. Interestingly, in Harare, some of the structures which were demolished had been erected by informal traders who had been evicted from the Central Business District (CBD) in 2018, and had not been provided with alternative trading places. The demolitions were reminiscent of Operation *Murambatsvina* (Restore Order) of 2005 where the government ordered urban councils to demolish illegal structures. The Operation resulted in an estimated 700 000 families losing their homes and livelihoods and affecting a fifth of the population (International Crisis Group 2005). In the COVID-19 demolitions, the security forces were active just as they had been during the highly politicised Operation *Murambatsvina*. For many, the actions were indicative that not much has changed as the very same heavy-handed tactics and lack of empathy for citizens in already precarious situations was being repeated by the state which claimed to be charting a new governance trajectory.

In Harare, the logic of the demolitions was that the actions were necessitated by the need for the council to clean up the city and remove illegal structures while curbing illegal activities. The informal sector was considered to be a potential hotspot for COVID-19 hence of epidemiological and public health concern. This necessitated the closure and demolition of markets. The City Council was said to be looking for alternative areas where the displaced traders would be accommodated. These sites would have the requisite amenities (Kadirire



2020). The actions of the local authorities and government was condemned by vending associations and civil society organisations who noted that the demolishing of structures without providing alternatives was a threat to livelihoods made more precarious by the COVID-19 pandemic. It was seen as a flagrant violation of human rights, was unconstitutional, regressive, and was undoing years of work aimed at ensuring self-reliance and the engagement of citizens in gainful economic endeavours (Vendors Initiative for Social and Economic Transformation quoted by Kadirire 2020). For the Harare Residents Trust, the demolitions were not only illegal but arbitrary, having been undertaken in a process that lacked transparency, without a court order and destroying the livelihoods of thousands of people in the process (Kairiza 2020). For Veritas (a Zimbabwean legal organisation), it was illogical for the demolitions to be undertaken at a time when focus was on combating COVID-19. If demolitions were to be undertaken, it said that the owners had to be informed and given notice to remove their goods. For them, the demolitions were unconstitutional and had decimated people's livelihoods (Kairiza 2020). It only took court action by the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights representing informal traders for demolitions to stop. The High Court ruled that the demolitions were unlawful and not procedural (Kairiza 2020). Given the above, only one conclusion can be drawn that the 'new' dispensation has not learnt much from the Mugabe administration, and the demolition of structures during a global crisis was badly timed.

6. Political developments during the COVID-19 pandemic

While the COVID-19 pandemic has radically altered all facets of life for Zimbabweans, the same can be said of the country's political landscape which in 2020, had seen some interesting developments. On 31 March 2020, the Supreme Court of Zimbabwe made a ruling that is significantly altering Zimbabwe's political landscape. Interestingly, it was made during the COVID-19 pandemic raising questions on its timing. The ruling pertained to the long-standing dispute on the MDC-T leadership in which Tsvangirai had, in 2016, appointed two deputy Presidents in a move that was seen as unconstitutional. Earlier in May 2019, the High Court had passed a judgement on the matter when an MDC-T member had challenged the legality of the ascendancy of the vice presidents. The High Court ruled that the appointments were illegitimate and so was everything else that had been done thereafter. It ordered that the party had to revert to the structures that existed before the unconstitutional appointments (Magaisa 2020b, 2020c). The MDC-A had appealed the judgement at the Supreme Court, and it was this appeal which was dismissed during the lockdown period. Although the MDC-A argued that the disgruntled member had not exhausted all remedies in the party to have their grievances heard, the Judge had noted that Nelson Chamisa and his faction were in control of party structures and any attempt to seek redress would be futile. The court upheld Thokozani Khupe's legal rights as the Acting President of the MDC-T (as it existed before the illegal appointments), effectively handing her political power and legal recognition. She was then charged with the responsibility of holding of an Extraordinary Elective Congress within three



months. In doing so it also acknowledged that since 2016, a lot had changed, whilst Chamisa had political control over the MDC-A, by law those who had contested in the 2018 elections technically belonged to the MDC-T (Magaisa 2020b, 2020c).

The Supreme Court decision has split the MDC-A as there was witnessed an escalation of infighting after it was announced. Immediately after the ruling, Douglas Mwonozora and Morgen Komichi who had been senior party members and Senators under the MDC-A immediately announced that they were reverting to the MDC-T and taking up the positions of National Chairperson and Secretary General which they held prior to 'the 2016 illegalities.' They had gone on to argue that the MDC-A was not a party, but an electoral pact and members had to revert to their respective parties after the elections. The MDC-A had responded by expelling them (Kanambura and Chingono 2020). Armed with the Supreme Court judgement and supported by some MDC-T leaders (including the defectors), Khupe had assumed the Interim Presidency of the party. By 3 July 2020, she had used the powers vested in her in terms of Section 129 (k) of the Constitution to recall 21 Parliamentarians and 10 councillors of the Harare City Council including the Mayor who were said to be no longer representing the interests of the party (Municipal Correspondent 2020a, 2020b). Chamisa, in his position of Secretary of Policy and Research (as per the 2016 structures) was said to have had terminated his membership by breaching the party constitution as he had made unsanctioned appointments and redeployments (Staff Reporter 2020a). The expulsions of MPs, Senators and Councillors were done with the Speakers of Parliament and Senate and the Ministry of Local Government being served with letters of recall, and they had acted upon them. They recognised Khupe as the legitimate leader of the MDC-T and indicated that they would inform the President on the existence of the vacancies in terms of Section 39 (1) Chapter 2:13 as amended, which would later pave way for the holding of by-elections (Herald Reporter 2020a). At the time of writing, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) had published a notice on the existence of 15 vacancies mainly of proportional representatives in both Houses of Assembly to replace recalled members (Herald Reporter 2020b). It had justified these actions, with its Chief Elections Officer saying that it was legally obligated to announce the existing vacancies and it was not the arbiter of who may or may not recall Members of Parliament, but it merely facilitated legal processes to fill resultant vacancies after recalls (Staff Reporter 2020b). The Khupe led MDC-T had not wasted time. It submitted a list of proportional party representatives to replace the recalled members, with Khupe ironically being on top of the list. ZEC had on 21 August, gazetted the list of names of people nominated to fill the vacant seats in terms of section 39 (6) of the Electoral Act, Chapter 2:13 (Murwira 2020). This action has led to serious moral, legal and political questions but what has been clear is that one faction of the MDC seized an upper hand and during the COVID-19 pandemic, with some of its members entering Parliament 'through the back door.'

While it was reeling from the recall of its members from Parliament and Council, the MDC-A suffered another major setback when its headquarters was seized by the MDC-T. The MDC-A accused the MDC-T and the security forces of seizing the MDC-A headquarters. The



MDC-A spokeswoman issued a statement saying that ‘...at approximately 10 pm on June 4 2020, a truckload of armed soldiers and police officers assisted by 20 youths had forcibly gained entry into MDC-A Headquarters Harvest House and had assaulted security personnel, and the building had been taken over’ (Matenga 2020). The MDC-A vice presidents were later arrested after trying to gain entry into the building. Since then, the iconic MDC Headquarters (Harvest House, later renamed Morgan Tsvangirai House) which for many ‘...carries the multiple narratives of the party, from its birth in 1999... (and is) ... a symbol of resistance to repression and an undying desire for change’ (Magaisa 2020d), has been occupied by the MDC-T. The MDC-T refuted accusations of hostile takeover and argued that it had been a smooth and peaceful handover and takeover (Matenga and Mhlanga 2020).

There have been some responses to the political assault against the MDC-A from various quarters, especially the recall of MPs and the hostile takeover of its headquarters with the assistance of the state security apparatus. Magaisa (2020c) viewed the recalling as a weapon by the political elite which was being used to settle political scores. There was seen to be the misuse of power granted to parties to settle political differences in a situation where those elected are placed there by the people but recalled by the political elite, thus, there was clear misuse of power. There was also concerted effort by the ZANU (PF) Speaker of Parliament and Senate President, to use the Supreme Court judgement to allow for an absurd situation where a person who was rejected in the 2018 elections and fielded candidates against those who won, now had newfound power to recall them. The MDC-A complained that the recalls were an onslaught against its members chosen by the people, and it was a continuation of electoral theft that had begun in 2018 with multi-party democracy coming under siege (Mahere 2020). ZANU (PF) was accused of meddling in the MDC factional fights and it was seeking to annihilate it. The MDC-A Secretary General said that the onslaught was at three levels. Firstly, through the co-option of fellow comrades to join Khupe, perceived to be a ZANU (PF) sympathiser. The second strategy was seen as being through ‘bogus’ court rulings aimed at internally destabilising the party and weakening its parliamentary representation. The third strategy was said to be a smear campaign against the leadership of the party, aimed at painting them illegitimate and corrupt, and there was concerted effort against the party’s president, with state resources being used (Kanambura and Chingono 2020).

The attack against the MDC-A had not gone unnoticed, with the European Union and the United States Embassy pointing out that the politicisation of the security forces to conduct hostile takeovers of the headquarters of the opposition, the lack of respect for the rule of law and constitutionalism, the partisan deployment of security forces, the disrespect of property rights and the lack of proper investigation into human rights abuses was unhealthy and regressive for democracy (Kanambura and Chingono 2020). In response to these accusations, ZANU (PF) had said that it had no hand in the warring factions. Its acting spokesman, Patrick Chinamasa, said that they had to blame its late leader Tsvangirai for creating the leadership crisis. He said it was important for the opposition to learn that there was the rule of law to be



adhered to. If anyone felt aggrieved, they were free to approach the courts and they had done so and ‘...ZANU (PF) was not there when they went to court, ZANU (PF) was not there when Tsvangirai tore up the constitution’ (Chinamasa quoted by Matenga and Mhlanga 2020). The reinstated MDC-T Secretary General had pointed out that ZANU (PF) was not involved in the party issues in which they were striving to build tolerance and democratic practices within the party. It was thus, imperative that the court judgement had to be followed, otherwise it would give the impression that that the party was an anarchic and lawless outfit that was failing to follow its own party constitution (Matenga and Mhlanga 2020).

What remains clear from these political developments was that ZANU (PF) used the COVID-19 pandemic to decimate the MDC-A politically. With the judiciary, military and legislature compromised, the MDC-A lost significant political ground. We are of the opinion that the recall of parliamentarians was an assault on the oversight role of the legislature during the COVID-19 pandemic. We posit that the alarmingly high number of Statutory Instruments and Executive Orders issued, made the Executive to exercise unlimited powers in 2020 without parliamentary oversight. A weakened parliamentary opposition saw the Executive exploiting constitutional loopholes and exercising legislative functions which should be a preserve of the parliament, undermining constitutionalism, democracy, good governance, the rule of law and the principle of the separation of powers. Policy making, debate and good governance became paralysed, and so did state accountability which was very important during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately it left citizens without representation and a voice in matters concerning their livelihoods. The position of the MDC-A in parliament was thus, weakened. The vacant parliamentary seats are likely to be contested in by-elections post COVID-19 and there is no guarantee that MDC-A will retain the seats. In addition, there is a likelihood that the party will split further with some MPs choosing to abandon the MDC-A to join the MDC-T in order continue to enjoy parliamentary benefits. This is in a context where the Clerk of Parliament in 2020 wrote to recalled members asking them to pay for vehicles allocated to them by Parliament in its vehicle loan scheme or face legal action (Herald Reporter 2020c). It was also in a context where ZANU (PF) embarked on a conciliatory path, readmitting seven members who included former ministers under Mugabe who had been expelled at the height of factional fighting in the party (Pindula News 2020). In 2021, ZANU (PF) continues to co-opt even senior officials from the MDCs, as it gains political mileage.

Political repression and alleged abductions

On 3 May 2020, the MDC-A reported that three of its members including a Member of Parliament (hereafter referred to as the ‘MDC-A trio’) had gone missing after allegedly being arrested by the police. They were accused of having participated in an illegal demonstration in which they had demanded government accountability in handling the COVID-19 pandemic. It was alleged that they had been abducted by security forces from police custody and had been tortured, sexually assaulted and later dumped in Bindura (Nkomo and Vinga 2020). The



case had attracted widespread attention locally and internationally, with similarities being drawn with related cases of harassment, torture and abduction that had occurred during the Mugabe era. What was worrying was that there were a number of similar cases reported in the Second Republic, with UN Special Rapporteurs (see OHCR 2020) noting that in 2019 alone, 49 cases of abduction and torture had been reported without any investigation or accountability of the perpetrators. The case had taken a new twist when the MDC-A trio were arrested and accused of falsifying their abduction. Government Ministers who included the Minister of Home Affairs and the Deputy Information Minister (who was later sacked after making inappropriate comments on social media), accused the MDC-A trio of fabricating the abduction so as to discredit the government (Harding 2020). For them, the issue of importance was that the trio had broken the law by participating in an illegal demonstration during the COVID-19 lockdown. Before they had fully recovered, they were arrested and denied bail several times as they were considered a flight risk, but later were granted bail but with strict conditions. However, in 2021, the trio still has pending cases in the courts.

Amnesty International responded to the abduction and arrest of the trio by condemning it and saying that it shows the escalation of the crackdown by the Zimbabwean state on the right to freedom of expression and criminalisation of dissent in the country (Harding 2020). The abduction has been taken to show that Zimbabwe's political landscape has not changed under the new dispensation. 'Abductions, brutality, torture and disappearances (continue to be) one of ZANU (PF)'s key modus operandi in dealing with critics and political nemesis (Gukurume 2020). The UN Special Rapporteurs had noted that there was now a disturbing pattern of forced disappearances aimed at suppressing protest (OHCR 2020). Such tactics are not new and we note that they were common during the Mugabe presidency where arbitrary arrests and detentions, heavy-handed policing, disregard of court rulings and enactment of repressive laws were common.

7. The push towards constitutional amendments during COVID-19

The public hearings on constitutional amendments set for 15 to 19 June 2020 are a deliberate move by the government to side-line the majority of the people from meaningfully contributing to the Bill. The government is fully aware that the movement of people is restricted ...The ZCTU is questioning the sincerity of the government in going ahead with the hearings amidst the deadly COVID-19 pandemic. We are fearful that some issues will be smuggled into the public hearings. The Constitution is an important document whose amendments must not be hurried (Japhet Moyo, ZCTU President 2020).

The quotation above, issued by the ZCTU President in response to the moves by the government to conduct public hearings on Constitutional Amendment (No 2 Bill) published in the Government Gazette on 31 December 2019, highlights concerns raised in some quarters of Zimbabwean society towards moves to undertake public hearings on constitutional amendments during the COVID-19 pandemic. The feeling was that the Constitutional amendments are premature considering that the Constitution was only adopted in March



2013, with an overwhelming 95% of votes in a referendum. In such a background, it was felt important that the people who voted for the adoption of the Constitution be afforded an opportunity to participate in any moves towards amending it. The move by the government came at a time where citizens and stakeholder participation was not guaranteed due to COVID-19 restrictions (these allowed for a gathering of not more than 50 people, at the time of writing). Most people were of the opinion that having the amendments during a life-threatening pandemic was an attempt to consolidate the power of ZANU (PF), while entrenching authoritarianism. This was reflected in the proposed 28 amendments to the constitution. Interestingly 20 of these were election related. When we reflect on the proposed constitutional amendments in 2020, it is clear to us that they represented negative implications on democracy and had an ulterior motive of authoritarian entrenchment. Some of the amendments were aimed at extending the powers of the President, allowing him to appoint the judiciary without public interviews and removal of the running mate clause among other progressive clauses which had been included and publicly accepted in the negotiated 2013 Constitution. Suspicion on the ulterior motive of the public hearings was that they were being pushed at a time when the opposition was fighting internally and, in the courts, with their numbers severely decimated in Parliament with the recall of its members, thus, there was no effective oversight role over the public hearings.

As indicated earlier, the proposed constitutional amendments have drawn a lot of criticism and condemnation. The timing of public hearings during the COVID-19 pandemic was questionable. As the government adamantly pushed on the public hearings, there were protests from different social actors and groups who include civil society organisations and in particular, two female activists. They openly stated that they were against the amendments and the timing of the public hearings which posed a serious public health threat. The government responded by arresting the activists as they tried to hand over a petition to the Minister of Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs. They were charged with participating in an illegal gathering with the intent of promoting public violence (Machak 2020). At the time of writing the article, they were awaiting trial but their cause had received a lot of attention and sympathy locally and internationally. For most people, the arrests were seen as a continuation of the suppression of the constitutional rights of citizens as they were prohibited from engaging in peaceful protests. We note that the bigger picture in this instance is that using the COVID-19 situation, the government had forged ahead with moves to amend the supreme law of the land to reconfigure the constitutional architecture so that more powers are vested in the Executive as the 'one centre of power' concept which started under Mugabe has continued, something which the 2013 constitution had reversed.



8. Coup rumours and growing unease during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 induced lockdown has seen interesting developments in the country's security sector. In June 2020, the Zimbabwe government, in an unprecedented move, saw the Home Affairs Minister flanked by the Minister of State Security and Defence as well as Security Chiefs holding a press conference expressing '...grave concern (on) a recent upsurge in rumours suggesting an imminent military coup d'état in the country' (Minister Kazembe quoted by Agere 2020). The Minister had gone on to say that it was all aimed at undermining the legitimacy of the President and to make the country ungovernable. The Working Committee of the National Security Council wanted to '...unequivocally debunk and dismiss the rumours' (Matenga 2020b). Former senior ZANU (PF) officials who had '...fallen by the wayside in 2017' and were in self-imposed exile, opposition leaders, civil society organisations under the control of some diplomatic missions accredited to Zimbabwe, print and electronic media houses and thousands of internet trolls' were accused of peddling the falsehoods and the narrative of a transitional authority and were warned that the law would 'catch up with them' (Matenga 2020b). The holding of a press conference on rumours by the country's securocrats was quite interesting, highlighting fears within the government of another coup. It was also important in showing the unease and mistrust that is currently prevailing in government, and fears that there is a plot to unseat the government. Whether the fears are valid or not, the holding of the press conference during the COVID-19 pandemic was important in highlighting the increasing uneasiness within the country's political establishment.

The increasing political uneasiness has become more manifest in the face of recent political developments in Zimbabwe. A call for Zimbabweans to participate in a mass action on 31 July 2020 to protest against unbridled corruption by the ZANU (PF) political elite and the deteriorating economic conditions in the country had resulted in stricter policing. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, activists had pressed ahead for mass action to be undertaken. The call for mass action was made by Transform Zimbabwe President Jacob Ngarivhume, who was joined by other activists. Ngarivhume at that time said:

31 July is a day for your voices to be heard. Zimbabwe has been plundered by selfish, self-serving politicians who do not care how many lives they destroy...Our brothers and sisters in the police and army have been weaponised against us for too long now. We must challenge them now to consider the facts and see that those in power have committed serious crimes against Zimbabwe...31 July is not a political agenda but a people agenda (The Zimbabwean 2020).

In response to the threats of mass action, Ngarivhume and a journalist Hopewell Chin'ono (who had played a sterling job in exposing corruption by the political elite and the Mnangagwa family and its associates) were arrested. The two were accused of conspiring to mobilise anti-



Government protests. At the time of writing, they were out on bail having been previously remanded in custody and denied bail numerous times and committed to the notorious Chikurubi Maximum Prison (Court Reporter 2020). In a bizarre twist, a magistrate had barred his lawyer Beatrice Mtetwa from representing him and recommended that she be charged for contempt of court in relation to some comments posted on social media (Frontline Defenders 2020). In response to perceived threats to its rule, ZANU (PF) responded from the highest levels. At the 341st and 342nd Ordinary Sessions of the ZANU (PF) Politburo, President Mnangagwa and the party's acting spokesman Chinamasa had warned political activists, the opposition and civil society organisations supported by foreign embassies of fanning anti-government sentiments especially on social media. Addressing the Politburo Mnangagwa had warned civil society organisations against deviating from their mandates and working with foreign embassies to support the opposition. Additionally, labour unions were warned for hiding behind workers' movements to push their political agendas. He indicated that civil society organisations risked being deregistered for deviating from their core activities while foreign embassies were reminded that the country was a sovereign state, and that they were not supposed to meddle in its internal affairs or fund destabilisation activities (Chief Reporter 2020). Despite not being the proponent of the mass action and only indicating that the MDC-A would support any mass action, Nelson Chamisa and the MDC-A had been mentioned and warned against mobilising anti-government demonstrators. In the same breath, the social media was accused of providing a platform to organise violence. In typical ZANU (PF) style, Chinamasa had issued a warning against the opposition and 'social media anarchists' that:

We have noted statements from some social media platforms to plan and organise violet protests and overthrow a constitutionally elected government...Let me say to Chamisa and those who are calling for demonstrations on July 31 that what happened on August 1, 2018, and January 2019 will not happen again. We want to send this warning loud and clear to Chamisa that whatever you are threatening on July 31, we say come to the front and face the risk (Chief Reporter 2020)

At another press conference, ZANU (PF), through Chinamasa, had once again warned the US Ambassador whom he uncharacteristically called a 'thug' against engaging in acts of insurgency and warned that he risked expulsion from the country. He had gone on to tell ZANU (PF) supporters and structures to:

...remain alert and ready to defend themselves, defend our people, their property and most importantly, defend peace in their communities against these malcontents, hired hooligans and hoodlums who rejoice at burning properties and looting...ZANU (PF) unambiguously reminds our people that self-defence is a right especially when your security is under threat from these so-called violent protesters (Political Editor 2020, ZANU PF Patriots 2020).

This statement was interpreted by many as encouraging violence. As has been the usual rhetoric, the MDC-A and its 'surrogate organisations' were accused of working with western



embassies to hold illegal and violent demonstrations on July 31 which were disguised as protests against corruption (Chief Reporter 2020). The aim of the demonstration was interpreted as a subversive plot to overthrow a democratically elected Government. This was despite no evidence supporting this claim (Tshuma 2020).

At the 342nd Politburo meeting, President Mnangagwa had once again warned against those planning demonstrations. He had labelled them terrorist organisations who masqueraded as opposition parties and activists and had foreign financiers. They were seen as a threat to democracy, constitutionalism, the rule of law, independence and nationhood, and the state was ready to defend the country's independence (Madzimore and Maphosa 2020). Interestingly, addressing a press conference after the 342nd Ordinary Session of the Politburo, Chinamasa had said that the Politburo had deliberated on a security report which had indicated that there were internal forces that were fomenting discord in the party, and were working with senior officials. He also said some '...individuals were burning the midnight candle, wishing to propagate disunity between President Mnangagwa and Vice President Constantino Chiwenga, at the same time trying to psyche our unsuspecting people into thinking that the party was divided' (Herald Reporter 2020c). The accusations of factionalism are not new and the fact that they were openly discussed during a Politburo meeting showed high levels of mistrust in the party. The situation had reached a climax when two senior ZANU (PF) members were expelled from the party for fanning factionalism, withholding information and supporting the July 31st demonstrations (ZBC Reporter 2020), marking an escalation of infighting within ZANU (PF).

Despite the government denying any governance crisis in the country during the COVID-19 pandemic, in an unprecedented move, the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference (ZCBC) released a pastoral letter in which it bemoaned the multi-layered crisis in the country citing economic collapse, deepening poverty, food insecurity, corruption and human rights abuses as serious challenges facing the people and had plunged the country into a crisis. It was critical of the governments heavy-handed response to criticism, its failure to take responsibility for its failures, a shrinking democratic space, poor handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the welfare of health workers amid scandalous COVID-19 corruption allegations. It had made some recommendations on a comprehensive national settlement framework which would help the country to move out of the crisis, but it strongly felt that:

It is not clear to us your Bishops that the national leadership we have has the knowledge, social skills, emotional stability and social orientation to handle the issues that we face as a nation. All we hear from them is blame of our woes on foreigners, colonialism, white settlers and the so-called internal detractors. When are we going to take responsibility for our own affairs? When are we going to submit to the requirements of national accountability? (ZCBC 2020).



The government, as expected, was not pleased with the pastoral letter with responses to it being issued by the Information Minister, the Permanent Secretary in the Information Ministry and the Justice Minister. In the first response issued by the Information Minister, the government had tribally attacked the head of the ZCBC and accused the Bishops of being genocidal. The pastoral letter was said to be full of generalised accusations, reckless and was a crusade against the ruling party intended to incite the public against the government (Bwititi 2020). The other response by the Justice Minister, although toned down, described the pastoral letter for being deliberately provocative, divisive, and insulting the President. The government had decided to summon the Apostolic Anuncio (the Diplomatic Representative of the Vatican to Zimbabwe) in order to ascertain whether or not such statements reflected the official attitude of the Vatican towards Zimbabwe's leadership, or it was of personal view of the individual Bishops (Mavhunga 2020, Chibamu 2020). The spat between the government and the ZCBC was unprecedented in contemporary times, and we believe it goes a long way in showing the deterioration of conditions and relations in the country.

9. Reflections and Conclusion

From the discussion above, what is clear is that in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, political manoeuvrings in the country have not stopped. If we locate these manoeuvrings in a historical context, what remains clear is that the contestations between ZANU (PF) and MDC are far from over, and not much has changed in ZANU (PF) despite the leadership change. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity for ZANU (PF) to consolidate its political stronghold over key institutions while dismantling the MDC by taking advantage of factional fighting within the party and supporting the ambitions of some of its members. An important takeaway from the article is that from a figurational sociological perspective, COVID-19 has exposed how the country's political landscape is dominated by individuals and organisations who exist in interdependent relationships and are prepared to use any opportunity to gain political capital. The COVID-19 pandemic saw heightened political manoeuvrings, and that political actors used every available opportunity to gain political mileage. In the article, what is clear is that ZANU (PF) has been strategic in using the COVID-19 pandemic to further decimate the already divided opposition. While there is no tangible evidence of it intervening in opposition factional fights, the fact that the ZANU (PF) government allowed processes which weakened the MDC-A to occur when the whole country was under lockdown or restrictions point to its covert support of happenings in the party. The move by the government to push forward constitutional amendments during the pandemic where there was limited public participation and limited representation and lobbying by the opposition in communities and Parliament blatantly point to its moves towards consolidation of power. What was alarming was that the proposed amendments had sought to increase the powers



of the President, in blatant disregard of opposition voices. This is a strong sign of a trajectory towards entrenched authoritarianism in the country.

The COVID-19 pandemic limited citizen participation, making moves towards authoritarianism easier for ZANU (PF). For Zimbabwe, the COVID-19 pandemic period will be remembered as a time where there have been moves towards undermining democratic processes, increased securitisation, obsessive control and blatant state repression of freedoms as outlined in the country's constitution. The lockdown measures increased the powers of the Executive to use force and curtail freedoms, but interestingly, they demonstrated that the state was increasingly becoming paranoid, fearful of a possible coup and wary of a possible uprising. Consequently, in 2020 there was increased surveillance and control. The challenges facing citizens were not restricted to freedoms, but the pandemic and the resultant lockdown negatively impacted on livelihoods. For those in the informal sector, restrictions to trade and the demolition of their places of businesses negatively impacted on their welfare and wellbeing. The crisis in the country as rightly pointed out by the Catholic Bishops Pastoral Letter which has received support locally, regionally and internationally; but the Zimbabwe government remained steadfast in its conviction that there was no crisis in the country. As the impact of COVID-19 is still unravelling, it remains to be seen how the politics of the country and the lives of the citizens will be affected. However, preliminary evidence shows that people's lives and the country's political landscape will not be the same after the pandemic.

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