



Opinion:

Equity and justice for ethnic minorities: A case of Matabeleland (Zimbabwe)

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Abstract

In the past four decades, ethnic minorities in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe have been facing a humanitarian crisis. In this article, I argue that this current state has been caused by the negative effects of the Gukurahundi atrocities in post-independent Zimbabwe, the economic structural adjustment program and the fast-track land redistribution programme. Policies and regulations that are currently in place have not been relaxed to open up space for minorities to participate in dialogue and setting the national agenda. This paper will outline the causes of the current humanitarian crisis while presenting a current perspective on the status quo. It goes to great length to outline solutions to the problems faced by ethnic minorities. It is envisaged that the suggested policies and legal framework will ensure that ethnic minorities in the Matabeleland region are guaranteed civil liberties and are meaningfully economically included.

Keywords: *ethnic minority, suffrage, justice, civil, development, inclusion, affirmative*

1. Introduction

The Ndebele speaking minority group in Zimbabwe has for decades been disadvantaged in public policy planning. I would argue that this has been due to historic events like the post 1980 civil disturbances in the region popularly known as the *Gukurahundi* in 1982-1987, which I posit was a genocide against the Ndebele people as it saw the death of an estimated 20 000 people as the army was unleashed on citizens accused of sheltering dissidents who were allegedly robbing, killing and damaging property (Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe (CCJPZ) & Legal Resources Foundation (LRF), 1997). It took a unity accord between the warring political parties, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and Zimbabwe African Peoples Party (ZAPU) for the hostilities to cease. The Economic and Structural Adjustment Programme, Operation Murambatsvina and the fast-track land reform programme are other state-driven policies which I believe have in different ways, negatively impacted on the Ndebele-speaking people. The failure by the state to openly discuss and address the pertinent issues and events faced by ethnic minorities has negatively impacted on them if one compares this group to rest of the population. There is no doubt that it has contributed to the inequalities, inequities and injustices which have continuously faced the ethnic minorities. The *Gukurahundi* genocide which occurred in Matabeleland and some parts



of the Midlands Province marks a very dark period in the country's history over which victims have not had closure. The event politically neutralised the region leading to reluctance by its inhabitants to participate in national politics. On the other hand, land alienation in the region has to a large extent impacted on the economic participation of minorities, and its unequal distribution in the region has to a large extent perpetuated already existing inequalities. This is in a context where in pre-colonial Zimbabwe, land was important for socio-economic, political and cultural significance for the indigenous people. Colonialism negatively impacted on this relationship as the colonialists forcibly took land from the indigenes. Despite the country gaining independence in 1980, land redistribution has been largely unfair, and it has continued promoting inequality while undermining the cultural identity of the minorities. A consequence of the side-lining of ethnic minorities has been systematic and structural tribalism. Given the challenges outlined above, I would argue that historic disparities must be addressed, and equality fostered in the government framework. If inequalities continue being unaddressed, they have negative effects on democratic processes in Zimbabwe, resulting in social instability and lack of social cohesion which I believe negatively impact on economic growth.

2. Education policy

By looking at education policy, I argue that it is an area which highlights the persistent inequalities and marginalization that ethnic minorities have faced for decades in Zimbabwe. The employment policy of teachers and the traumatic events of the Gukurahundi genocide have had a long-term impact and have negatively affected the education system in the Matabeleland Province. Since 1990, the region has witnessed a decline in school pass rates at all levels. Employment policies which I believe are very unfair and exclusionary of qualified locals, has seen them being denied teaching opportunities. A communication barrier has existed between teachers who are not conversant with the mother tongue and their pupils. This, I believe, negatively affects academic performance and child development. (Savage, 2017) has argued on the importance of mother tongue in the education for young children. This puts into perspective the challenges that arise if there is reliance, as in the Matabeleland case of the employment of teachers from other regions who are not conversant with local languages. It results in communication failure which becomes a learning barrier in schools. In the region, recently, this issue has become topical and there is an urgent need for it to be addressed. Recent examples include a protest by parents at Nkankezi Primary School in Insiza District, Matabeleland South Province, where parents staged a protest against non-native speakers (Tshuma, 2021). This led to a reconsideration of the employment status of five new teachers, with the government carrying out an investigation on their 'unprocedural removal.'

I also posit that, the *Gukurahundi* genocide has also impacted on the education sector in different ways. The descendants of the victims of *Gukurahundi* have for decades failed to access education as a result of the denial and bottlenecks which they encounter due to lack of identity documents like birth certificates. Birth and identity registrations have not seen



policies being relaxed to accommodate victims of *Gukurahundi*, and this has created generational challenges. Infrastructural development in the district has been lagging behind and some of the infrastructure destroyed during the days of *Gukurahundi* continues to be in disrepair. This has impacted on access and quality of education. This has been in a context where I believe reparations need to be paid to victims of the *Gukurahundi* with developmental funds being also availed to rebuild damaged infrastructure. Unfortunately, this has never been the case resulting in poor educational performance by children in the marginalized region.

3. Challenges in participating in electoral processes

In the past decades, Zimbabwe's political landscape or constituencies in particular have undergone changes and have been delimitations by the electoral regulators. When I look at the delimitation process in retrospect, I believe that it has contributed to the political exclusion of the people of Matabeleland by reducing the number of representatives in the legislature and government. With high out-migration from the region due to lack of opportunities especially by the youth, using the criteria of population to allocate parliamentary seats for example or representatives, has become unfair and skewed in favour of other regions. This is in a context where voter identity registration which has been traditionally exclusionary for ethnic minorities as it involves national identity cards (which many do not have) has pushed minorities to the fringes, denying them opportunities to participate in politics.

The disenfranchisement for citizens in this marginalized region is a serious reality which I believe needs to be seriously looked at as it is a reality which is a product of the regions dark past. Some citizens cannot participate in voting processes, and they do not have identity documents. This is exemplified by incidents during the run-up to the 2018 harmonised elections in Zimbabwe where interviews were conducted in a Tshwao village in Tsholotsho. It was observed that the marginalized communities of the Tshwao or San community (who are subjected to systematic neglect and suffering by the state) had some villagers who could not participate in the elections as they did not have the requisite identity documents (Ndlovu, 2018). This, to some extent, supports the argument which I am presenting that the prevailing situation is not favourable for ethnic minorities who are disadvantaged and failing to participate in electoral processes despite voting being their constitutional right. This is closely related to the challenges faced by Zimbabweans from Matabeleland living in the diaspora who for decades have been denied the right to participate in electoral processes by the state. A large number of indigenes from this region now live in the diaspora but for years have expressed interest in participating in local electoral processes and development initiatives, but for a long time they have been denied the opportunity. This has further entrenched marginalisation, suspicion, and stalled development as they are not keen to invest in areas where they are denied the right to choose local political leaders at all levels.



Delimitation processes, voter registration bottlenecks and disenfranchisement of Zimbabweans in the diaspora can thus, be seen combining and denying ethnic minorities their rights to fully participate in electoral processes. This is an impediment to their development and exercise of their constitutional rights.

4. Economic disparities

Persistent economic inequality in Zimbabwe can be traced to unresolved colonial injustices and have negatively impacted on minorities. This is a common phenomenon in most post-colonial states. In Matabeleland, political instability in the post-independence period, recurrent failed economic policies have left many people unemployed, and families have not been spared, being negatively affected and torn apart.

Parochialism has led to the propelling of a very narrow definition of who is seen as an 'indigenous' person. In the many so-called indigenisation programs, I would argue that many ethnic minorities have not benefited. This is exemplified by the land reform programme up to the youth development fund in which ethnic minorities were underrepresented and many failed to benefit from them. This is attributable to the narrow view by the state on who the indigenous people are. It lays credence to the observation by Muzondidya, cited in Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) that ethnic minorities are also marginalized in the indigenisation narrative, and this is despite the fact that some like coloureds were also disadvantaged under colonial rule.

5. Socio-economic Injustices

When I consider socio-economic injustices facing ethnic minorities, I take into consideration three developments in the region. These are:

The Economic Effects of Gukurahundi: In the report by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe & Legal Resources Foundation, (1997) placed the death toll of two districts (Tsholotsho and Kezi) at 3 500. There was also a food blockade which was imposed during the genocide, and it affected 40 000 people. Events during this time forced many to seek asylum and become political refugees in South Africa and Botswana. The impact of this had ramifications on the region's demography and economic performance. The Centre for Innovation Technology, a civic organization in Matabeleland, estimated that of the three million Zimbabweans in South Africa, a majority are from the Matabeleland region. The migration of this important human resource led to brain drain during the early years of postcolonial Zimbabwe and this has become a generational challenge. It left the region underdeveloped then and it has not recovered. The children of these migrants have not been able to contribute to its development as would have been expected.

The Economic Structural Adjustment Program: Despite its shortcomings, the colonial government left the region with a booming industry and a developing city with amenities.



Development was reversed by ESAP. The program was implemented at an unfortunate time as it came after Gukurahundi which had disrupted local economic activities as well as vocational training and education. Migration and brain drain had left the region with cheap and unskilled labour. Consequently, a global recession in 1991 and 1992, coupled with the adoption of the flawed ESAP resulted in de-industrialization which caused unemployment (Brett & Winter, 2003). The social sector was negatively affected with budget cuts, and this affected ethnic minorities who were dependent on these. Poverty levels in the region can be seen as having increased. The development index of the three Matabeleland provinces is lower because there was no concerted effort to develop an economic policy uniquely tailor-made to focus on the region.

Fast track land redistribution in Matabeleland: Land in precolonial Africa had important economic and socio-cultural significance. Consequently, the colonial expropriation of land had far reaching implications and it included the violation of the cultural rights of indigenes. In post-colonial Zimbabwe, land is highly politicised. Despite the country undertaking a fast-track land reform programme in the 2000's, many people in the region do not have access to the resource. Lack of access to land by people in the region has led to many political conflicts which in many instances involve the traditional leaders and political parties (Bulawayo Correspondent, 2020).

6. Justice for ethnic minorities after *Gukurahundi*

From my discussion above, I believe that it is crucial to note that underdevelopment in the Matabeleland region is a result of the effects of *Gukurahundi* which was a genocide. All other developments that have led to inequalities are secondary and stem from this atrocity. A question arises: Is justice for the Matabeleland region possible in this current situation?

For decades, the government of government has denied accountability for the genocide. The appointment of individuals who have been accused of their involvement in *Gukurahundi* to senior political positions, as diplomats and senior military offices is an indication that the state will never be accountable for the tragedy which occurred in the region. I am of the opinion that by international standards there is need to appoint a tribunal to lead a healing process.

The National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC) is available, but it is largely dependent on the Executive, hence its effectiveness is compromised. In my opinion, some of its appointees are already comprised due to the mutual relationship they enjoy with perpetrators implicated in *Gukurahundi*. There are stipulated global standards for handling the *Gukurahundi* atrocities, but I believe that the commission in its current state is too compromised and cannot fulfil any role especially that of justice for ethnic minorities. Many civic society organisations share the opinion which I have and have cast doubt on its capabilities to deal with this historical atrocity (Centre for Innovation and Technology (CITE), 2020).



Interestingly in the National Assembly, it can be noted that there has been debate on the *Gukurahundi* and calls for alleged perpetrators to account for their actions. Unfortunately, debate on this thorny issue has tended to be suppressed with only a few Members of Parliament speaking out on the reluctance of the government to decisively deal and bring closure to the subject. One of the few Members of Parliament who is on record for speaking out is Willias Madzimore of the opposition- Movement for Democratic Change, who is on record saying that ‘Patriotism would only be promoted if everyone is treated equally before the law... People still have wounds, and we are saying let us forget about it and move on...’ (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2021).

In my opinion, I do not believe much can be gained from engaging with the traditional leadership to advocate for justice and push for equality for ethnic minorities as they are comprised politically. A number of the chiefs have over the years been beneficiaries of state sponsored initiatives and have participated in ruling party activities. They cannot be expected to advocate for accountability.

7. Devolution and the International debate on minorities

The 2013 Constitution falls short of international standards in its design of devolution in Zimbabwe. Sections 264-273 deal with devolution but lack political clauses that empower the people. The intergovernmental power balance is one-sided with the National government retaining most of the control. Without political authority, the provincial councils cannot deal with specific social policy issues like affirmative action or pushing for policies that ensure equality and empowerment for ethnic minorities. Current devolution in the world advocates for the decentralization of power, but this may not happen in Zimbabwe.

For the country, going forward I believe it is important to enshrine into national law and the national constitution a special framework for the protection of ethnic minorities. In Sub-Saharan Africa, it is only in Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda that clauses exist which protect ethnic minorities in their constitutions (Gilbert, 2013).

8. How equity and justice can be achieved

Affirmative action based on addressing the specific needs of each locality can go a long way in solving the problem of marginalization in the education sector. The employment policy must not be restricted to the education sector but must be tailormade for the private sector and other public institutions. Regulations dealing with citizenship registration need to be revised, with the specific needs of ethnic minorities taken into consideration. A robust debate on extending the vote to the population in the diaspora needs to be held and voting rights extended to this disenfranchised group. Law and policies as well as procedures on land access and ownership need to be reviewed and revised so that they cater for the needs of ethnic minorities. It is tragic that four decades after independence, ethnic minorities continue facing land access challenges and land dispossession as in the colonial era. On the *Gukurahundi*, I



believe there are three important steps that need to be followed. These are acknowledgement that Gukurahundi was a politicised ethnic genocide, setting up of a Truth Commission and a Justice Tribunal; and the state has an obligation to provide financial compensation to the victims. Compensation should also be extended to the rest of the population which was indirectly affected, and the region has to benefit through special policies, aimed at bringing it to the level of development as other regions.

9. Conclusion

The promotion of equality and recognition of the rights of ethnic minorities is critical in the nation-building process. Intersectionality must be employed in policymaking to promote the inclusion of ethnic minorities whose historic experiences are different from the rest of the population. Gukurahundi impacted the pace at which the region develops leading to a humanitarian crisis. Focusing on Matabeleland when dealing with minority rights does not give the region a privileged position but this is a recognition of its vulnerability. By advocating for the rights of Ndebele speaking ethnic groups in Zimbabwe, the country might avoid unnecessary armed conflict or violent civil unrest. The 2020 summer riots in the United States of America provide an important example of the negative implications of ignoring minority rights and their demands for justice.

Notes on contributor

Rabhelani Mguni was born in Bulawayo, a metropolitan city in the western region of Zimbabwe. The author is currently a high school graduate taking a gap year. He is a young minority rights advocate and spends his time highlighting issues affecting minorities in Zimbabwe and showing support to social movements that promote liberal policies and opinions. Rabhelani Mguni is an ardent supporter of progressive social policies and opinions. In his spare time, he writes short stories on a wide range of topics and non-fictional essays. The author reads books about socio-political issues in Africa and also ventures into African literary works for inspiration.

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