

THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN THE DEMOCRACY-RELATED PROCESSES OF ZIMBABWE*

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Abstract: *Civil society organizations represent a substantial resource for translating democratization processes to the grassroots, ensuring the usage of local and international knowledge, and mobilizing communities to act in pursuit of bettering their own social circumstances. This paper aims to shed light on the way in which non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have developed in Zimbabwe since the 1980's, while particularly emphasizing their constantly shifting relationship with state structures, which transited stages such as: cooperation, subservience, and opposition. The said stages are not linear, nor are they general, nonetheless, they apply to great numbers of varying organizations throughout distinct periods, allowing us to categorize in our attempt to provide an overview. Furthermore, the relationships developed with donors and the population also delved upon, as we try to underline the way in which foreign governments and umbrella organizations chose to pursue the consolidation of democracy in Zimbabwe, especially in the wake of Robert Mugabe's prolonged autocratic slippages. We argue that as the donor culture of Zimbabwean NGOs, which encourages the pursuit of democratic practices, clashed with the nationalist-fueled authoritarian practices of the ZANU-PF party-state, the said types of civil society organizations began to truly mobilize social movements, in pursuit of the common good of the citizens of Zimbabwe.*

Keywords: international relations, social movements, (post)colonialism; donors, NGOs

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Introduction and framework

It has become a consensus amongst theoreticians of political science that civil society holds a poignant role in the democratization process of any nation. The current paper seeks to unveil not only how endemic civil society groups have aided the democratization in Zimbabwe, but, foremost, to establish to what extent foreign NGOs operating directly or indirectly in the country have influenced the process.

For such an endeavour, we chose to operate with the definition given by Biekart, whom considers civil society:

*“...an intermediate associational (public) realm between the state and its citizens, populated by organizations which [...] enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests and values.”*¹

Notwithstanding, numerous other definitions, both limitative and expansive are offered by literature. John Keane, drawing from Hegel, conceptualizes civil society as something encapsulating *“market economy, social classes, corporations, and institutions concerned with the administration of welfare”*². Their common denominator is that they operate under civil law and are not directly reliant on the political state³. Gramsci includes the state as a variable, arguing that civil society is but a framework within which the state struggles for legitimacy, amongst numerous other entities⁴.

As some authors point out⁵, civil society is a syntagm with a shifting meaning throughout history; that meaning depending mostly on the preferred theoretical perspective and the place of its usage. Edwards has gone as far as to point out that civil society might be the *“chicken soup of the social sciences”*⁶, granted the elasticity of the term, which tries to encapsulate a lot of information from various theoretical fields.

While, in theory, democratization may be perceived as an influx of power originating from the state apparatus and moving towards civil society, Biekart adds another layer to the equation, arguing that, *“...[democratization] also depends on the patterns of conflict and cooperation between various parts or (sectors) that make up*

¹ Kees Biekart, *The Politics of Civil Society Building: European Private Aid Agencies and Democratic Transitions in Central America*, Utrecht: International Books, 1999, p. 58.

² John Keane, *Civil Society: Old Images, New Visions*, Stanford University Press, 1988, p. 50.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ Germain D. Randall and Michael Kenny, *Engaging Gramsci: International Relations Theory and the New Gramscians*, in “Review of International Studies”, 24, 1998, pp. 3-21.

⁵ See Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992.

⁶ Michael Edwards, *Civil Society, 2nd Edition*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009, p. 3.

civil society”⁷. Thus, to understand democratization in Zimbabwe, one must analyse the way in which civil society groups have interacted not only with the state apparatus, but with citizens, with economic players and amongst themselves, as to later put pressure on decision-making bodies, jointly.

The transformations of civil society

In Zimbabwe, civil society exists since the pre-colonial era. Certain groups have developed under colonialism and have multiplied after the country secured its independence. In the dusk of the 20th century, people engaged in various recreational activities started to organize, giving birth to a new, albeit still rudimentary, form of civil society. The 1930’s saw a further development of civil society, with the creation of numerous hierarchical associations, the most notable of which were trade unions. Gradually growing and diversifying, these movements acquired the necessary political power and secured important positions in the liberation of the country. The groups overwhelmingly fought side by side with liberation movements, with which they shared similar goals, even though such goals were overwhelmingly fuelled by different motives.

Nonetheless, at the time independence was obtained, in 1980, civil society was still relatively weak and fragmented, and that situation was perpetuated by the new rhetoric of the state. ‘Unity’ was the buzzword of the early years of independent Zimbabwe, and a discourse engulfed in nationalistic grievances annulled any CSOs’ effort of providing dissent. The risk of being regarded as divisive by someone in government rendered numerous organizations obsolete, forcing them to become either silent or obedient. This obedience was not forced, at first, as it became apparent that advocacy was to be set aside, in order to enable organizations to vest their energies in furthering the ‘greater good’ of the nation. Raftopoulos makes a pertinent comment about the hasty adjustment of NGOs to the new *status quo*, claiming that: “*their accommodating role stemmed from a perspective of shared goals and a belief in having emerged from a common tradition of struggle*”⁸. This was particularly true for the organizations that had been part of the liberation effort. In the meantime, the newly created such entities had to prove their good intentions to state officials, in order to obtain an acceptable pedigree.

⁷ Biekart, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

⁸ Brian Raftopoulos, *The State, NGOs and Democratization*, in “NGOs, the State and Politics in Zimbabwe” (edited by Sam Moyo, John M. Makumbe and Brian Raftopoulos), Harare: SAPES, 2000, p. 45.

Another commentator sums up the atmosphere of the 1980's and early 1990's by noting that ZANU-PF's government was genuinely accepted "*as the only source of political authority*"⁹.

Student movements, women's movements and labour organizations were rapidly seized by the party-state, ZANU-PF. As the country was developing, CSOs worked closely with the government, supplementing its efforts in areas in which the latter had its hands full. Social programs were developed and civil society seemed satisfied to direct much of their efforts to these welfare-type actions. Like in many parts of the world, the dismantling of the USSR and the fall of the Berlin Wall put in motion a wave of liberalization throughout Africa. Civil society groups were, par excellence, affected by these transformations, as they expanded under the incentive of liberal democracy.

NGO's worked with both the government and external donors. The 'donor created space' also aided the multiplication of said organizations. In a bid to secure their interests in Zimbabwe, especially considering the proposed land reform¹⁰, the West invested large amounts of money in diverse NGOs. While, as Howell and Pearce report, some NGOs emerged with the only intention to take advantage of the funding¹¹ it is important to note that, for the most part, such entities started genuine, palpable operations. The logistic support offered by donors was also invaluable for the broadening of Zimbabwe's civil space. As such, a convenient situation was reached for all parties involved: the NGOs received training and funds from donors, the government received free support; the citizens were receiving vocational trainings and assistance in creating income-generating programs, and foreign donors saw their interests represented and felt they had secured a viable entrance which facilitated access to the core of the Zimbabwean system. Although some host countries' governments tend to be wary of the international community, especially due to the opaqueness in the allocation and spending of funds, Zimbabwean authorities largely welcomed international donations that sought to strengthen NGO activity. We argue that while some recipient CSOs have used their funding to further local programs, at other times, they and 'international experts', in total non-transparency, have allocated very little funding for programmatic activity.

⁹ Martin De Graaf, *Context, Constraint or Control? Zimbabwean NGOs and their environment*, in "Development Policy Review", 5, 1987, p. 292.

¹⁰ Beginning in the 1980, the purpose of land reforms was to equitably redistribute land between black subsistence farmers and white Zimbabweans of European descent.

¹¹ Jude Howell and Jenny Pearce, *Civil Society and Development: Genealogies of the Conceptual Encounter*, in *Civil Society and Development: A Critical Exploration* (eds. Jude Howell and Jenny Pearce), London, Boulder, 2011, p. 124.

This situation lasted well into the 1990's, when things fell apart economically, and members of civil society quickly saw their work ruined by the political sphere. Unable to control the rapid decay of the economy, which started with the 1997 economic crisis, the establishment gradually lost the support of civil society. The numerous market-shortages, the farm invasions orchestrated by government¹², and a growing number of human rights abuses - in the context of a growing militarization - determined international human-rights watchdogs to send ultimatums to national NGOs, warning them that the situation had reached a tipping point. In turn, these NGOs reacted, for they were indebted to their international 'older brothers', and, despite affiliations with the power-apparatus in Harare, the former decided they could not remain silent indefinitely.

In the late 1990's, the political system of Zimbabwe was marked by a classical form of authoritarianism, in which political power was centralized around the figure of president Mugabe and his clientele – mainly composed by ruling party members and supporters¹³. This client-patron relationship is what enabled ruptures in the democratic process. On the one hand, the holders of political power were relying on nationalism, when promoting a culture of intolerance towards the other part of society, which encapsulated both political parties and divergent CSOs; on the other hand, the divergent part of the population was articulating a discourse of 'transition', hoping that power will be ceded by ZANU-PF, and that a new regime will strive for further democratization. The establishment grew tired of this latter category not falling in line, thus it started considering them enemies of the state – as the former took upon themselves to be the only legitimate representation of the state. One must keep in mind that in true non/pseudo-democratic systems, any type of association of citizens is controlled from the top; losing such control has the tendency to further erode the enshrined power structures.

Sam Moyo's analysis of state-NGO interactions displays a preference for the tactics that avoid confrontation. He argues that NGO advocacy should be done by either passive resistance, or opposition, when collaboration or entryism are not possible¹⁴. At that time, we observe that policy change was not an issue tackled by organizations;

¹² The year 2000 debuted with the invasion and seizures of white-owned farms by groups comprised by (but not limited to) liberation veterans, in support of the government of Zimbabwe's Fast-Track Land Reform Program.

¹³ While we might imagine that this clientele was limited to high ranking politicians, members of the judiciary and financial elites, it included most of the public service – which was staffed according to ZANU-PF loyalty, media representatives.

¹⁴ Sam Moyo, *NGO Advocacy in Zimbabwe: Systematizing an Old Function or Inventing a New Role?*, Harare, Zero, 1992, pp. 7-10.

rather the main problems of the interaction were relating to the implementation of projects¹⁵.

In 1997, Masipula Sithole argued, rather hopefully, that “*authoritarianism in Zimbabwe is eroding*”¹⁶. Several decades have passed and that erosion is not yet very visible, even in the light of Robert Mugabe’s ousting and, later, death.

1997 marked the first poignant point of rupture between government and civil society. The government’s decision to modify Zimbabwe’s constitution sparked the creation of the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) - an NGO that embedded various types of actors, from citizens, to labour movements, youth groups, and business organizations. The proposed constitution was designed to consolidate the ruling party’s power and secure their win in the upcoming elections. The NCA opposed the idea of the drafted constitution and pursued its failure in the mandatory referendum which was to come. The referendum failed, marking the first major defeat suffered by the government since Zimbabwe’s independence. These events did not remain unnoticed by Mugabe. With elections nearing, Mugabe had justified worries that an opposition party, supported by an NGO capable of causing this kind of damage, could cost his party its hegemony. As a result, ZANU-PF began drafting laws targeting CSOs.

Legislation that would govern the functioning of CSO’s has been in place since the colonial era in Zimbabwe. During the colonial rule, the 1959 Unlawful Organizations Act sought to ban any organization that was not in line with government policies and practice, rendering obsolete any right to appeal such decisions in court. The Welfare Organizations Act (1967) was enacted to allow the control of CSOs linked to the liberation movement, as it impeded organizations from passing on information and sounding alarms with regards to human rights infringements taking place in Rhodesia. Until the Act was repelled, most CSOs were forced to focus on humanitarian issues, and only a small number of organizations dared to turn their focus to political rights. In 1995, the Private Voluntary Organizations Act (PVO) was introduced – to correct and extend several other such acts from the past¹⁷. The PVO gave the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare the power to effectively stop the activities of certain NGOs by de-registration. Furthermore, executive committee members of NGOs

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

¹⁶ Masipula Sithole, *Zimbabwe’s eroding Authoritarianism*, in “Journal of Democracy”, 8 (1), 1997, pp. 127-141.

¹⁷ Most notably Acts 63/1966, 6/1976, 30/1981.

could be suspended in several cases¹⁸. In 2004, the Harare legislature proposed the Non-Governmental Organisations Bill – an almost identical piece of legislation to the PVO. NGOs rightfully argued then that the sole purpose of the bill was to suffocate NGOs working in key areas, such as the governance and human rights fields. Although the Bill was enacted by Parliament, it never gained presidential approval, and it has since lapsed. We argue that Mugabe’s unwillingness to commit to a piece of legislation that would have banned external funding to several NGOs came after the public outcry of both endemic and international NGOs. The Bill was found to be “*unacceptable*”¹⁹, as organizations feared that its enactment “*will result in the shutting down of the majority of NGOs*”²⁰.

In 2008, before the Homogenized Elections, hopes were high that the full-blown social crisis, lasting for more than a decade, was about to meet its end. The waves of repression against members of the opposition party, which were sometimes incarcerated merely because they seemed ‘suspicious’, coupled with raids on activists and NGO members, extinguished the hopes for a transition, rather quickly. After the ballot had been cast, the headquarters of the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) were raided by police forces, whom confiscated documents tied to the elections. Arguably, as the results had not yet been announced, this was a method of intimidation. Numerous other CSOs were raided to avoid the contestation of results, based on the premise that parallel vote counts could dismiss, and thus delegitimize the official result. The wave of violence, not only impeded NGOs with a stake in the electoral process to do their job, but affected the work of other groups activating in the field of poverty relief and humanitarian assistance. It had gone so far, that the UN teams dispatched in Zimbabwe reported that the distribution of food aid had been disrupted²¹. Numerous other entities reported similar troubles: “*the intimidating presence of security personnel and the physical violence taking place across the country is severely limiting our partners’ ability to fulfil their humanitarian mission*”²².

¹⁸ According to the PVO Act, these measures could be enacted in cases where: (a) the organization no longer operated according to the objective specified in its constitution; or (b) the organization was being poorly administered, jeopardizing its activities; or (c) the organization was involved in illegal activities; or (d) it was necessary or desirable to do so in the public interest.

¹⁹ The National Association of Non Governmental Organizations, *Statement on the passing of the NGO Bill by Parliament*, 2004, Press release, Available at: <https://www.pambazuka.org/governance/zimbabwe-ngo-bill-unacceptable>, accessed on: 18 July 2020.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ UN, *Country Team Statement of 13 May 2008*, Press release, Available at: <http://www.un.org/press/en/2008/db080513.doc.htm>, accessed on: 12 July 2020.

All these clampdowns on CSOs demonstrate that ZANU-PF does not have a taste for the particulars of participatory democracy, as it displays the characteristics of a party-state. Furthermore, it is apparent that ZANU-PF is willing to use its client groups, such as war veterans as some form of deterrent against any entity that dissents from the will of the people in power.

CSOs reluctant to support the government's plans and methods of action – due to moral restraints or to signals from donor entities - started advocating for a change of the *status quo*, and lobbying for a more inclusive and democratic system. They rapidly secured the support of opposition parties and started reciprocating. The outcries for a democratic space, originating from both sides infuriated Robert Mugabe, determining him to establish a direct link between the political opposition and CSOs. In turn, this perceived 'unholy alliance of objectors' was met with further oppressive measures by the power in Harare. The [National Association of Non-governmental Organizations in Zimbabwe](#) (NANGO), an entity that has the backing of over one thousand NGOs, had co-opted several non-members to aid in its struggle against violence and for the creation of an inclusive space, especially in the context of the 2008 harmonized elections. The polls before the election created the expectation for a highly contested result, and this coalition of CSOs took upon itself to aid in facilitating the transition to a stable democracy.

Arguably, the 2008 waves of violence against CSOs could have been intuited, for they had a prequel. In 1999, independent editors were accused of being used by "hostile forces in the UK, South Africa and the United States to plot the downfall of President Mugabe's government"²³. In the lack of any eloquent proof, ZANU-PF's motives behind the respective accusations soon became conspicuous: after the claims, a press statement was released, announcing that no further foreign observers could obtain accreditation to the upcoming elections. The result: a few hundred already accredited EU and Commonwealth observers would be in the field, while the rest were denied the possibility to deploy²⁴.

After the transitional Inclusive Government (IG) was instilled in 2009²⁵, hopes for an end to persecution began to echo throughout Zimbabwe. The further expansion of the democratic space formally came to an end in 2013 when ZANU-PF won the elections and ended the IG.

²² NANGO, *Zimbabwe: Civil Society and Democracy*, 2008, Press release, Available at: <http://www.ngopulse.org/article/zimbabwe-civil-society-and-democracy>, accessed on: 14 July 2020.

²³ "Daily News", 4 May 1999, p. 2.

²⁴ Government of Zimbabwe - Department of Information, *Zimbabwe Parliamentary Elections 2000: Accreditation of elections*, Press release, 20 June 2000.

²⁵ With the aid of South Africa's SADC backed mediation, an IG was formed in 2009, encompassing representatives from ZANU-PF and the former opposition party, the MDC.

During the IG there was high optimism that the ZANU-PF rule would soon be over and that the brutal state-sponsored practices that put the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party in government would also end; however, there was little progress in this regard. Creating an open public space was on the agenda of both MDC and activists alike, but pursuing that objective was more complicated than initially expected. The MDC side in the IG relied a great deal on the technical expertise of CSOs when trying to make a push for political reform. The human resources of these organizations were also invaluable in achieving whatever reforms could be attained. Thus, several CSO representatives have been appointed in the state apparatus. Furthermore, new institutions have been created such as the Human Rights Commission or the Zimbabwe Media Commission. Both aforementioned, reportedly independent institutions and several others were underfunded and acted under severe constraints from government. In addition, in the preamble of the 2013 elections, ZANU-PF started targeting CSOs, some of which were labelled illegal.

After Robert Mugabe's removal from power, hope once again swept across civil society, but, again, the sentiment was short-lived, as it quickly became apparent that even without Mugabe at the helm, ZANU-PF and their government remain equally distrustful of the intentions and actions of CSOs. After President Mnangagwa announced in January 2019 that gas prices would almost double, civil unrest sparked in Harare and Bulawayo, which led to violent interventions from the state's security forces. The clampdown resulted in several deaths and hundreds of detentions from the ranks of civil society's activists. Labelling the protest movement as an attempt to change the regime, orchestrated by "local NGOs well-funded and by the [main] opposition"²⁶, Emmerson Mnangagwa admittedly foreshadowed that the state's relationship with civil society would not find any improvement. More recently, Mnangagwa warned that CSOs which interfere in national politics could be deregistered²⁷. We argue that this perceived "interference" is inherently problematic, as it has been used, and still is used in the public discourse of ZANU-PF members in a very willfully-ambiguous manner. As such, a plethora of organizations, working in fields pertaining to democracy, such as rule of law or human rights, find it very difficult to follow their mission, for critique of state structures could render them obsolete via deregistration, while partial alignment with ZANU-PF's policies would render them illegitimate and defeat the purpose of their creation.

²⁶ Emmerson Mnangagwa in "France 24", 10 February 2019, Available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/f24-interview/20190210-emmerson-mnangagwa-zimbabwe-protests-interview-mugabe-regime-change-operation>, accessed on: 14 July 2020.

²⁷ "New Zimbabwe", 10 July 2020, available at: <https://www.newzimbabwe.com/mnangagwa-threatens-to-deregister-meddlesome-ngos-confirms-fresh-lockdown-plans/>, accessed on: 14 July 2020.

Conclusions

Following Zimbabwe's independence, and especially in the wake of continuously deteriorating conditions in the country, CSOs traditionally dealing with matters of democracy and good governance could no longer remain silent. Their efforts were supplemented by newly established organizations and by an increasingly complex network of umbrella actors. Together, the growing web of CSOs aided the creation of the country's political opposition, from the ground-up. While the Zimbabwe was theoretically opening its democratic space, due to pressures from CSOs, the ruling party was pushing back to close it. NGOs, churches, and individuals were punished in different forms by ZANU-PF, in the attempt to force either their silence or subordination. The situation continues and it is our prediction that it will continue if ZANU-PF manages to retain the central spot in national politics, for the party has no real interest in the democratization of Zimbabwe, being primarily preoccupied with the seizure and control of all state structures.