

Silencing Guardians of the Democratic Shrine in Colonial and Post-Colonial Zimbabwe: Student Activism, Zimbabwean Nationalism and the Third Chimurenga (1960-2005)

Ishmael Mazambani and Gilbert Tarugarira
Department of History
Midlands State University

Abstract

Student activism at the University of Zimbabwe has a long history in colonial and post-colonial Zimbabwe. Student activism and activists have been dismissed, demonized, scandalized and rubbished in both pre and post-colonial Zimbabwe. During the decolonization process, the student movement and nationalists were allies in their quest to end colonialism, colonial injustices and unfair land distribution. The colonial regime branded them as terrorists because they supported the Liberation struggle. It needs to be underlined that student activists were blinded by nationalist rhetoric as the Zimbabwean nationalists were masquerading as liberators driven by the propensity and passion to deliver the Zimbabwean people to the “Promised Land”. The honeymoon was short-lived soon after the attainment of independence as myths of decolonization and illusions of freedom became a nightmare. The independence euphoria vanished as student activists realized that the democratic shrine had been abandoned by the adoption of authoritarian and dictatorial tendencies by the Zimbabwean nationalist government. Draconian and biting pieces of legislation were enacted to politically castrate and silence critical voices in order to make them “null and void”. The Third Chimurenga in our view had several purposes and functions. It was a political gimmick to serve political ends, a regime survival technique of ZANU-PF, an

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agenda to finish the unfinished decolonization process, an extension of the silencing of opponents and rewarding of political cronies and supporters.

Introduction

The earliest critical voice in Zimbabwe about the state of affairs in the country was university students who professed to be the 'voice of the voiceless' and the barometer of society. Student activism involved articulation of broad national issues as well as those issues specifically affecting students. While many student demonstrations were sparked off by local factors at the university such as delays in the disbursement of payouts for students, break down of communication between the administration and students, lack of concern on the plight of students on the part of the administration and academics issues like student victimization, the demonstrations were also caused by national problems. Student activism in Zimbabwe is here understood as the early warning lights of what was coming in the 1990s and beyond

including the present crisis of governance and economic collapse.

Student activism across the globe has reflected broader national and international political, economic, educational and social stresses and changes. Since the inception of the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in 1957, student activism has become a tradition in Zimbabwe that is intertwined with the growth of African nationalism and the emergence of opposition politics in the country. This rich tradition of student activism need to be factored in any study of nationalism in Zimbabwe as during the colonial era student activism was largely dominated by the nationalist paradigm.

Nationalism and Student Activism

Zimbabwean nationalists and black student activists were partners in the struggle for national liberation. The University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland became a breeding ground for some of

the most articulate nationalist leaders. They seem to have bought themselves into seeking political sovereignty before anything else could be added onto it (Mazrui, 1993 and Nhema, 2002). Even several students who were in the Diaspora after being deported from Rhodesia for their involvement in African politics remained vibrant political activists, spending a week working on their studies and the weekends addressing meetings, mobilizing anti-Rhodesian demonstrations (Bhebe, 2005). The students perceived the national liberation struggle as a movement for democracy and human rights, a people centered struggle and a struggle to end all evil practices by the settler regime. Most students joined the liberation struggle as a result of colonial policies such as unequal land distribution, racial discrimination, and selective application of the law, unfair labour policies, political harassment, and police brutality and human rights abuses, just like other people of Zimbabwe.

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In 1965 after the Rhodesian Premier, Ian Smith, announced the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI), students from the University College of Rhodesia vehemently denounced the move and organized a demonstration as most nationalists were languishing in colonial prisons. Despite the fact that the university authorities condemned the move, labeled student demonstrations as “illegal” and grabbing the episode as a platform to demonstrate their brutal tendencies, the students moved on to organize a class boycott. By this time, nationalism was in vogue across the whole of Africa. It was a very attractive ideology which was conceived as an emancipatory struggle. Hence students fully supported nationalist struggles.

Student activists that dominated the nationalist movement included the late W. Mangwende, N. Bhebe, E. Mashingaidze, J. Chirenje, H. H. Bhila, S. Mudenge and many others who had been expelled from the University to become fully involved in

politics up to the time of independence (Bhebe 2005:7). Some remained at the university but kept the fire of the liberation struggle burning. What should be noted is that the colonial state was an enemy of the people (black) and simultaneously the state was an enemy of black student activists. Student activism in the 1970s was vibrant and pronounced despite the fact that not many Africans were given the opportunity to enroll at the University of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. African students were in the minority throughout the colonial era (Mlambo 2001:55). In spite of the fact that the colonial state was engaged in the process of manufacturing draconian pieces of legislation to arrest and kill the spirit of nationalism within the students' body, the movement remained solid. In 1973 African students violently demonstrated in the Chimukwembe demonstrations and about 150 students were imprisoned (Mlambo 2001:55). Such demonstrations galvanised the momentum within the students' movement and also cemented the relations between the nationalists and student

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movement. As such students and nationalists were comrades in arms in their quest to liberate Zimbabwe throughout the colonial period.

Violence perpetrated by the Rhodesian government after the passing of various draconian pieces of legislation such as the Law and Order Maintenance Act (LOMA), the Emergence Powers Act and Martial Law, which criminalized all political activities, forced many activists to join the liberation struggle. The colonial state in an attempt to uproot, arrest and kill African nationalism adopted a ruthless methods when dealing with real and imaginary enemies. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (1997) noted that:

Because the colonial state was in extreme panic over its security as a result of the winds of change...it evoked a net type of political surveillance, which failed to choose the frogs, the crabs, tortoise from the fish.

Such policies led many students to abandon their studies to join the liberation struggle while others were expelled after being suspected to be

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supporters of terrorists. Student activism during the liberation struggle was also a struggle for academic freedom and many other freedoms cherished by students. Colonial education was also characterised by many colonial stereotypes and myths designed to dehumanize and to deliberately distort the African past. The first Minister of Education Dzingai Mutumbuka (Mlambo 2001:67) noted that:

The whole African education system under the colonial regimes was a kind of 'ambush' system. African students had to survive a series of 'ambushes' before they could get to the end of the system.

African students at the University of Rhodesia and Nyasaland were treated as second-class citizens. Africans were made to internalise mythical claims that colonialism was a 'white men's burden' and that Africa was a 'Dark Continent.' Students were taught history which glorified colonialists such as Rhodes and African leaders were portrayed as primitive, backward, barbaric and bloodthirsty savages. Colonial education was therefore, 'inequitable and ideologically biased against African

interests and was highly dismissive of the African past (Mlambo 2001:67).

However, the interface between nationalists and the student activists was not always harmonious. At the training camps in Zambia and Mozambique, university students were treated with a lot of suspicion by those who were recruited from a worker and a peasant background. They became caught up in the violence, authoritarianism, complex ambiguities, friction, factionalism, purges, assassinations, witch-hunting and intimidation that characterized the liberation struggle (Ndlovu 2003: 99-130). The relationship between student activists and nationalists became characterized by collabotation, conflict and accommodation as violence and coercion formed a central part of nationalist mobilization (Moyo et al 2000).

Independence and Student Activism.

The achievement of independence was celebrated by both students and nationalists much as it was taken as a triumph of the African people over settler colonialism. During the early years of independence, the nationalist government made commendable strides in providing funding and educational facilities to university students and the whole education sector. There were little or no areas of conflict as the nationalists and students enjoyed their newly hard won independence. Student activists had every reason to cherish independence for the following reasons: Firstly, facilities at the university were expanded and modernized. Secondly, student enrolments were expanded and discrimination on race, sex or colour was abolished. Thirdly, the new nationalist government also fulfilled their promise of expanding tertiary education through establishing new universities such as the National University of Science and Technology (NUST). It is therefore,

clear that the Zimbabwean government had made impressive strides in providing education to Africans and ‘that phase can aptly be categorized as a honeymoon period’ (Nhema 2002:41).

The Zimbabwean state was enjoying popular legitimacy earned from the nationalist struggle (Zeleza 1997:26). The government was in the eyes of many university students and indeed was proving to be a ‘government for the people, by the people and for the people.’ Independence euphoria gripped every Zimbabwean coupled with great expectations in different fronts and across different constituencies. During this same period of the honeymoon, at the University of Zimbabwe, the student movement was split into those supporting ZANU-PF against those supporting PF-ZAPU (Nhema 2001:5-25). During this period, 1980-1988 the influence and authority of ZANU-PF went largely unquestioned as the student movement conceded with the development discourse of the state. Students were mainly supportive of the

nationalist leadership's socialist orientation and they celebrated signs of economic growth and stability under 'an apparently socialist banner carefully tempered by pragmatism' (Herbst 1999:19).

Under the veneer of economic and political success of the 1980s lay the emergence of an authoritarian and violent state. This owed partly to the fact that the post-colonial state was a direct successor to the authoritarian settler Rhodesian state. Rhodesian repressive tendencies were also inherited by the new state. This was clearly demonstrated in how the state handled PF-ZAPU and the people of Matabeleland in the period 1983-1998. Similarly, violence had to be deployed against workers and students in the 1990s. Political opposition was never tolerated in Zimbabwe (Astrow 1983:167). Ndlovu-Gatsheni says that, "The ideologies of Chimurenga were also being mobilised to fragment the people of Zimbabwe into patriots, war veterans,

puppets, traitors, sell-outs, born-frees, and enemies of the nation” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2014:117).

As the state became openly violent, student activism at the University of Zimbabwe intensified against state violence and authoritarian politics. The university became the centre of demonstrations, class boycotts, and emergence of militant student leaders. There was also a growth of fearless and charismatic leaders such as Arthur Mutambara, Paul Chimhosva, Obey Mudzingwa, Tinomudaishe Chinyoka, Raymond Majongwe, and Learnmore Jongwe. A rupture had developed between the nationalist leadership of the state and the students as the political leadership were prone to corruption and primitive accumulation of wealth. As the political leadership of the state and the student parted ways, the state concentrated on crafting various draconian pieces of legislation to curtail and kill student activism.

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Zimbabwe was on its road to economic and political failure. Herbst (1999; 55-60) noted that, 'compared to what was hoped for in 1980, Zimbabwe has been a great disappointment, arguably the greatest disappointment in Sub-Saharan Africa.' Students were the first to sense the plunge of Zimbabwe into a 'pariah state' Ranger (2003:3) laments that 'The emancipatory potential of Zimbabwean nationalism, in which I had so confidently believed, has not been fulfilled.' Various government policies and failures led to the growth of various forms of opposition. The abandonment of socialism and reduced spending on social services was a major source of conflict. The decisions to deregulate prices and remove subsidies on health and education were resisted. Mlambo (2001:25-40) called this 'the scheming for the poor' which caused severe hardships on the Zimbabwean poor.

Whether students were true socialists at heart or pseudo socialists is debatable. Students also adopted a combative stance as a result of scandals

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and cases of corruption, which rocked ZANU PF government in the late 1980s. It should be noted that the stance taken by students was as a result of ‘a series of corruption scandals brushed aside by President Mugabe, further tarnished the credibility of the ruling party and the state’ (Saunders 200:17-24). From revered nationalist revolutionaries, ZANU PF government officials fell disgracefully into corrupt, arrogant, power-hungry, and despotic capitalists. In 1988 the University of Zimbabwe Student Representative Council (SRC) organised a massive demonstration against corruption, calling for re-adoption of a people oriented political programme. Kempton Makamure, who was a law lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe, noted that:

The bubble burst in 1987-1988 when it became clear the government had no intention of freeing its citizens. The students took to the streets and the government response was very brutal. They sent in an armed contingent to capture student leaders (Saunders 2000:17-24).

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Despite the violence of the state, students at the University of Zimbabwe continued to mount pressure on the government and relations between the two continued to deteriorate. In 1989 students at the University of Zimbabwe boycotted classes after being labeled 'hooligans, drunkards and megalomaniacs' and anti-patriotic and anti-nationalistic in nature' by the then Minister of Education Fay Chung (Saunders 200:20-25). Despite all the physical and verbal harassment directed against the activists, they continued to openly and vibrantly criticize the government. On 4 October 1989 the first Vice Chancellor of the University of Zimbabwe Professor Walter Kamba suspended classes and closed the university for the first time since independence. The closure of the university marked the beginning of a series of more and more closures in years to come.

During a congress held in December 1989, ZANU-PF resolved to create a one party state in Zimbabwe by legislation, provoking further protests

from the university students. On the 3rd of May 1990 at a General Student Meeting held at the University of Zimbabwe, the students rejected and voted against such an establishment. This led to a protracted conflict between the government and the students. The students allied with the workers and intellectuals and organized demonstrations to force the government to abandon the idea of a one party state. The fire-band student leader Arthur Mutambara noted that ‘the University of Zimbabwe students union obligated by historical responsibility, states its case on this pertinent issue without equivocation and ambiguity.’ He went on to say that ‘the union denounced all naive feudalistic arguments advanced for the one party state as short-sighted, simplistic and incorrect’ (Mutambara 1991:132).

In an attempt to get rid of all forms of opposition especially from the university students the government in 1990 introduced the University of Zimbabwe Amendment Act, which empowered the

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Vice- Chancellor to suspend and expel students will-nilly (Saunders 2000:10-15). The government was now pre-occupied and obsessed with regime security. All forms of opposition were treated as political enemies rather than political opponents. Saunders (2000:10-15) noted that ‘the presence of riot police and other security agents at University of Zimbabwe became common place.’

As repressive state practices tightened and as the politicians interfered more and more with the running of the university, the Vice-Chancellor Walter Kamba threw in the towel protesting over the enactment of the University of Zimbabwe Amendment Act, which was an infringement on academic rights stating that the piece of legislation ‘amounted to academic and political intolerance, demise of academic debate and a threat to academic freedom and autonomy’ (Saunders 200:10-50). The student union also described the piece of legislation as ‘the political assassination of academic freedom’ (Saunders 200:10).

Political Castration of Student Activism

Indeed a new era was forming itself where “the voice of the voiceless” (students) and the state were on a collision course as the politicians became arrogant and disconnected from the people. This was well described by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2003:107) who noted that:

The ruling party moved away from identification with the basic aspirations of the masses, remaining in agreement with popular hopes only at the level of rhetoric. The government leadership pursued its own enrichment at the expense of the people.

By the end of the 1990s the draconian pieces of legislation coupled with securitization of the state was hitting student activism very hard. Economic hardships directly affected student welfare through the privatization of catering. Students had to engage in localized politics of the belly for some time. But some students responded to economic hardships at the campus through embracing more national politics. The opposition Movement for

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Democratic Change (MDC) is a product of a coalescence of students, workers and intellectuals fed up with the failures of ZANU-PF government and its violent politics.

However, there was a noticeable decline of student activism caused by the state's use of various draconian pieces of legislation such as the Public Order and Security Act (POSA). POSA legitimized the use of violence by the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) and other arms of the government to castrate opposition activists. Under POSA students were banned from taking an active part in politics whether on campus or outside. It also forbade students from organising demonstrations without 'approval' from the police. Under POSA, the government became more repressive than ever before. Demonstrations at the universities were now associated with violence, arrests, incarceration, beatings, torture and disappearance of student activists. The late Edison Zvobgo described POSA as 'the most calculated and determined assault on

our liberties' (Chan 2005: 45). In 2003, Ranger pointed out that 'the University of Zimbabwe today is very different...it has been torn apart by student and faculty strikes, by police repression, by collapse of funding.' Sithole (2002: 25) also noted that 'in Zimbabwe, the infringement of human rights and civil rights by the state organs...have multiplied.' It is within this context that student activism declined.

The act of brutality on student activists was demonstrated by the shooting of Morememories Chawira a student in 1998 during a demonstration on campus at the University of Zimbabwe. Such use of excessive force on unarmed and defenseless students demonstrated the ruthlessness and mercilessness of the Zimbabwean government. In 2001, another University of Zimbabwe student Batanai Hadzisi died when the ZRP used excessive force to break up a demonstration (Daily News 12/02/02). In 2004, the Secretary General of the Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU) was

arrested and tortured by security agencies and the police also assaulted Gladys Hlatshwayo of the SRC at the University of Zimbabwe. All these acts of violence and brutality on students played a crucial role in creating fear and decreasing enthusiasm and desire to participate in student politics.

The young MDC Member of Parliament (MP) Nelson Chamisa argued that the government was attempting to destroy student activism because political activists like Tendai Biti, Munyaradzi Gwisai, Job Sikala, Learnmore Jongwe and many others were products of student activism. He stated that 'what they want to do is make sure that at least they cut short the conveyor belt, which they allege has been responsible for churning out people who they think are anti-government (<http://www.kubatana.net/7/14/2005>).

The Nigerian political scientist Claude Ake (1990) noted that the academic community is a target of political repression in Africa because they are

considered to be merchants of subversive ideas. What is ironic is the connivance of academics with the state in the suppression of student activism. For instance, the appointment of Professor Graham Hill as the Vice Chancellor of the University of Zimbabwe intensified the decline of student activism at the UZ. Under Hill's leadership of the university, students became "a terrified lot" as he adopted an authoritarian type of leadership as he became ruthless, suspending student leaders time and again, banning meetings at the UZ, openly supporting the introduction of fees and allowing the police to become a permanent feature at the University of Zimbabwe.

Despite the use of violence by the state and the connivance of the Vice-Chancellor in muzzling student activism, the students continued to engage in debates about national politics. They demanded good governance and democracy in Zimbabwe. They demanded the release of detained journalists Ray Choto and Mark Chavunduka as well as the

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withdrawal of troops from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to save an economically bankrupt Zimbabwe from collapsing. They also demanded the stoppage of a fascist approach of governance and a new constitution for the people (The Standard 24/01/ 99). The then SRC President, Fortune Mguni (now Daniel Molokela) categorically and fearlessly noted that as students they ‘felt that Mugabe is too old and should retire’ (SRC News Letter July 1999). Students also tried to press on the political leaders that ‘a university is supposed to be a market place of ideas where students engage in intellectual debate and if this is not happening, it is disastrous and it is the death of a democracy in Zimbabwe’ (News Release SRC, August 1999). In 2001, ZINASU also expressed its unhappiness with the land redistribution exercise noting that ‘we condemn the current ZANU-PF land reform exercise which in our view is partisan, ill-conceived and has led to bloodshed on commercial farms’ (Daily News 14/09/01). A new student leadership at the University of Zimbabwe

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graphically described their present predicament compared to the earlier years:

We inherit a legacy, a legacy embedded in defending the student union. Defending the students union at a time when the nation is at cross roads, we inherited a space in a society where democracy is dead and buried, human rights have been trampled upon. Students have been brutalized, tortured and even murdered (Daily News 14.09/01)

Indeed, students are surviving under very harsh economic and political environment within which some students were being banned for life from the University of Zimbabwe. For instance, in 2001 the President of the Student Representative Council Innocent Mupara was suspended for life from the University of Zimbabwe, after being described by the Vice-Chancellor as an MDC sponsored agent bent on causing confusing and chaos on the campus (Daily News 15/9/01). The imposition of a life ban on Mupara provoked former student leaders like M. Gwisai, T.Bitl, L. Jongwe, T.Chinyoka, J. Mafume and G. Shumba to argue that the ban was not only unreasonable,

unconstitutional and a great miscarriage of justice but also politically motivated (Daily News 07/9/01).

The political leadership in Zimbabwe is of the opinion that ‘the mistake the ruling party made was to allow colleges and universities to be turned into anti-Government mentality factories’ (Ranger 2003:5).¹ This indicates the depth of the rupture that has developed between the political leadership of the country and the institutions of higher learning as well as the disconnection between the political leadership and the students. While student activists were crying for democratic space and transparent land redistribution exercise, at a ZANU-PF Congress President Robert Mugabe declared that: (The Herald 15 December, 2000)

The country is our country and this land our land...They think because they are white they have the divine right over our resources. Not here. The white man is not indigenous to Africa. Africa is for Africans. Zimbabwe for Zimbabweans.

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From that time Zimbabwe became a divided and fragmented nation politically. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni says that, “The space of patriots and veterans is reserved.... Members of the opposition MDC are categorised as traitors, sell-outs and puppets” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:118). The unholy alliance between the MDC and the former commercial farmers has widened and worsened the gap between those who support the Third Chimurenga and those who do not.

Conclusion

At the centre of this process is the fate of the once powerful and active student movement at the University of Zimbabwe that is now lumped together with the opposition political forces fighting for democratic change in Zimbabwe. Universities have indeed played a central role in forming ‘the political consciousness of students’ and this development is very healthy for the political and economic development of Zimbabwe (Habermas 1971:1-10). However, this paper has proven that

political leaders of Zimbabwe at the helm of the state do not want the production of critical and politically conscious students capable of monitoring government excesses. Across the globe university students form useful agents of social and political change, having been created within the knowledge factory known as the university. Student's power in universities can act as checks and balances both in universities and outside to weed out corruption, mediocrity and academic decay, economic and political decay in Zimbabwe. The government and university administrators should also acknowledge the fact that the use of police terror, arrests, refusal of permission to use university buildings and declining student support rate is catastrophic to the present and future generations. It can also be concluded that the demise of student activism is symptomatic of blocked democracy in Zimbabwe as student activism contribute tremendously to the demise of undemocratic regimes in Africa as exemplified by the collapse of the Yakubu Gowon regime in Nigeria (Eze1982:62). In 2001, five

universities in Zambia demonstrated against Chiluba's attempt for a third term. ZINASU in solidarity with their Zambian counterparts supported the move and pointed out that 'our call is that Chiluba has done his bit and must go now and go away. It is our honest view that the student union in Zambia is acting in its natural obligation and taking its place as it has always occupied in history as the true vanguard of democracy (ZINASU News Release May 2001). To avoid the Zambian experience when student activists played a crucial part in blocking Chiluba's quest for extension of office, ZANU-PF established alternative student bodies such as the Zimbabwe Progressive Student Union and the Zimbabwe Congress of Students Union to counter ZINASU. As noted by Brian Raftopoulos (2001: 15) this was designed to push centers of dissent to the margins of political debate. The emergence of the Third Chimurenga should be historicised to appreciate that it had a long history. The unfinished business at the end of the liberation struggle, the incomplete decolonization process and

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unresolved questions of economic and social justice fought for and supported by student activists during and after the Second Chimurenga all contributed to out-break of the Third Chimurenga. The tendency to lump student activists together with members of the opposition as traitors, sell-outs and enemies when they criticise the leadership and government is unjustified as dissenting voices are health for the development of democracy in Zimbabwe.

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