

The Battle for Control of Zimbabwe's Cities: Exploring Governance Conflicts and Causal Links for Operation Murambatsvina (Operation Restore Order)

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Paper presented at the Social Science Research Seminar Series at the Batanai Campus on 26 November, 2005.

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyses urban governance conflictual situations that culminated in Operation Murambatsvina. At the centre of the conflict is shrinking democratic space caused by hostile interfaces between central government, local authorities and civil society. To wrestle authority from local authorities, central government uses a labyrinth of strategies ranging from introduction of parallel spheres of governance, unitary, conflictual and variable application of town planning and housing standards, politicizing poverty, and using ministerial directives to veto local authority decisions and therefore suppress popular participation in governance.

INTRODUCTION

Operation Murambatsvina refers to state sponsored demolitions of informal settlements and 'illegal' structures used for a variety of production and trade activities by informal traders in both urban and rural areas. The operation which started in Harare on 25 May 2005 lasted several months. 700 000 people across the country lost their homes, livelihoods or both. Bratton and Masunungure (2007) estimate that 54% of the adult population in Zimbabwe was affected by operation Murambatsvina either directly or indirectly. The official viewpoint was that demolitions and evictions were necessary in

order to rid urban areas of criminals, illegal immigrants, illegal foreign currency dealers and unsafe structures. Government's action was considered insensitive and received widespread condemnation both locally and internationally on a scale large enough to warrant independent investigation of Operation Murambatsvina by the United Nations Secretary General Special Envoy on Human Settlements Issues in Zimbabwe, Anna K. Tibaijuka and Bahame Tom Nyandunga a member of the African Union Commission on Human and People's Rights and Special Rapporteur Responsible for Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Internally Displaced Persons in Africa .

Operation Murambatsvina raised fundamental urban governance issues. The World Conference on Metropolitan Governance in 1993 noted that governance has five fundamental dimensions that include political, contextual, constitutional, legal, administrative and managerial (UNDP 2005). However, in some social and political contexts, governance activities are confined only to the political dimension and fail to transcend to the other dimensions. Governance is a hotly contested issue. To safeguard political space, urban politics have been militarized and are mired in violence (UN-HABITAT 2002; Punch 2004). Conflict arises due to lack of coincidence of interest between two or more parties resulting in action that may damage the other party's ability to pursue such interests ([Cramer 2003](#)). Interplay of a variety of structural and proximate causes generate and sustain conflicts. Nathan (2004) identified the following factors as structural causes of conflict in Africa, authoritarian rule, exclusion of minorities from governance, socio-economic marginalization and weak states lacking institutional capacity to manage conflicts. Causal factors for conflicts are not mutually exclusive.

Fortunately, not all conflicts result in violence ([Cramer 2003](#)). Vulnerability to conflict is indicative of presence of endemic crises in a country. Pre-conflict imperatives include good governance, effective institutional capacity for good governance, adherence to the rule of law, which presupposes existence of a competent and fair judiciary, police service and criminal justice system, acceptance of political plurality and diversity in state institutions and rule of law ([Brecher 1996](#)). Operation Murambatsvina embodies characteristics of both structural and social conflicts. Common elements in both types of conflicts are inability to accept pluralism and presence of self-serving institutional rigidities that generate and sustain conflict. Demolitions and evictions that were carried out under Operation Murambatsvina are symptomatic of broader latent and active political struggles.

The United Nations Fact Finding Mission to Zimbabwe comprehensively documented the socioeconomic impact of Operation Murambatsvina. Physical, psychological, social and economic insecurity are some of the externalities of Operation Murambatsvina ([Tibaijuka 2005](#)). Militarization of demolitions and evictions accentuated the conflict and underscored the impact of political malfeasance on urban governance. It also stretched the conflict's spatial boundaries from a national to a supranational arena. A constellation of actors was sucked into the problem- nexus, which pitted central government against the urban poor, private property interests, local authorities, civic groups, NGOs and international organizations. There are multiple fundamental and proximate causes of the conflict. At the basic level, however, the problematic may be perceived as arising from central government's wanton violation of housing and economic rights of the urban poor

by imposing unitary conditionalities to the right to urban life (Commission on Human Settlements 2001).

Housing is a public good. In Zimbabwe, Statutory Instrument 216 of 1994 of the Regional Town and Country Planning Act regulates the sector. Conflictual, variable and partisan interpretation and application of the statute is perceived as having precipitated Operation Murambatsvina. Restrictive and high building standards in the provisions of the statute are one reason for failure by urban local authorities to produce houses at levels at par with demand. Another reason is that revenue received by local authorities from central government is not proportional to population growth in cities (United Nations Observer Mission to Zimbabwe 2005). National cumulative housing backlog is one million units. Housing production is between 15 000 to 20 000 versus a target of 162 000 a year. Two in three people in Harare, for example, live in rented accommodation (Yoshikuno 2005).

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT AND URBAN GOVERNANCE ISSUES OF OPERATION MURAMBATSVINA

To increase majoritarian political domination in local government, central government changed the voting criteria from the colonial prescription of age, residency, citizenship and property ownership to age and residency ([Kamete 2002](#)). Provisions of Statutory Instrument 216 of 1994 of the Regional Town and Country Planning Act were centrally relaxed to allow for a proliferation of multifarious informal housing types, informal activities and non-residential activities in residential areas. To maximize loyalty among

party supporters, poverty was politicized through institutionalization of numerous self-help schemes. Start-up capital for such schemes was accessed on a partisan basis from the Ministry of Small and Medium Enterprises. This system of patronage bestowed entrepreneurial advantages on favoured political groups. School leavers were urged to create rather than look for employment.

Until 2002 the ruling party commanded a majority in national and local government elections. The urban poor were significant to the ruling party as actual and potential political capital. Privatization of local government politics by the political elite, occupation and control of local government influential positions is a stratagem to enhance private capital accumulation and to sustain control of urban resources ranging from free urban services, access to land and employment for party cadres (Yoshikuno 2005). When the urban electorate overwhelmingly rejected the draft constitution and subsequently voted out ZANU PF in urban local government elections in June 2002, the seeds of the current conflict were sown.

Operation Murambatsvina is perceived by many as a war of attrition and retribution against an electorate that voted for the opposition again in 2005. This is sustained by the fact that Zimbabwe's slum incidence rate at 3.4% per annum is one of the lowest in the world. Average slum incidence rate in Africa is 71.9% (African Ministers 2005). Desire for monopolistic political power is a dominant determination in the conflict. The conflict thus also arises from refusal by the dominant political elite to accept democratic political pluralism through forcibly dissipating the political capital for the opposition party. The

urban poor are no longer perceived as a political asset but an electoral risk (Kamete 2002). Their right to urban life was unilaterally and centrally revoked. Evicted families had to choose between self-rural repatriation and banishment to overcrowded holding camps. To effect evictions and demolitions, central government did a volte face by unpredictably and arbitrarily evoking and implementing, in their entirety, provisions of Statutory Instrument 216 of 1994 of the Regional Town and Country Planning Act. As a consequent, all informal settlements and illegal structures were razed to the ground.

Operation Murambatsvina raises fundamental questions concerning the state's ability to transition from a command and control relationship with local authorities. Democratic norms and values that underpin public administration presuppose a holistic approach to urban planning driven by a communicative bottom- up rather than a top-down activity (Querriene and Elander 2002). The Urban Councils Act of 1995 accords local authorities jurisdiction over their areas of governance. In essence, Operation Murambatsvina exposed fissures in the relationship between local authorities and central government. There was no plurality in its planning and implementation. Operation Murambatsvina was conceived at central levels of governance in unclear nontransparent circumstances indicative of a vertical and centralist approach to urban governance devoid of mutual trust and reciprocity (Bray 1999). With the exception of Harare City Council, local authorities were not consulted. There was no collective, broad based consultation and consensus on the modalities and reasons for implementing Operation Murambatsvina. However, as local and international criticism for demolitions and evictions mounted some local authorities were subsequently coerced into acquiescence. This was done to give

legitimacy to the infamous operation raising critical issues on the functionality of decentralization of local governance to local authorities. Operation Murambatsvina exposed the volatile and politically capricious nature of the relationship between central government and local authorities (Asmal 1996). While there should be an interrelationship and dependency between central government and local authorities conventional assumption dictates that the two spheres of governance be differentiated (Bray 1999; UN-HABITAT 2002). Based on an assessment of democratic norms and values that underpin public administration, Operation Murambatsvina was a strategy by central government to encroach on local authority governance spheres. It has been presupposed that the autocratic and centralist behaviour of central ministries and institutions stems from denial by central government to accept political pluralism post 1998 following the formation of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

Seventeen years of one political party rule institutional culture has curtailed the internalization of requisite conduct and behavior and attitudes that demonstrate broad and beyond the surface political pluralism. Operation Murambatsvina revealed underlying political struggles between central ministries and MDC controlled local authorities. Central government's fixation with thwarting the opposition party at every turn is presumed to be one of the causes for implementing Operation Murambatsvina irrespective of the attendant human and material costs. Instead of collaboration, there is gross rivalry and polarization between central ministries and local authorities (Carmody and Taylor 2005). The conflict that spawned Operation Murambatsvina is indicative of central government's encroachment in the sphere of governance of local authorities by

centralizing decision making power and limiting the ability of citizens to influence their political, social and economic environment (O'Brien 2002). This is a case of conditional decentralization with central government calling for trade offs between representative democracy on the one hand and political largesse on the other. This is congruent with Blair (2005) 's observations that apart from the rhetoric central governments have often not really wanted to devolve real power to local authorities.

Political and social conflicts in urban areas are also sustained through the introduction of resident ministers in the two largest cities of Bulawayo and Harare. The development is anomalous because it fortifies vertical bureaucratic rigidities and central government's political gridlock on local authorities (Panos Institute 2000). Because posts of resident minister are political appointments, what central government has done in essence is to introduce parallel and competing spheres of urban governance by adding yet another political sphere of governance in geographical areas where local authorities have a mandate to govern on their own initiative within the jurisdiction of national laws (Asmal 1996). Such strategies are geared towards appropriation of local governance space and causing confusion as to what sphere is in charge of which mandates ([Adebanwi 2005](#)). These stratagems are used by central government to penetrate and manipulate lower levels through recentralization of activities. It causes functional duplication and political fragmentation in cities by allowing distinct political power enclaves to develop. Other state centric strategies to wrestle power from local authorities include the line ministry's arbitrary suspension and/or dismissal of elected mayors and councilors, imposing a partisan Commission to run the affairs of Harare without consultation with the electorate,

refusal to hold mayoral and council elections when they are due, vetoing local authorities' budgets and staff recruitment. These strategies subvert urban residents' legitimate participation in local governance ([Kamete 2002](#)).

Cities by their very nature are heterogeneous. Operation Murambatsvina is symptomatic of attempts by government institutions at social engineering as demonstrated by their corresponding desire to shape the character of cities (Panos Institute 2000). This parallels historical racial inequality of access to urban areas. To establish political hegemony the colonial government used influx control regulations among other constrictive legislation to exclude indigenous people from urban areas ([Carmody and Taylor 2005](#)). Twenty-five years after independence, income differentiated social barriers are replacing racial divides. Contrary to the objectives of the Millennium Development Summit, the poor are perceived as a problem. Their humble dwellings are seen as spoiling the visual amenity of the urban landscape and not as a solution to urban housing problems (Kombe and Kreibich 2001; Syagga, Mitullah and Gitau 2001). Operation Murambatsvina destroyed communal safety nets and socio-economic coping mechanisms of the urban poor. This happened at a time when global initiatives are underway to make cities more inclusive by advocating for implementation of pro-poor policies. 'Social and economic rights are fundamental rights not matters of policy aspiration' (Asmal 1996).

Using state agents to effect demolitions and eviction orders demonstrates how central government uses extra-legal measures to exert control over citizens and local authorities (Balala 1999). State institutional culture is averse to information disclosures,

accountability to citizens and other stakeholders. One of the nomenclatures of Operation Murambatsvina is ‘Operation Tsunami’ symbolic of the lack of timeousness in information dissemination concerning government’s objectives and the material substance of the operation.

Good urban governance aims inter alia to promote inclusive, and collective decision-making that allows for shared responsibility for development (Barten, Montiel, Espinoza and Morales 2002; UN-HABITAT 2005a). Grant (2002) suggests a 3 way dynamic between local government, civil society and central government. Dynamic partnerships, engagement and consensus formation with marginalized groups and all stakeholders based on equality, respect and reciprocity is a vital precondition in a problem nexus of the magnitude of Operation Murambatsvina. Operation Murambatsvina showed the capriciousness of central government’s motives pertaining to decentralization of urban governance to local authorities. This clearly demonstrates that the state has no obligation to go into partnership with local authorities based on equality or to narrow the gap between citizens and the government.

Habitat 11 endorsed decentralization of power from national to local authorities as a means to achieve greater accessibility, effectiveness, transparency and accountability. Decentralization is also necessary to offset unresponsive and bureaucratic decision making at the centre by promoting an enabling environment for public participation in policy formulation (Barten, Montiel, Espinoza and Morales 2002). Good governance presupposes ‘governance with the people and not for the people’ (Bray 1999). Operation

Murambatsvina endorses observations in the literature that meaningful decentralization is constrained under conditions where central government institutions are not democratic. By uprooting whole communities from informal settlements to rural destinations and overcrowded holding camps, Operation Murambatsvina violated people's rights to political, social and economic participation in urban governance (Grant 2002). Operation Murambatsvina typifies the indifference and extremities that some governments will take to hide the victims of their structural policy failures regardless of the associated human and material costs.

CONCLUSION

The United Nations Fact Finding Mission to Zimbabwe galvanized the world's attention on Operation Murambatsvina. Condemnation of the exercise by the international community forced central government to halt the operation. Intra-national efforts to resolve the conflict were marked by distrust. Lack of information disclosures made it difficult for mediators to keep abreast of what was going on. Access to some holding camps was also denied.

'Operation Garikai' (Operation Live Well) which is the antithesis of Operation Murambatsvina has already attracted controversy in that some of the houses under construction are being built on private land in violation of property rights and court injunctions to halt construction on such private property. Disregard for the rule of law predisposes the country to more conflict. The Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights are working on various cases that they hope to bring before the courts pertaining to unlawful

destruction of property during Operation Murambatsvina. A number of people whose properties were demolished had valid leases and permits.

Tendering procedures for building materials are not transparent and are likely to be awarded on a partisan basis. There are divergent views as to whether it is victims of Operation Murambatsvina who will benefit from the houses under construction. Under conditions of generalized housing scarcity it is likely that houses will be allocated to those who pay allegiance and/or are affiliated to powerful politicians (Di Lullo 2005). Local authorities have limited authority to allocate local resources. Using the army to destroy houses adds another dimension to the discord. There is doubt, insecurity and unease over deployment of the army in an internal policing role or in areas where civilians have the requisite competencies. Lack of or shallow involvement of the affected people and civic representatives in Operation Garikai is not reflexive of good urban governance. To balance the interests of central government and local authorities there is need to configure relationships between central government, local authorities and civic society based on consensual participatory decision-making.

Sidelining local authorities in decision-making may derail efforts to come up with coherent overall development plans. Relationships between central government and local authorities will remain polarized unless political pluralism is institutionalized. There is also need for democratization and decentralization to be constitutionalized. According to Issar (2004), apart from a series of legislative enactments and directives, which sought to democratize and strengthen local government, in the 1974 constitution, which is in use in

the country, decentralization is not constitutionally regulated. Management of rates of urbanization should not be used as a ruse to deprive poor people of the right to live in urban areas or violate their constitutional rights whatsoever.

According to UN-Habitat (2005b) good governance is critical for poverty alleviation. It is not achieved by entrenching the interests of the dominant power elite at national or sub-national level. Local authorities must be a distinct sphere of governance in their own right in the overall national structure of governance (Bray 1999; UN-HABITAT 2002).

Sustainable urbanization does not entail banishment or obliteration of the urban poor. It entails the design and implementation in a transparent and democratic manner innovative development-oriented policy after genuine and meaningful consultation with all stakeholders including the marginalized in order to meet multiple, competing, overlapping and contradictory interests (Barten, Montiel, Espinoza and Morales 2002). There is need to harness the emergent forces of urbanization for socio-economic and political development. Demolitions and evictions are only short-term solutions to fundamental national problems that require solutions. In the context of global initiatives and debate to reduce poverty by 2015, it is indeed imperative for national efforts to be channeled towards creating partnerships with the marginalized and the excluded so that their needs and voices can help to shape the urban socioeconomic and political landscape. Vibrant democracy in all spheres of governance is a national and global imperative. It is indeed a truism that ‘bad governance is a burden borne by the poor in society’ (UN-Habitat 2005a).

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