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Episodes of Ambiguity: Steps towards Socialism in Zimbabwe, 1980-1985¹

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Abstract

With the benefit of hindsight, and in light of the current crisis, a growing number of authors have concluded that Zanu (PF) and Robert Mugabe's relationship with socialism was never more than a cynical slogan employed to mobilise the masses. By contrast, this paper will argue that such interpretations are mistaken. Indeed, an examination of Zanu (PF)'s welfare initiatives in the period 1980-1985 uncovers 'episodes of ambiguity' pointing towards a possible socialist future. Yet as this paper also acknowledges, these moments coexisted with and were soon superseded by authoritarian alternatives. The particular nature of Zimbabwe in this period has been much debated. Both at the time and subsequently, many observers questioned why the country had failed to experience the socialist transformation that Zanu (PF) once promised, given the fact that in the early 1980s the government was implementing a type of socialism that was loosely constructed around welfare provisions. This paper revisits the early 1980s when Zanu (PF) to some extent engaged with socialism on more than a rhetorical level; when a socialist future seemed possible.

Introduction

As the current crisis in Zimbabwe shows few signs of abating, there is a tendency in journalistic and popular accounts to write the country off from the moment Mugabe came to power.² In doing so, there is a danger of losing sight of the brave new dawn heralded by Independence in 1980. This paper revisits a moment, however constrained and fleeting, in the early 1980s when a transition to socialism seemed possible. By 1979, Zanu (PF) led by Robert Mugabe emerged as the dominant liberation movement within the country, and stressed that the 'Second Chimurenga', Zimbabwe's liberation struggle, was ideologically 'based on scientific socialism'.³ Additionally, there was the widely held belief that once independence had been achieved, "lateral communication",⁴ that is, dialogue with the masses, would shape governmental policies. When this commitment was questioned, Ministers were quick to

¹ The author wishes to thank Ian Phimister and Daryl Gowlett for their valuable comments on earlier drafts.

² For an example of this literature see David Blair, *Degrees in Violence - Robert Mugabe and the Struggle for Power in Zimbabwe* (London: Continuum, 2003); Martin Meredith, *Our Votes Our Guns: Robert Mugabe and the Tragedy of Zimbabwe* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003); and Heidi Holland, *Dinner with Mugabe: The Untold Story of a Freedom Fighter Who Became a Tyrant* (London: Allen Lane, 2008).

³ Zanu (PF), *Official Press Release issued by the Central Committee* (Chimoi: Zanu (PF), August 1979).

⁴ Zanu (PF), *Official Press Release issued by the Central Committee* (Chimoi: Zanu (PF), August 1979).

reassure the masses that socialism, loosely constructed as social welfare provisions, was not just a rhetorical device used in the context of wartime propaganda. While the march towards socialism would be a gradual process, Zanu (PF) was indeed committed to a socialist future.

In the event, this commitment never materialised and by about 1985 it was clear that whatever Zanu (PF)'s relationship with socialism might once have been, it was giving way to the strictures of structural adjustment, formally adopted in 1990. With the benefit of hindsight, and in light of the current crisis, a growing number of authors have concluded that Zanu (PF) and Robert Mugabe's relationship with socialism was never more than a cynical slogan employed to mobilise the masses. By contrast, this paper will argue that such interpretations are mistaken. In doing so, it will re-visit those scholars, prominent amongst whom is Christine Sylvester, who recognised that in this period, Zimbabwe was "somewhere in between socialist and capitalist parameters".⁵ Indeed, examination of Zanu (PF)'s welfare initiatives in the period 1980-1985 uncovers 'episodes of ambiguity'; ambiguous in as much as they opened up possibilities which pointed towards a possible socialist future, after the so-called 'national democratic' phase.⁶ As the then Minister of Labour, Kumbirai Kangai puts it, "the goals we were fighting for have not been abandoned... We believe we are going through a national democratic revolution whereby the institutions, the society have to be democratised. This is a national democratic phase but it is also a transition to socialism".⁷ Yet as this paper also acknowledges, these moments coexisted with and were soon superseded by authoritarian alternatives.⁸

According to David Moore, "much debate on the nature of Zimbabwean politics and ideology has focused on whether or not the 'revolution failed', and whether or not the petit-bourgeois leaders of the struggle for national liberation had the intention or were capable of transforming that battle into a socialist one".⁹ Consequently the particular nature of Zimbabwe in this period has been much debated, with many observers questioning why the country had failed to experience the socialist transformation that Zanu (PF) once promised.

⁵ Christine Sylvester, *Zimbabwe The Terrain of Contradictory Development* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1991), 183.

⁶ For further clarification of the use of the term 'ambiguity' in this context, see Robert Davies, "The Transition to Socialism in Zimbabwe: Some Areas for Debate." In Colin Stoneman, ed., *Zimbabwe's Prospects: Issues of Race, Class and Capital in Southern Africa* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 18-32.

⁷ The Ministry of Education and Culture, "Education: the road to Zimbabwe's future," *The Herald*, 1 May 1982: 12.

⁸ This article does not aim to assess the nature of Zimbabwe from independence to the present day, nor offer a defence of the actions of Robert Mugabe and Zanu (PF). Rather it aims to challenge a deterministic and Whiggish interpretation of Zimbabwe's history.

⁹ David B. Moore, "The ideological formation of the Zimbabwean Ruling Class," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 17 (1991): 472.

Accordingly, this article will firstly discuss the historiography of the early independence years, and secondly examine Zanu (PF)'s initial reforms in education, healthcare and labour. In doing so, it will suggest that initially the Party did follow a socialist agenda. The emerging authoritarian nature of the regime, as well as factors which may have mitigated against further socialist transformations will also be examined. The conclusion argues that by 1985 or so, elements within Zanu (PF) were becoming increasingly divorced from the socialist positions they had adopted towards the close of the liberation struggle.

The literature concerning Zimbabwe in the period 1980 to 1985 is characterised by two dominant positions. Most monographs written before 1990 were largely optimistic about the government and the course of action it was taking. In the first ten years of independence, a number of publications were written from the perspective of Zanu (PF) regarding the country's development. Herbert Ushewokunze, Canaan Banana, Fay Chung and Arthur Patsanza amongst others, were keen to emphasise the worst effects of Zimbabwe's colonial legacy, whilst simultaneously asserting and emphasising the socialist ideals of the new regime.¹⁰ Indeed in the early 1980s many writers were keen to both examine and explain Zanu (PF)'s adoption of socialism and further examine how scientific socialism would be implemented within the country. Fay Chung and Emmanuel Ngara, for example, stressed that Zimbabwean socialism "rejects all forms of exploitation, whether it be the exploitation of producers by the owners of capital, or the oppression of subject peoples by their rulers".¹¹ However, in subsequent passages the writers also noted that in the Zimbabwean context that "what socialism advocates... is not absolute equality but equal opportunity".¹² Furthermore, that "Marxist-Leninism is not a dogma but a guide to action which much be harmonized with our own historical, cultural and social circumstances".¹³ Consequently, in line with a broader continent-wide tradition, Zanu-PF's socialism was interpreted to be context specific, even as it tracked African post-colonial notions of socialism defined in development terms.

Christine Sylvester, while approaching the subject from a different perspective than the aforementioned authors, also suggests that in this period Zanu (PF) were "setting forth a revolutionary and action platform premised on

¹⁰ Herbert Ushewokunze, *An Agenda for Zimbabwe* (Harare: College Press Publishers, 1990); Canaan Banana, ed., *Turmoil and Tenacity Zimbabwe 1890-1990* (Harare: College Press, 1989); Fay Chung, "Education: Revolution or Reform," in Colin Stoneman, ed., *Zimbabwe's Prospects: Issues of Race, Class, State and Capital in Southern Africa* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 118-133; Arthur Patsanza, *Our Zimbabwe - An Element of Political Economy* (Harare: Govazvimwe Mukuruwenzira Publishers, 1988).

¹¹ Fay Chung and Emmanuel Ngara, *Socialism, Education and Development: A Challenge to Zimbabwe* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1985), 5.

¹² Chung and Ngara, 5.

¹³ Chung and Ngara, 12.

socialism”.¹⁴ Indeed, even writers such as Jeffrey Herbst and Tor Skalmes who subsequently argue that Zimbabwe had abandoned socialism by 1990, at least acknowledge moves towards socialism in the preceding decade.¹⁵

However, as early as 1983, Andre Astrow was suggesting that Zanu (PF) was entirely lacking in socialist credentials.¹⁶ He argued that after independence, the new ‘petty bourgeois’ leadership misdirected the socialism of the liberation struggle, creating affluence for themselves at the expense of the working classes. As such, the promise of the revolution lay with the working classes who could not fulfil their role because of the policies the government were pursuing. According to Astrow, the government’s decision to plan on the basis of stabilising capitalism meant that the country would never experience a socialist transformation. While Astrow’s overall conclusion may seem strikingly accurate with the benefit of hindsight, his attempt to read off political practice from class position was too deterministic for some tastes.

The second phase of the historiography, generally written after 1990, was to a large extent dominated by a sense of disenchantment with the government. Jenkins and Knight,¹⁷ like Raftopoulos and Savage,¹⁸ although writing from very different perspectives, discuss the associated problems Zimbabwe faced because of limited societal transformation. In their analysis, Jenkins and Knight argue that the policy of reconciliation employed by the government was in the main a rhetorical device, as after independence Zimbabwe experienced limited structural changes. Furthermore, while Zanu (PF) may have felt constrained because of fears of ‘White Flight’, South Africa’s destabilisation campaign and the Lancaster House agreement, Jenkins and Knight argue that it was the government’s own policies which hindered the transition to socialism. In doing so, they suggest that the regime’s concentration on micro rather than macroeconomics through the policy of ‘growth with equity’ was inherently flawed. Raftopoulos and Savage, in their edited collection, attempted to reconcile the increasingly authoritarian nature of Zimbabwe since 2000 with the image of the country as a “beacon of hope at the time of independence”.¹⁹ They also assess the ambiguous implications of the policy of reconciliation, and in doing so highlight the contradictory position whereby Zanu (PF) was actually emphasising “the centrality of race in Zimbabwe’s history”.²⁰ Hevina

¹⁴ Sylvester, 68.

¹⁵ Jeffrey Herbst, *State Politics in Zimbabwe* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Press, 1990); Tor Skalmes, *The Politics of Economic Reform in Zimbabwe - continuity and change in development* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995).

¹⁶ Andre Astrow, *Zimbabwe: A Revolution That Lost its Way?* (London: Zed, 1983).

¹⁷ Carolyn Jenkins and John Knight, *The Economic Decline of Zimbabwe - Neither Growth Nor Equity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

¹⁸ Brian Raftopoulos and Tyrone Savage, eds., *Zimbabwe Injustice and Political Reconciliation* (Cape Town: Rondebosch: Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, 2004).

¹⁹ Raftopoulos and Savage, v.

²⁰ Raftopoulos and Savage, xx.

Dashwood, by contrast, argues that the key to understanding the current political situation in Zimbabwe requires a thorough analysis of its class position.²¹ For Dashwood, the key development after independence was “the embourgeoisement of the ruling elite... [which led to the] embracing of a capitalist ideology”,²² and largely contributed to the deviation and abandonment of the large scale welfare initiatives instigated in the early 1980s.²³

When assessing the historiography, it is clear that there has been a significant shift in the perspectives concerning the first five or so years of independent Zimbabwe. While the arguments outlined above are not exhaustive, they do reflect the broader historiographical trends which were dominant for this period. Interpretations have moved from broadly positive and supportive of Mugabe and Zanu (PF) to exclusively negative and condemnatory of the regime in Harare. It is this swing of the historiographical pendulum that arguably has gone too far.

In order to assess the socialist nature of Zimbabwe in the early 1980s it is useful to re-examine the party’s adoption of socialism alongside an appraisal of governmental initiatives in the early part of the decade. It must be remembered that Zanu (PF)’s adoption of the two stage theory of democratic revolution indicated that change would be gradual; indeed, the party itself accepted that “the mere adoption of socialism as an ideology does not mean automatic success”.²⁴ While the first stage of the revolution incorporated the overthrow of the Smith regime with the attainment of independence, the second phase was problematic and ambiguous, as the implication was that the achievement of independence was only the first step to true liberation. However, a closer examination of the government’s attempts in the early 1980s to reform the education, healthcare and labour sectors shows that they had arguably embarked on a course which was heading towards the fulfilment of the theory and the de facto transition to socialism; even if taken to be welfare reformism and development in this early stage. For this period the main published primary sources are newspapers such as *The Herald*, alongside various government supported periodicals. As the thirty year rule is still in force at the National Archives of Zimbabwe, this means that there are no other available sources in the public sphere. Consequently, this article draws on some of the limited primary material that is available.

²¹ Hevina Dashwood, *Zimbabwe, The Political Economy of Transformation* (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

²² Dashwood, 3-4.

²³ See also Staffan Darnolf and Liisa Laasko, eds., *Twenty Years of Independence in Zimbabwe From Liberation to Authoritarianism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), particularly the article by Brian Raftopoulos and Daniel Compagnon, *Indigenization, the State Bourgeoisie and Neo-authoritarian Politics*, 15-34.

²⁴ Chung and Ngara, 37-38.

In 1979 there were 819,586 children in 2,401 primary schools, an average of 341 children per school.²⁵ As a result one of the government's main priorities was to democratise access to education, as it was felt that a heavy emphasis on education was "the main tool for developing...Zimbabwe's future".²⁶ Governmental policy was that of "education with production" with an emphasis, according to Zvongo, on "producing a politically conscious nation, aware of and devoted to the promotion of the welfare state".²⁷ By 1982 the number of children in primary school rose to 1,903,917, a 132% increase, with the number of primary schools virtually doubling to 4,012; an impressive growth rate over a three year period.²⁸ A particular success in this period was the number of children entering secondary schooling,²⁹ something that according to the government demonstrated that "education is now readily accessible to all people, particularly at primary and junior secondary school level".³⁰ Furthermore, in 1983, Zimbabwe's national literacy campaign was launched, which emphasised the importance of adult education. The government also decided that new educational methods were to be employed, as the rote learning favoured in Rhodesia was abolished in favour of an increased emphasis on scientific and technological education. Therefore in the education sector it seems that the promotion of socialism as a force 'which guarantees all round development... in the interests of society',³¹ was a key concern for the government as Zimbabwe's youth were particularly targeted. As Zanu (PF) had adopted the two stage theory of democratic revolution, in the early 1980s they were so far fulfilling their role in this, in as much as access to education became much broader based.

Once in power, Zanu (PF) attempted to redress the inequality of and access to healthcare, as according to Loewenson and Sanders, "the challenge at independence lay in reorganising a deliberately fragmented, inaccessible and oppressive form of healthcare, into one which would serve the needs of all and respond to changing social and economic demands".³² The official governmental policy was that of "planning with equity", which emphasised the need for a fully integrated health service which benefited the previously marginalised members of the population. The government also realised the

²⁵ The Ministry of Education and Culture, "Education: the road to Zimbabwe's future," *The Herald*, 17 April 1982: 12.

²⁶ The Ministry of Education and Culture, 12.

²⁷ Rungano Zvobgo, "Education and the Challenge of Independence," In Ibbo Mandaza, ed., *Zimbabwe: The Political Economy of Transition, 1980-1986* (Dakar: Codesria book series, 1986), 334.

²⁸ The Ministry of Education and Culture, 12.

²⁹ The number of children entering secondary education increased from 66,215 in 1979 to 218,430 in 1982; The Ministry of Education and Culture, 12

³⁰ The Ministry of Education and Culture, 12

³¹ E. Krustkahn, "Socialism, the way forward," *The Herald*, 6 September 1984: 4.

³² Rene Loewenson and David Sanders, "The Political Economy of Health and Nutrition," in Colin Stoneman, ed., *Zimbabwe's Prospects: Issues of Race, Class and Capital in Southern Africa* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 137.

need to “move away from the inappropriate hospital based curative system [to develop a] system that is relevant to our circumstances”.³³ Consequently, in 1981 the government launched the village health worker programme, an attempt to bring healthcare within reach of those in the most remote areas. Village health workers were trained “to provide basic health education and health care for their communities”,³⁴ with an emphasis placed on problem solving within the community. In 1982 a diarrhoeal disease programme was implemented, as diarrhoea-related deaths were identified as a key priority. These initiatives fitted in with a wider pattern of extensive childhood immunization and a drive towards improved sanitation. Additionally, by 1985 Zimbabwe had the highest use of contraception in sub-Saharan Africa, demonstrating an emphasis on education within healthcare.

Zanu (PF) identified its third welfare priority as that of labour reform. For much of the colonial era there was no legally recognised African representation in the workplace because of the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1934, which excluded Africans from the term ‘employee’. While there had been some limited reforms in the 1950s, there was little sense of equality on the factory floor, with women often facing the most stringent forms of discrimination. Consequently, the labour system needed to be completely reworked. According to Sachikonye, “the advent of independence... assumed added significance to the workers”,³⁵ and gave hope to a workforce who believed independence would positively alter their circumstances. Perhaps the most significant piece of legislation to be passed in the early 1980s was the 1985 Labour Relations Act (LRA). Far reaching in its objectives, but primarily concerned with introducing a comprehensive list of employment regulations, in doing so it built upon previous labour legislation, and defined the “fundamental rights of workers and unfair labour practices”.³⁶ Furthermore, “the passage of the LRA represented a major advance for the working class to the degree that its fundamental rights have been formally specified and guaranteed”.³⁷ Also in this period the second major achievement of the government was the founding of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions,³⁸ alongside the establishment of a national minimum wage, and the introduction of maternity leave. Consequently, as the second stage of the two stage theory argues that socialism is only achievable once the national democratic stage has been carried through, this in turn suggests that a period of transition from capitalism to socialism is seen as necessary. Arguably, Zanu (PF) was on its way to fulfilling the promises of the

³³ The Ministry of Health. “Health for all is the government’s target,” *The Herald*, 17 April 1982: 16.

³⁴ The Ministry of Health, 16.

³⁵ Lloyd Sachikonye, “State, Capital and Trade Union,” in Ibbo Mandaza, ed., *Zimbabwe: The Political Economy of Transition, 1980-1986* (Dakar: Codesria book series, 1986), 252.

³⁶ Sachikonye, 260.

³⁷ Sachikonye, 263.

³⁸ For an example of the increased importance placed on Zimbabwe’s industry see Kumbirai Kangai, “New Laws give workers a better life,” *The Herald*, 17 April 1982: 6.

revolution, as the democratisation of social resources such as access to education and healthcare were prioritised, alongside the implementation of labour reforms.

However, in this same period, it also appears that Zimbabwe's commitment to socialism was tempered by the desire to stabilise the economy through the continuation of capitalist production and markets. What precisely were the factors which hindered the larger scale implementation of socialism? While historians disagree over the precise inhibiting effects of the Lancaster House constitutional agreement, it is widely acknowledged that its provisions did have an impact on the new government. Jenkins and Knight believe that "for the first decade after attaining independence Zimbabwe's new government was constrained in implementing a full socialist programme by the constitution to which it had agreed in 1979".³⁹ Indeed, in September 1979 Zanu (PF) had anticipated that the Lancaster House conference would pose a serious threat to the revolution,⁴⁰ as land could only be sold on a 'willing buyer, willing seller basis', and furthermore that the tiny white minority had one fifth of the seats in parliament reserved for it. Both constraints had huge implications for a country which was supposed to be rapidly transforming in the interests of the black majority.⁴¹ As Mugabe was keen to encourage the white population to remain in Zimbabwe, this meant that radical land distribution was necessarily put on hold, being deferred for at least ten years until the Lancaster House agreement expired. Furthermore, according to Palmer, "the issue of land reform [was] so high on the political agenda a decade ago, but... a curious silence fell for much of the 1980s".⁴² While from 1980-1985, 2,298,241 hectares of land had been purchased by the government, many commentators insisted that this reappropriation was not substantial enough.⁴³ The silence identified by Palmer was explained by Moyo in his assertion that "what seems clear, given the interest of the 'West' in the resolution of Zimbabwe's 'land question', is that there is growing international consensus and local acceptance that there may really be no 'land question' worth talking about in 1986, given Zimbabwe's star agricultural performance".⁴⁴ Factors such as these, according to the government, had "greatly retarded the resettlement programme".⁴⁵

³⁹ Jenkins and Knight, 25.

⁴⁰ For an example of this type of literature, see the *Zimbabwe News*, especially vol. 11 no. 3, September-October 1979.

⁴¹ In this period, Robert Mugabe was advised by both Samora Machel (President of Mozambique) and Julius Nyerere (President of Tanzania) about the disabling effects which a radical restructuring of the economy can bring in terms of "White Flight". Consequently, it is widely believed that this advice was a driving factor for the post-Independence policy of "reconciliation" employed by Zanu (PF).

⁴² Robin Palmer, "Land Reform in Zimbabwe 1980-1990," *African Affairs* 355 (April 1990): 163.

⁴³ Quoted in *Parade* (October 1989), p. 9, cited in Robin Palmer, 170.

⁴⁴ Sam Moyo, "The Land Question," in Ibbo Mandaza, ed., *Zimbabwe: The Political Economy of Transition, 1980-1986* (Dakar: Codesria book series, 1986), 165.

⁴⁵ "Land to the People," *Zimbabwe News* 17, no. 3 (March 1986): 25.

Consequently when “during the political struggle... Zanu... [had] committed themselves to radical land reform on achieving power”,⁴⁶ the government’s inability to fulfil their promise did little to bolster their socialist credentials.

Another factor which is widely thought to have hindered Zimbabwe’s transition to socialism was South Africa’s campaign of ‘destabilisation’. Apart from the historic ties between South Africa and Rhodesia, South African capital was as influential in Zimbabwe as it had been in Rhodesia, with South Africa being the economic powerhouse of the region.⁴⁷ As described by Martin and Johnson, South Africa’s destabilisation campaign “can be subdivided into seven categories – direct military action including sabotage, clandestine support for banditry, assassination, espionage, economic sabotage propaganda and disinformation”.⁴⁸ Perhaps most importantly, “Zimbabwe’s...ties to South Africa, including the fact that it inherited Pretoria as its largest trading partner at independence, left it particularly vulnerable to economic destabilisation”.⁴⁹ Furthermore, according to Sylvester, “soon after Mugabe took office, South Africa began to impose sanctions against its neighbour, abrogating a long-standing bilateral trade agreement... disallowing Zimbabwean migrant labour and deporting forty thousand mine workers”.⁵⁰ Consequently it seems clear that South Africa’s campaign of destabilisation limited the room for manoeuvre enjoyed by the Mugabe government in the early 1980s. While this paper does not attempt to exculpate the actions of Zanu (PF), it seems entirely reasonable to suggest that Mugabe and the party tempered their socialist outlook because of fears of destabilisation. It appears as though Samora Machel’s observation that “there are two things you cannot choose, neighbours and brothers”,⁵¹ had for Zimbabwe never been more apt.

While “during the 1980s the new government felt constrained in its ability to engage in too radical a redistribution of wealth from whites to blacks”,⁵² and factors such as destabilisation may have tempered the government’s socialism, it appears that by the middle of the 1980s Zanu (PF)’s earlier welfare initiatives were not sustainable. Although many scholars see the “signs of stagnation and

⁴⁶ Palmer, 165.

⁴⁷ According to Carol Thompson, ‘South African investment in Rhodesia was estimated at US \$330 million for 1976 and \$1.03 billion in 1979’, Carol B. Thompson, *Challenge to Imperialism – The Frontline States in the Liberation of Zimbabwe* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1985), 154.

⁴⁸ David Martin and Phyllis Johnson, “Zimbabwe: ‘Apartheid’s Dilemma,’” in Phyllis Johnson and David Martin, eds., *Destructive Engagement: Southern Africa at War* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House for the Southern African Research Documentation Centre, 1986), 43.

⁴⁹ Martin and Johnson, 67.

⁵⁰ Sylvester, 77.

⁵¹ Martin and Johnson, 46.

⁵² Jenkins and Knight, 30.

maybe even a reversal of the trend”,⁵³ as evidence that Zanu (PF) were not interested in implementing a socialist agenda, it could also be argued that it was the demands of the market and particularly the drought of 1982/3, that caused Zanu (PF) to turn their attentions elsewhere. Indeed according to Agere, “the fundamental problem...is that [welfare systems are] influenced by the demands of capital”.⁵⁴ This suggestion gives further weight to the suggestion that Zanu (PF) were inhibited in implementing a fully socialist agenda because of a variety of external factors.

This article has so far proposed that in the early 1980s, Zanu (PF) were taking tentative steps to democratise and ultimately socialise the country, but were also inhibited by market forces. However, by the mid-1980s, the defining moment of *Gukurahundi* would suggest that this position had been overlaid by a ruthless authoritarianism. The origins and the consequences of the massacres in western Zimbabwe are a hugely complex topic;⁵⁵ suffice to say the Fifth Brigade who were responsible for *Gukurahundi* were Mugabe’s self-styled personal militia, and were created with the intention to ‘plough’ and ‘reconstruct’ Zimbabwe. In doing so, they introduced a “qualitatively new and more horrific kind of war”.⁵⁶ Arguably perpetrating genocide in their actions to eliminate Joshua Nkomo’s Zapu stronghold, the Fifth Brigade’s attacks were directed towards civilians, political opponents and civil servants, suggesting that this was an exercise in ‘total warfare’. Beatings, rape and torture were the key weapons employed by Mugabe’s personal army, alongside stringent curfews. Public executions were commonplace, with victims being forced to dig their own graves before they were shot. Consequently “Five Brigade were destined to become the most controversial army unit ever formed in Zimbabwe”.⁵⁷

The employment of the Fifth Brigade was an attempt by Mugabe to eliminate opposition and consolidate his power, a characteristic much in evidence in the subsequent 1985 election. During this period, reports of ‘terror and abduction’

⁵³ Colin Stoneman and Lionel Cliffe, *Zimbabwe: Politics, Economics and Society* (London: Pinter, 1989), 174.

⁵⁴ Samuel Takarina-Agere, “Progress and Problems in the Healthcare Delivery System,” in Ibbo Mandaza, ed., *Zimbabwe: the Political Economy of Transition, 1980-1986* (Dakar: Codesria book series, 1986), 374.

⁵⁵ See for instance, Ian Phimister, “The making and meanings of the massacres in Matabeleland,” *Development Dialogue* 50 (December 2008): 197-214; Shari Eppel, “‘Gukurahundi’ The need for truth and reparation,” in Brian Raftopoulos and Tyrone Savage, eds., *Zimbabwe Injustice and Political Reconciliation* (Cape Town: Rondebosch: Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, 2004), 43-63.

⁵⁶ Joycelyn Alexander, “Dissident Perspectives on Zimbabwe’s Post-Independence War,” *Journal of the International African Institute* 68 (1998): 159.

⁵⁷ Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, *Breaking the Silence Report – A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands, 1980-1988* (Harare: Catholic Commission for Peace and Justice, 1997), 45.

were commonplace,⁵⁸ with Zanu-Zapu rivalry reaching its peak. Despite the government slogan of “Your vote is your secret”, it is clear that they did all they could to reinforce their dominance, using whatever means necessary. Polling stations were strategically placed to benefit Zanu (PF), and the process of registering people as members of the electorate was deliberately difficult and time consuming. The result of the election signalled further consolidation of Zanu (PF)’s power, with the party winning 64 seats (80% of the vote). The election was characterised by a strong anti-Nkomo sentiment, and after the election mock funerals were carried out for Zapu and Nkomo; “at one such funeral in Kadoma, a live bull (the Zapu election symbol) was actually axed to death in front of a huge crowd to symbolise the death of Zapu”.⁵⁹ By 1985, it was becoming even clearer that Zanu (PF)’s democratic socialist doctrine had given way to authoritarianism, and that this imperative was clearly in the ascendant.

Perhaps one way of beginning to understand the apparent ‘failure of the revolution’ and subsequent unsuccessful transition to socialism is to briefly re-examine the position of both Zanu (PF) and Zapu in the latter stages of the liberation struggle. While both parties were brought together under the Patriotic Front coalition and had the shared objective of bringing down the Smith regime, the earlier 1963 split and the formation of Zanu had profoundly altered the nature of the liberation struggle. While according to John Saul, Zanu distinguished themselves from Zapu in terms of an early commitment to armed struggle, he sees that the 1963 split was actually precipitated by “a confrontation between a faction of educated, middle class, rather elitist elements who had joined the nationalist movement in the early sixties... and those who had much firmer roots among the migrant workers and the peasantry itself”.⁶⁰ It was the former faction which would breakaway from Zapu to form Zanu, while the latter group remained under Nkomo’s leadership. Consequently the disparate class position of the liberation leaders proved decisive in shaping the rhetoric of both Zapu and Zanu during the ‘Second Chimurenga’ and after the latter assumed office in 1980.

Yet even this perspective may overemphasize the differences between Zapu and Zanu. Ranger, for example, claimed that “Robert Mugabe offered no prospect of the man who might start from scratch. He was one of the ‘old guard’ leadership”.⁶¹ Accordingly it was this clash between the ‘old guard’, and those who had embraced the imperatives of guerrilla struggle who sought to

⁵⁸ “State of Emergency to Continue in Zimbabwe,” *Argus*, 26 February 1984.

⁵⁹ Masipula Sithole, “The General Elections 1979-1985,” in Ibbo Mandaza, ed., *Zimbabwe: the Political Economy of Transition, 1980-1986* (Dakar: Codesria book series, 1986), 92.

⁶⁰ John Saul, “Transforming the struggle in Zimbabwe,” in John Saul, *The State and Revolution in Eastern Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1979), 112.

⁶¹ Terence Ranger, “The changing of the old guard - Robert Mugabe and the revival of Zanu,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 7 (1980): 73.

radicalise the party once Zanu assumed power. While Zanu (PF) may have appeared to be radicalised in the ending stages of the liberation struggle, this was certainly a contingent process. Transformation was far from complete, and turned on authoritarian principles which rewarded unwavering loyalty to the 'old guard'. When the policies or legitimacy of this group were questioned, Mugabe and his closest political allies were well positioned to question the loyalty of these 'dissenting' factions, which ultimately resulted in the further purging of the leftist elements of the party. Once in power, the authoritarian elements of the party gradually trumped the more progressive and socialist elements of the party. While initially the "ideological struggles experienced by the intellectuals on the road to power were acute and did have transformative potential for the whole of Zimbabwe";⁶² this struggle was not allowed to play out and instead one party statism and authoritarianism triumphed.

While at first glance, it is tempting to accept the arguments of scholars such as Andre Astrow, and simply dismiss Zanu (PF)'s claim that the country was following scientific socialism, on closer inspection it appears that there were 'episodes of ambiguity' when it appeared that the country was edging towards a socialist transformation. But while the government's choice of following the two stage theory of democratic revolution appeared to reaffirm their connection with socialism, in the event even this limited goal was missed. Socialist and even welfare targets were not met, as democratisation itself also faltered; indeed by this period the party's model of socialism was not strong on either democracy or accountability. By the mid-1980s, it was increasingly clear that the reforms that had been instigated were not sustainable because of a lack of available funding. If Zanu (PF) had little room for dramatic economic manoeuvre, constrained as the party was by a variety of external factors, ultimately it seems that the promotion of western investment was the government's key concern. Davies may well be correct when asserting that a "period of transition from capitalism to socialism will be characterised by ambiguity and that this ambiguity will be heightened when the transition is attempted".⁶³

This article has suggested that at independence in 1980, the potential possibility did exist for a socialist transformation that would have allowed Zimbabwe to undergo profound change. Yet by 1985 it seemed that the transition to socialism was no transition at all. Instead, Zanu (PF) had consolidated itself as the dominant force in Zimbabwean politics, and the 'leftist' elements of the party had been silenced. Nonetheless, before that point was reached, the government did for a period, and on some levels, engage with socialism on

⁶² Moore, 473. For further debates on the emerging authoritarian nature of other liberation movements who subsequently formed government in Southern Africa, see for instance Henning Melber, *Limits to Liberation in Southern Africa: The Unfinished Business of Democratic Consolidation* (Cape Town: HSRC, 2003).

⁶³ Davies, 29.

more than just an entirely rhetorical level. While today's historiographical wisdom largely holds that socialism was never a realistic prospect in Zimbabwe, living and dying as mere rhetoric, this article has argued that 'episodes of ambiguity' were clearly discernable. A close inspection of the early 1980s reveals the hope of a better life encompassed within the liberation struggle and the possibility of a socialist future, even if it also included the ruthless authoritarian nature of the regime, coupled with Mugabe's determination to stamp out all opposition to the new order of things. Sadly, it was the latter characteristics that have triumphed and have become Zimbabwe's tragedy.

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