

# Reflection

## Zimbabwe's war veterans: from demobilisation to re-mobilisation<sup>1</sup>

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In 1993, I read Charles Samupindi's novel *Pawns*.<sup>2</sup> What caught my attention from the onset was the striking cover picture of the novel. The picture depicts an ex-combatant (ie a ZANLA or ZIPRA figure who had fought against the Smith regime), standing on a chess-board like a real pawn but with his two legs astride and each foot firmly covering the black square of the chess-board. The picture is a searing split depiction of, on the left-hand side, a combatant holding an AK-47 in complete typical combatant's regalia, a long and seemingly tight jacket, a hat and Wellington boots. However, on the right-hand side, the same figure is vividly portrayed as a pauper whose hair is now unkempt, wearing a tattered shirt and long pants with a string for a belt, barefooted and the hand opening a garbage bin, presumably to look for food or anything to keep body and soul together. Indeed, the novel is the story of 'a schoolboy ... driven by a sense of personal shame and futility to join the movement and is sent to Mozambique'. While 'waiting for training, waiting through hunger, boredom, disease, he watches the evolution of the struggle'. He recalls the events of the war 'through the intensity of vividly remembered personal experiences', in which he reveals a hotchpotch of mixed emotions 'dilemma, loss, pain, confusion, anger, noise and the raw nakedness of combat'. In light of these 'disturbing' memories, Samupindi poses three fundamental questions, '...Was the war worth fighting for? What has happened to the combatants? Who will validate, who will acknowledge the memories that they carry with them?' It is these interconnected questions that propelled me to think about documenting a brief factual account of what I perceived then to be the 'ordeal of rehabilitation' as demobilised combatants, ie those who, for one reason or another, had not had the fortune of being co-opted and reintegrated into the newly formed

Zimbabwe National Army (a motley mix of the former Rhodesian Army, ZANLA and ZIPRA forces). Had ex-combatants been used as political 'pawns' as the title and, indeed, the picture of Samupindi's novel seemed to suggest?

As the deepening predicament of unemployed former liberation war combatants – powerfully encapsulated in a *Moto* magazine headline title: “‘Son of the soil’ during the armed struggle; ‘squatter’ after independence’ – received widespread media coverage, it dawned on me that nobody had as yet attempted to chronicle the brief history of the war veterans’ history, ie 13 years after independence (*Moto* 71, 1988: 6). I argued in my article in *Transformation* 26 (1995) that this contradiction – namely that freedom fighters had been extolled as ‘sons of the soil’ by the nationalist leadership during the struggle were now consigned to the category of ‘squatters’ after independence – absolutely represented ‘some of the ambiguities of democracy and indeed to some extent the futility of independence’. I opined that this contradiction seemed to have become ‘part of the inherent nature of national liberation movements in Africa and elsewhere. During the struggle for independence the masses are mobilised by the nationalist bourgeois leadership and called upon to make supreme sacrifices to liberate the country. But as soon as they have fulfilled their historical mission of leading the bourgeois to power, they are ungraciously discarded’ (1995:31). On the basis of these claims, I set out to critically and chronologically explore the demobilisation process and its impact on ex-combatants, and examined their expectations during and after the course of demobilisation as well as the repertoire of strategies they devised to rescue themselves from this quagmire.

I concluded this article by cautiously noting that ‘Zimbabwe should perhaps consider itself fortunate that the disenchanted war veterans did not consider destabilisation as a means of twisting the arm of the government to compel it to help them in their rehabilitation into civilian life’ (1995:44). Their potential for destabilising the country had to be borne in mind for, as Motumi and Mckenzie would later write, ‘Demobilisation which fails to provide for the social integration of ex-combatants poses a potential threat to society through increased political and social instability’ (Motumi and McKenzie 1988:181). The opposite is equally true as both Motumi and Mckenzie again emphasise, ‘Demobilisation which is well managed and effectively implemented potentially reduces the security risk which disaffected combatants may pose’.

But what has happened in Zimbabwe, in particular, and in southern Africa

at large, regarding the situation of ex-combatants since I wrote this article? As is abundantly clear by now, demobilisation processes involving guerrilla armies in most Southern African independent states, ie in Namibia, Mozambique, Angola, South Africa, became sources of destabilisation.

In Zimbabwe, what has also transpired over time is a process which, simply put, saw war veterans first demobilised, then neglected and eventually remobilised again but this time to wage a different kind of war to keep the same establishment, which largely marginalised them from enjoying the 'fruits' of independence, in power. As in the instances cited above, it did not take long before the war veterans began to pose a threat to the power of the state such that from the mid-1990s, the ZANU (PF) government began to pay serious attention to the concerns of the war veterans as it sought to enlist their assistance in containing the mounting opposition from within and without the party. But this was not a fortuitous decision on the part of President Mugabe's government. Dogged by mounting opposition from civil society and institutions and political parties such as the MDC, churches, the elite, and peasants, all of which sharply criticised the state's repressive methods of dealing with dissent, the government instituted measures to 'consolidate its rule and hold over the population' by deepening its 'control over the law, the media and the security services' (Muzondidya 2009: 197). As Muzondidya has rightly noted, Mugabe 'turned increasingly to the security services, especially the army, for protection against indications of discontent. Through his patronage system, he managed to keep the army leadership close to him'. It was against this background that the government could not afford to alienate the war veterans any further as they could easily shift the residual loyalty they may still have had for ZANU (PF) and its leadership to the opposition. It is beyond question that as far back as the 1970s during the liberation struggle, 'the party-military nexus had always been strong in both PF-ZAPU and ZANU (PF), and the military had always had a significant say in party politics' (Muzondidya 2009: 197) until the war veterans were discarded in the post-colonial era. Since then, the relationship between ZANU (PF), and the war veterans had become strained as 'many in government feared the power of a united and organised veterans' group' (F Chung, 'Re-living the Second Chimurenga' as cited in Muzondidya 2009: 197).

In the mid-1990s the Zimbabwe government had grudgingly enacted laws aimed at ensuring the welfare of the war veterans such as the War Veterans Act (No. 4 of 1992) and the War Victims Compensation Act (1993). The War

Victims Compensation Act was meant to provide financial compensation for all ex-combatants who had been injured in the liberation war. Compensation was to be commensurate with the severity of the injuries. Nonetheless, the first sign that the government was serious in regaining the support of the war veterans came in 1997 when the government assented to the payment of gratuities of Z\$50,000 (US\$4,500) and subsequently monthly pensions of Z\$2,000. However, all this was money which the Treasury had not budgeted for in that year. The government's gesture was therefore not simply an altruistic measure but one into which it had been cajoled by a series of protests led by the intemperate war veteran leader Chenjerai 'Hitler' Hunzvi who at one time laid siege to President Mugabe's party offices with disgruntled war veterans (Muzondidya 2009: 198). Hunzvi, who became the leader of the ZNLWVA in 1995, was a medical doctor and, hence, well-placed to preside over the processing of the claims by signing medical examination certificates including for those injuries that were not so easy to validate such as psychological strain. Thus from the beginning the compensation scheme was dogged with corruption. Between 1993 and 1996 senior party leaders, some of them assisted by Hunzvi, plundered funds earmarked for the scheme by fabricating claims, in the process disadvantaging the intended beneficiaries of the scheme – ordinary war veterans (Addison and Laakso 2003: 463). According to Kriger, 'What Hunzvi offered his members was the (ab)use of his medical clout to get them compensation for invisible injuries, and more particularly post-war traumatic stress disorder – a type of disability claim not previously used'. Accordingly, these claims surged from 1,000 in 1994 to 9,500 by late 1997 (Kriger 2006: 116). When a series of press reports revealed cases of financial profligacy by party gurus and other war veterans, further compensation was suspended and President Mugabe set up a commission to enquire about the financial irregularities and how the War Victims Compensation Act had generally been administered from its origins in 1980 until April 1997, and to recommend to government how money fleeced from it could be recovered (Kriger 2006: 116). To my knowledge, this money was never recovered. This did little to assuage the anger of the war veterans who mobilised themselves and protested against the suspension of the payments they had been promised. Thus, as Kriger has correctly observed, an unexpected alliance between two erstwhile enemies, the government leadership and poor war veterans had been forged.

But, while such an alliance was in the making, another was simultaneously breaking up. The veterans' renewed support for the government led to the

straining of relations between them and the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) which was led by Morgan Tsvangirai. The progressive economic decline and government suppression of dissent had led to the creation of a number of alliances between and among civil institutions in Zimbabwe. One such alliance was between war veterans and workers. For example, following the President's announcement regarding the compensation of war veterans, both Hunzvi (leader of the ZNLWVA) and Tsvangirai (Secretary-General of the ZCTU) agreed that the already overburdened workers were not going to pay any additional taxes to underwrite the veterans' compensation. However, subsequent to the veterans' shift of loyalty to the government there was no further communication or meetings between the two organisations. Thus, the government had managed to eliminate one source of threat to its legitimacy leaving only the ZCTU. Thus, 'the veterans' position served the interests of the government as well as the personal interests of the government as well as the personal interests of Hunzvi; the latter had become so powerful that his own involvement in defrauding the war victims compensation scheme did not in the end lead to any legal action' (Addison and Laakso 2003: 463) until he died in 2001.

In December 1997 the ZCTU successfully staged a mass protest billed as the largest ever seen in the country to register their displeasure at the 5 per cent levy introduced by the government to finance war veterans' pensions. Clearly, this led to a complete fall-out between trade unionists and veterans 'notwithstanding the fact that there are war veterans among the workers, too' (Addison and Laakso 2003: 463). In the meantime, the formation of first, the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), an amalgamation of civil society formations which included human rights organisations, churches and minute opposition groups, in May 1997 and second, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) led by Tsvangirai, was a veritable demonstration to the government of the intensity of the opposition mounting against it and which it could hardly ignore. What further deepened the crisis and strengthened the new opposition party was President Mugabe's unilateral decision to send 11,000 Zimbabwe National Army troops to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to shore up Laurent Kabila who was waging a war against rebels propped up by Rwanda and Uganda. This obviously had huge financial implications for a country already reeling from a crippling fiscal deficit compounded by the President's allocation of unbudgeted funds to appease restless war veterans just a year before. These monumental errors of political judgement on the part of the president and his government

provided more cannon fodder for the opposition which ceaselessly began to campaign for a new constitution which would curtail his executive powers. While the NCA and the MDC were in the process of sketching ideas for a new constitution, the government set up its own commission to draft a parallel constitution whose acceptability would be tested by a public referendum. As was to be expected the process was a politically charged and contested affair. Against the backdrop of a vigorous campaign by the NCA and the MDC, 56 per cent of the people who voted rejected the proposed constitution in February 2000 – much to the surprise and chagrin of the government. This was the first time the ZANU (PF)-led government, typically not used to losing elections, suffered a huge humiliation.

In response, the government unleashed severe reprisals on everyone and everything deemed anti-government. Forthwith, the land question became the linchpin around which the unfolding repression and attempts by the government to recover from its humiliation would revolve. White commercial farmers – perceived to be, and accused of being, behind the rejection of the constitution – were the first to pay for this ‘sin’. Land occupations which began in Masvingo and then in Mashonaland and thereafter took place in rapid succession were spearheaded by the War Veterans’ Association, which was fully endorsed by the government. The government also funded the association to recruit unemployed youths. The infamous youths attending National Youth Service institutions were commonly referred to as ‘Green Bombers’ because of the ruthlessness with which they executed orders from above. Just as they had been during the liberation war, war veterans once again became pawns, ‘sons of the soil’ used by the political leadership to ensure that it would remain in power at whatever cost. In many ways, therefore, war veterans have become an integral part of the narrative associated with the political economy of Zimbabwe’s descent into political and economic conflict. It could also be argued that in terms of their employment as ‘political pawns’ by ZANU (PF), they have in fact come full circle as Kriger neatly summed it up: ‘The parallels between ZANU (PF)’s use of ZANLA veterans in the early 1980s and in 2000 are striking ... In both cases, the party used veterans to build or salvage power and legitimacy ... For the party, the veterans’ dual image as revolutionaries and people of violence was valuable in eliciting compliance, both in the 1980s and in 2000’ (2003:108).

This is not the place to chronicle the numerous incidents that took place as the waves of violence rippled across Zimbabwe’s landscape as the so-

called war veterans wreaked havoc and mayhem all in the name of saving the 'revolution'. Perhaps an intriguing phenomenon during this period, 1999-2009, is the way in which the term 'war veteran' was used, misused, and abused. It came to mean different things to different people, the government, the party, state agents as well as those who easily labelled themselves thus. Simply put, the term largely became amorphous. Prior to roughly 1999, the question about who was the real war veteran was hardly a topic that was part of any political discourse at the time. It did not seem to matter.<sup>3</sup>

It is perhaps important to explain why the label 'war veteran' became so controversial a term, yet at the same time gained increasing currency. Since about 1990, when the economic structural adjustment programme and free-market capitalism were introduced, powerful ex-combatants/guerrillas decided to drop the term 'comrades' by which they were often addressed as it had become obsolescent given its socialist associations. They also discarded another label, popularly used by Parliament, the media, etc – 'ex-combatants' on the basis that they saw it as having contributed to stereotyping them. They preferred to be called or to call themselves 'war veterans'. This is the label that became officially acceptable as it found expression in both the name of their organisation, the ZNLWVA, and the War Veterans Act. This Act defined war veterans as 'any person who underwent military training and participated, consistently and persistently, in the liberation struggle which occurred in Zimbabwe and in neighbouring countries between the January 1, 1962, and the February 29, 1980, in connection with the bringing about of Zimbabwe's independence on the April 18, 1980' (Government of Zimbabwe no. 4, section 2 as cited in Kriger 2003: 110). As the land invasions increased and were also increasingly associated with war veterans, what became questionable in public discussion was why youths who were far too young to have fought in the liberation war could be called war veterans. Kriger has attributed the loose application of the term largely to the Commercial Farmers Union whose members bore most of the brunt of the invasions which used it as a way to 'appease youthful invaders who insist on being identified as war veterans'. I personally think that youths involved in the violent land invasions used the label as some way of giving legitimacy to their actions as the idea of being a war veteran and taking over land struck a chord with the ZANU (PF)'s central mantra that the liberation struggle was staged to resolve the land question.

It is important to note that even though the party regained its relationship with the war veterans, not every war veteran supported the activities of the

ZNLWVA. For example, a group of veterans founded the Zimbabwe Liberators' Platform (ZLP) in May 2000 and distanced themselves from the ZNLWVA and its involvement in invasions of white-owned farms. At the time, the ZLP contended that Hunzvi and his 1,500 supporters did not constitute the significant majority of the ex-freedom fighters (Addison and Laakso 2003: 467). There are also a number of war veterans in different parts of the country who have been excluded from the patronage and access to resources now enjoyed by those who are now back in the party's fold who are speaking against ZANU (PF). For example a number of war veterans in what was once a stronghold of ZANU (PF), Manicaland Province, are said to have complained that 'they are tired of being used to help the party win elections and then forgotten by ZANU (PF)' and demanded to have access to the President at the party's national congress held in Mutare December 15-18, 2010 (<http://www.thezimbabwean.co.uk>, December 24, 2010). War veterans in the same province are reportedly affected by on-going power struggles as one group is said to belong to James Chitakatira while the other is led by Jame Kaunye. Yet another, believed to be more popular than the other two, is aligned to Vladimir Mukada. What has irked these war veterans is that the benefits from patronage have eluded them as the government continues to shower traditional chiefs and the army with more benefits. As one of them categorically stated:

Mugabe is rewarding selected senior civil servants and chiefs with hefty salaries and perks as a token of appreciation. But he forgets that we fought the war and liberated this country ... True war veterans are there and we know them and they are now quiet because they are tired of being used. (<http://www.thezimbabwean.co.uk>, December 24, 2010)

It has not been easy for the government to control the war veterans to the extent that the department dealing with War Veterans' affairs was transferred from the Office of the President to the Ministry of Defence in 2000 so that the army could have greater control over them and absorb them into the national army as reserves.

In conclusion, the eventual 'recognition' of the war veterans by Mugabe and ZANU (PF) was not an altruistic response but was dictated by the party and government's need to survive the mounting political onslaught posed by a groundswell of grassroots and civic opposition. The alliance struck between the ZNLWVA and the government was part of a continuing system of 'patronage and kinship connections which were on the rise during the 1980s, as a means for Mugabe to ensure political loyalty', and these remain

the main channels of dispensation of wealth and opportunities', as Raftopoulos and Compagnon have correctly observed. Thus, 'the government was able to buy the loyalty of the war veterans and to use them to intimidate the opposition' (Cited in Addison and Laakso 2003: 457). But, at the same time, this reflection has also underscored the point that ZANU (PF) as a party and controller of government and the state no longer has complete control of the war veterans, as Krista Johnson correctly observed: 'President Mugabe and the Zimbabwean state do not have a free hand to act as they please' (Johnson 2005: 1) any more. This, no doubt, explains the resort to violence as, perhaps, the only means left to the state to cow dissenting groups and individuals into submission.

## Notes

1. Reflections on Musemwa 1995. The same article was also published in an edited book, Cilliers 1996.
2. Harare: Baobab, 1992.
3. The debate which was in the public domain, among others, concerned who was, and what defined, a 'hero', and accordingly who could be labelled a hero – a status which earned one a place at one of three burial spots, defined by the ZANU (PF) government. I guess the hero in some sense was a kind of war veteran/ex-combatant as well (see Werbner 1998).

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