

Comment on the article by Musemwa

Political pawns or active agents?

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Firstly, I want to congratulate all those involved in the publication of this journal on the occasion of its 75th issue forthcoming. I have been asked to comment on Mucha Musemwa's paper (1995). It is nearly 20 years now since this paper was first published in this revered journal. Then I was just over ten years of age, perhaps far from imagining what sort of trade I would pursue in life.

The article addresses a critical question that has vexed post-1980 Zimbabwe. It discusses not only Zimbabwe's liberators but also (though in a subtle way) the fate of Zimbabwe's liberation. Written 13 years after 1980 the year of the supposed independence, the paper represents the growing disillusionment and an awakening from the liberation euphoria that characterised the time hence the title, 'ambiguities of democracy'. Counterposed to the sorry state that Zimbabwe is today, such a title would qualify for a euphemism. A title for this day is most probably to read 'failed democracy/independence'. John Saul's (2007) article 'The strange death of liberated southern Africa', in a way reflects this disenchantment with what has become of 'liberated Zimbabwe'. In particular the paper discusses in detail challenges that characterised demobilisation and reintegration of the former fighters. From the Musemwa paper one is convinced that the post-colonial state failed to adequately deal with the plight of ex-fighters. Written on the eve of South Africa's transition from apartheid, the paper concludes with an attempt to draw lessons for South Africa.

The reflection paper presented today (in this issue) by the same writer traces what appears to be a love and hate relationship between Zimbabwe's dominant party ZANU-PF politicians and the ex-fighters. It shows how Zimbabwe's dominant party ZANU-PF has 'recaptured' the war veterans at the hour of great need – this, purportedly after alienating itself from them

through failure to address their plight as shown in the original paper. The veterans now play a central role in ZANU-PF's political and economic reproduction by waging violent campaigns against ZANU-PF's opponents. From this, the author concludes that the former fighters have been mere 'pawns' in ZANU-PF's power retention scheme. It is here that I want to argue that such a conclusion would be too simplistic. Instead, ZANU-PF and war veterans' relationship is more nuanced and needs to be located within the ZANU-military nexus that emerged from the latter years of Zimbabwe's liberation struggle, particularly the enforcement of a civilian leadership in the form of ZANU upon the hitherto quasi-autonomous bush fighters.

In sum, my argument can be summed up thus: the agitation of war veterans must be viewed within the context of the general failure of liberation politics to deliver better lives. Within this general context war veterans can be viewed as an active special interest group that has fought to position itself within the state power complex to advance unique group interests. A distinction needs to be made between the political or elite war veterans and the generality of the public. The historical relationship between the political and the military is critical in understanding the ZANU-PF-war veterans relationship. On the whole, defining who a war veteran is within Zimbabwe's current politics has become problematic, ZANU-PF's politics of legitimation has altered what could otherwise be a plain and traditional definition of an ex-fighter. In this regard, perhaps Mucha's reference to ordinary (perhaps versus 'elite') ex-combatants could have been explored further. This paper not only critiques Musemwa's article but further discusses some of the issues raised therein.

After going through Musemwa's piece I could not help but recall a 24th January 2011 news report in Zimbabwe's private owned daily newspaper, *Newsday*:

Riot police drove out scores of war veterans who had invaded cottages at Lake Chivero claiming ownership of the properties in the name of indigenisation. A truckload of police in riot gear arrived at Lake Chivero in the afternoon and moved swiftly to restore order. When *NewsDay* arrived at one of the invaded boating clubs, the gate was locked and covered with a banner carrying the picture of President Robert Mugabe and a message of "100% Empowerment and Total Independence".

Police intervention came after Minister of State in the Prime Minister's Office Jameson Timba advised the chairman of Postal Boating Club, Kwanai Kashangura, to make a formal report to the nearest police station. Timba said he got involved in the Chivero invasion saga in his

capacity as the Member of Parliament for Mt Pleasant constituency where Belgravia Sports Club, who are owners of the boating club, are located and also as a member of the club. Timba said after the police intervened: (sic) “The place is liberated now.” “Today I witnessed firsthand the culture of impunity, lawlessness and thuggery. We cannot develop this country and the tourism industry with this kind of behaviour. This thuggery and lawlessness must stop. We cannot empower our people by encouraging laziness, thuggery and a grab culture. We empower them through education and creation of opportunities,” he said. The Chivero invasion was part of a string of violent drama that characterised the week. There were ugly scenes of political violence reported around the capital where several people were injured and others were arrested.

Ironies in this report are startling. The action to occupy the property was in the name of indigenisation, ‘100% Empowerment and Total Independence’. The takeover was spearheaded by the country’s liberators. However, according to the minister after police drove off the liberation fighters, the place had been liberated. It is common cause that the politics of property grabbing has dominated post 2000 Zimbabwe and in most instances have been driven by Zimbabwe’s ex-guerrillas. But the reference to war veterans as championing the campaigns has become general rather than specific. In most cases as several scholars have noted, the persons involved are too young to have fought in Zimbabwe’s liberation war. In ZANU-PF’s political discourse, these could be classified as fighters of the third (farm invasions) and perhaps fourth (takeover of businesses) Chimurenga.¹

A strong sentiment pervades public discourse that the former liberators have become the oppressors. I remember having a discussion with a senior Zimbabwe ex-liberation fighter in 2002. Then I was a student leader, just removed from the University for organising student anti-privatisation protests. Sympathising with my predicament, he said ‘Young man, Zimbabwe has never been free since 1890’. The failure of liberation in Zimbabwe can thus be understood two fold: one, failure to deliver on the economic expectations for a better life; and, secondly, what can be perceived as lack of political freedoms. The quote, ‘I can’t believe we are fighting again for the right to vote’² represents what has become common cause in Zimbabwe’s public political discourse.

That the agitation of war veterans in the 1990s was part and parcel of the general disillusionment with the failure of liberation could have come out more forcefully in the paper. It was in fact aggravated by the failure of

economic liberalisation reforms at the behest of the Breton Woods institutions. This period saw the fomenting of demands not only by the war veterans but other social groups as well, among them labour, affirmative action groups and the landless. It is thus worth recalling that emerging national consensus towards, first, political and economic reforms and, ultimately, a political alternative to ZANU-PF rule (in the form of the MDC) had until late 1990s seen labour and war veterans closing ranks. The possible alliance was of course broken after war veterans received financial handouts. That the gratuities were to be financed by taxpayers through a special levy had inevitably set labour and the ex-fighters on a collision course and marked the end of what had appeared to be an emerging potent alliance against a ZANU-PF status quo. To be sure, it is difficult to be definitive as to how Zimbabwean politics would have been different, had this probable alliance not been broken.

We had all been in the rain together until yesterday. Then a handful of us – the smart and the lucky and hardly ever the best – had scrambled for the one shelter our former rulers left, and had taken it over and barricaded themselves in. (Achebe 1967:34)

Locating war veterans and their actions within a broad national sentiment of disillusionment with the promise of liberation helps us to understand them as something different from mere pawns. It helps us understand why in the late 1990s onwards the grouping appears to have been ‘captured by ZANU-PF’, yet prior to that it seemed to have been on a different course of history. Understanding ex-combatants as a special interest group aids in explaining their relationship and actions with respect to other actors (including the state) in the context of strategic shifts, vacillating between resistance and cooperation as it response to dilemmas. If one is to understand Zimbabwe as a ‘party state’ as Eldred Masunungure has eloquently argued to analyse ZANU-PF war veterans relations is equal to analysing state war-veterans relations. Distinguishing ZANU-PF from the state in this analysis would thus be of no consequence.

But one needs not treat ex-combatants in Zimbabwe as one homogenous group. In her book, *Through the Darkness: A Life in Zimbabwe*, Judith Todd (2007) shows the pathetic conditions of disabled war veterans and the state of neglect they lived in. This is also pointed out in Musemwa’s paper. While it was relatively easy for other able-bodied ex-fighters to be integrated into the new army or to start other income earning activities, this was not the case with those handicapped during the war. The levels of education were also

different among war veterans thus they held different access to opportunities. For those highly educated, it was easy to join the political elite and cross over from being a 'foot soldier' to a politician. In the post-1980 period and particularly at the height of tension between ZANU and ZAPU (the two most active parties during liberation war) prior to the unity accord of 1987, the distinction between their respective former military wings ZANLA and ZIPRA mattered. Because ZANU was the ruling party after 1980 there were often complaints from ZAPU that ZIPRA combatants were treated unfairly (Todd 2007). Such complaints still persist.³ In terms of needs it is thus true to say that the grievances and aspirations of ex-combatants were varied, and perhaps still are.

On the whole, as Norma Kriger observes, using patriotic history, war veterans have 'challenged the ruling party's recognition of select individuals and groups for their supposedly pre-eminent sacrifices, claiming their own respective contributions were distinctive and superior'. Post-independence Zimbabwe has been characterised by 'use of a political language in a pattern of appropriation and re-appropriation by those within the ruling party who seek to legitimate their quest for power and resources'. War veterans as a special interest group have latched on to this narrative. 'More generally Zimbabwe's experience with the politics of recognition in the 1990s demonstrates the dangers of building government legitimacy on a national liberation war and simultaneously recognising the contributions of some participants as superior to those of others' (Kriger 2006:1151). The categorisation of deceased ex-combatants by ZANU-PF's highest decision making body the politburo into national, provincial and district hero statuses or which ex-fighter should get state burial or not, has not been questioned in this regard. This though is not without precedent as the experience of post World War II formally Nazi occupied territories shows. Groups often seek legitimation in laying claims on the state through an interpretation of history in their favour.

The discontent and what appears to be neglect of ex-fighters can be further understood in two possible ways. Historically a disharmony has existed between the bush fighters and politicians. A distinction can be made between the exiled politicians and the military. The external military leadership had worked independently of those leaders who had been in prison in Rhodesia and who now formed a distinctive group. In the 1970s ZAPU and ZANU civilian politicians fought hard from the 1970s to put those with military training under their control while the latter often posed a challenge.

Examples of this include the 11 March Movement in ZAPU in 1971, the Nhari revolt in ZANU, and the Zimbabwe People's Army (ZIPA) saga that affected both ZAPU and ZANU in the 1970s. All these incidents, Sabelo Ndlovu argues, 'mirrored and magnified a lurking duality of power between civilian nationalists and their military wing' (Ndlovu Gatsheni 2006:55). No wonder parliamentary debates in the 1990s took a military versus political veterans' dimension, as he argues.

Liberation movements like any social/transformational movements are not homogenous. Social forces with assorted interests often come together for a purpose which is never perpetually harmonious. For example scholars like Ranger (1980), Raftopolous (1996) and Freund (1999) have shown how the acquisitive instincts of ZANU-PF political leaders have shaped post liberation politics. The evolution of nationalist politics and how this articulated with emerging African capitalists' contests for entrepreneurial space and the developing African middle class' struggle for recognition and quest for upward mobility within the colonial status quo betrays this sectoral interest. Scholars on this subject have made a case for nationalist politics being a product of the African capitalists' unhappiness over failure to access trade and commerce which seriously undermined their acquisitive ambitions. Raftopolous (1996:2) notes:

During the formative years of Nationalist politics in Southern Rhodesia, in the 1950s, a central concern for emerging nationalist intellectual elite was its desire for upward mobility. Through its educational achievements, professional aspirations, and social and cultural practices a significant number of this elite sought to establish themselves, and to be seen as, an emergent middle class, even as they sought, and succeeded in presenting themselves as a nationalist leadership.

Thus the early phases of liberation struggle in Zimbabwe like elsewhere in Africa were characterised by a conflation of demands for space both in mainstream commerce and nationalist politics. Some scholars have cited the participation of the likes of Joshua Nkomo (late vice president of Zimbabwe) 'in the advocacy for African capitalism as chairperson of the Bantu Cooperative Society' (Chirimambowa 2006) as indicative of this phenomenon, to the extent that Nkomo was referred to as a businessman. Arrighi described ZANU in the 1960s as a 'faction of educated, middle class, rather elitist elements'.⁴ Notwithstanding this, the later years of the struggle saw the emergence of an avowed adherence to a socialist trajectory as a political strategy to engender the struggle with a broad national appeal. This however

remained largely rhetorical.⁵In reality, says Saul, Arrighi's characterisation of ZANU in the 1960s as a 'faction of educated, middle-class, rather elitist elements' is much more convincing. In exile, the parties 'came to manifest many of the negative features characteristic of petty-bourgeois politics in independent, neo-colonial Africa ...' (Ranger 1980: 72-3)

Transitions however present a 'moment of truth' where different social groups, once a coercive force, retreat to their narrow interests. On their part the war veterans can be viewed as a group that has employed a strategy of cooperation and resistance to secure its interests (MacCandless 2005). A section of war veterans has thus benefited from ZANU-PF's weak moment.

Notes

1. Chimurenga is a term used to refer to Zimbabwe's war of liberation.
2. Wilfred Mhanda, aka Dznishe Machingura, founding member and director, Zimbabwe Liberators' Platform, March 10, 2002 quoted in Moore (2007).
3. See for example *The Standard*, 6 February 2011 or visit <http://allafrica.com/stories/201002081286.html>
4. Arrighi cited in Ranger 1980: 72.
5. For more on this see Mawowa, 2010. This rhetoric is best evinced by the brutal quashing of the ZIPPA movement which consisted of radical Marxist young Turks who wanted to overthrow the ZANU old guard for its 'lack of ideological clarity'.

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