



Zimbabwe – Political Violence and Elections.

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Abstract

In the context of the momentous changes to the Zimbabwean polity, the predilection for violent political problem solving is examined. By reference to public data on political violence for the period 1998 to 2018, Zimbabwe is compared with four of its neighbours in SADC that share a common history of armed struggle; Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. The analysis shows Zimbabwe to be the most violent of the five countries, with most violence aimed at civilians by political militia, and a very significant amount of the violence (46%) occurs during elections. Furthermore, the kind of political violence during elections is considerably more serious than that which occurs outside of elections. The findings provide a cautionary background to the forthcoming elections in 2018.

1. Background

Zimbabwe has entered a new and possibly dangerous era after the events of November and December 2017. The interference of the military in the civilian affairs of a country is always a cause for concern, even if the coup in Zimbabwe was not characterised by a violent overthrow. The deeper concern must be what the role of the military will be going forward into an election in 2018. Will the military be neutral, merely passive observers, or have a vested interest in the outcome? This question is relevant because of the potential violence that always seems to lurk under the surface of Zimbabwean politics.

Zimbabwe has an unenviable reputation for being the most politically violent country in Southern Africa, certainly since the civil wars ended in Angola and Mozambique, and the independence of Namibia and South Africa. The country was born out of a particularly violent struggle against white settler domination, entered a new internecine conflict in the 1980s, and, since 2000, has been the subject of violent elections, mass displacements, and continuous repression. Five of the SADC countries emerged out of violent political struggles, headed by liberation movements that subsequently became the ruling parties, and the transformation of liberation movements into modern political parties is frequently complex and incomplete (Southall. 2013). The path of liberation movements in power has drawn a good degree of comment in recent years (Clapham. 2012), and some have suggested that there is a tendency towards the growth of predatory states (Bavister-Gould. 2011; Bratton & Masunungure. 2011). Important in this lack of transformation is the close affiliation between the political and military wings of the liberation movements. As Lucian Way has commented:

Finally, and perhaps most important, revolutionary struggle frequently creates strong ties between the political rulers and the security forces. Having emerged out of the revolutionary struggle, security forces are often deeply committed to the survival of the regime and infused with the ruling ideology—all of which enhances discipline. Violent revolutionary struggle tends to produce a generation of leaders with the —stomach for violent repression (Way. 2011. p20).

The propensity for a military-party conflation, as well as the resort to violence, has been well-noted for Zimbabwe (Mandaza. 2016; Bratton. 2014).

As can be seen in Table 1, Zimbabwe ranks first as the most violent of the countries governed by former liberation movements. All five countries were the subject of anti-colonial wars, and both Angola and Mozambique had subsequent bitter civil wars. Zimbabwe arguably was similar, but it might be difficult to describe the post-independence violence of the 1980s as civil war.

Table 1: Frequency of violence reports, 1997 to 2014
 [Source: ACLED database.2015]¹

	Total No. of Reports	% of total
Angola	3001	21.8%
Mozambique	561	4.1%
Namibia	573	4.2%
South Africa	4540	33.0%
Zimbabwe	5075	36.9%

Zimbabwe is seen as the most violent by total amount of reported incidents, and it should be pointed out here that the reports for Zimbabwe are of a wholly different character to those from the other four countries. The data for Zimbabwe is derived in the vast majority (more than 70%) from reports produced by human rights organisations, mostly by direct testimony and often accompanied by medical reports (RAU. 2016). For the other four countries, the majority of the reports are gleaned from the press and media, or international organisations. Thus, the assertion that Zimbabwe is violent is empirically-grounded, but it is the pattern that also sets Zimbabwe apart from its liberation party neighbours.

Table 2: Frequency of violence types in Zimbabwe, 1998 to 2018

[Source: ACLED database]

	No. of events	% of total
Violence against civilians	4216	71.9
Strategic development²	367	6.3
Riots	1047	17.9
Remote violence³	15	0.3
Non-violent transfer of territory⁴	3	0.1
Base⁵	128	2.2
Battle (no change of territory)⁶	85	1.5

As can be seen from Table 2, the vast majority of the violence is directed at civilians, with riots coming a very distant second. All other forms of violence are largely insignificant, as might be expected of a country that is ostensibly at peace.

¹ Reported in RAU (2016), *Are former liberation movements inherently violent as governments?* February 2016. Harare: Research & Advocacy Unit.

² Contextually important information regarding the activities of violent groups that is not itself political violence. For example: recruitment drives, looting, incursions, and rallies qualify for inclusion.

³ Events where engaging in conflict did not require the physical presence of the perpetrator. The main characteristic of this event is when a group determines the time, place, and victims of the attack, but is not directly present.

⁴ Situations in which rebels, governments, or affiliates of both acquire control of a location without engaging in a violent act.

⁵ A violent group establishes a permanent or semi-permanent base or headquarters. This event is not violent.

⁶ A battle between two violent armed groups where control of the contested location does not change.

Amplifying these findings, it can be seen in Table 3 that the majority of perpetrators in the violence in Zimbabwe are non-state actors (51.2%), and supporters of ZANU-PF, as well as war veterans. State actors, the police (ZRP), the army (ZNA), and the intelligence service (CIO) do also account for a substantial number of the perpetrators (22.7%).

Table 3: Frequency of actors against events in Zimbabwe, 1998 to 2018

[Source: ACLED database]

	No. of events	% of total
ZRP	846	14.4
Militia	97	1.7
War vets	234	4.0
ZANU-PF	2607	44.5
ZNA	392	6.7
CIO	91	1.6
MDC	241	4.1
Protestors	666	11.4
Rioters	321	5.5
Other	364	6.2

Of course it has to be noted that the period covered by this data base excludes both the Liberation War and the low-intensity conflict of the 1980s, the violence that took place in Matabeleland and the Midlands. These were periods in which state actors were dominant as the perpetrators, but in the former case, the Liberation War, this was in the context of a very bitter civil war, and there were military casualties as well as gross human rights violations against civilians. The second period is more complex, and most commentators are agreed that this was a period characterised by gross human rights violations perpetrated by military forces of the state.

Table 4 describes the distribution of violent events over the period 1998 to 2018.

Table 4.
Frequency of events by Province in Zimbabwe, 1998 to 2018

[Source: ACLED database]

Province	No. of events	% of total
Bulawayo	316	5.4
Harare	2310	39.4
Manicaland	595	10.2
Mashonaland Cent	542	9.2
Mashonaland East	593	10.1
Mashonaland West	557	9.5
Masvingo	309	5.3
Matabeleland North	120	2.0
Matabeleland South	86	1.5
Midlands	433	7.4

The startling finding is the high frequency of violent events in Harare over the 20 years. Not even the combined frequencies (28.8%) of the three Mashonaland Provinces, anecdotally always seen as the most violent during elections, approaches the frequency of violations in Harare. Additionally the frequency of events in the southern half of the country- Bulawayo, Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South – is very low, less than 9% of the total. However, the traditional heartland of ZANU-PF support, Manicaland, the three Mashonaland Provinces, Masvingo and the Midlands, jointly exceed Harare, 52% as opposed to 39%.

Thus, the empirical evidence over the period 1998 to 2018 supports the claim that Zimbabwe is a violent country, but it is important to stress that this must be seen in the context of a prolonged struggle for political power between the two main political parties, ZANU-PF and MDC-T (previously MDC). The terrain for this struggle was always elections, and, since 1998, Zimbabwe has held 5 elections in 10 years, with yet another to come in 2018.

2. Elections in Zimbabwe

It is evident that Zimbabwe leads the other SADC countries in terms of violence during elections (RAU. 2016). Using the ACLED database again, Zimbabwe leads the region – Angola, Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa – in the frequency of violations during elections (46%). Only Mozambique comes close (42%), and this is in a country where there is a highly contested political settlement in the aftermath of a very bitter civil war. South Africa and Namibia have about half as many violent events during elections and Angola virtually none.

The extent of the violence and intimidation in Zimbabwe has varied from election to election (CSV. 2009). The elections in 2000, 2002 and 2008 were all violent, and arguably 2008 was the most violent of the three. However, it should be pointed out that both 2002 and 2008 were elections in which there was a poll for the presidency, and accordingly the stakes for these two elections were very high. The significance of the violence in polls where the presidency is at issue is simple: the previous (Lancaster House) constitution was amended in 1987 to create an executive presidency, and the powers assigned to the presidency were enormous. It can almost be claimed that whichever party won the presidential poll could claim the state, and hence losing the presidency could not be offset by having a controlling majority in parliament. This was seen very clearly during the period of the Inclusive Government established by the Global Political Agreement. The point is that elections generally are very severe tests of popularity in Zimbabwe, and presidential elections are critical to the maintenance of political power. Hence, rules are broken in the pursuit of maintaining political power.

This is not to say that violence and human rights violations are exclusive to elections: political power can be challenged outside of elections. Thus, the interregnum between elections in Zimbabwe since 1998 are also characterised by violence and human rights violations.

Table 5.
Comparison of average monthly human rights violations: election months & non-election months.

[Source: Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum: Political Violence Monthly Reports]

	No				
	Election (n=21)	Election (n=60)	df	t	Sig (2-tailed)
Abduction	97.9	30.6	79	3.703	0.000
Arrest & detention	96.4	111.7	79	-.378	ns
Assault	0.6	0.2	78	3.350	0.001
Attempted murder	4.4	1.0	75	2.040	0.050
Death threat	0.2	0.5	78	2.903	0.005
Disappearance	25.8	14.3	75	-.377	ns
Displacement	73.8	113.7	79	.739	ns
Freedoms	2.2	1.2	79	-1.063	ns
Murder	94.7	35.8	79	1.207	ns
Political discrimination	47.8	15.5	79	2.626	ns
Property related	0.4	0.2	79	2.493	0.015
Rape	0.0	0.8	79	.982	ns
Torture	94.1	33.9	79	2.821	0.006
School closure	0.0	0.8	79	-.642	ns

As can be seen in Table 5, which is a statistical analysis of the data on human rights violations collected by the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum since 1998, there are violations that are much more frequent during elections than at non-election times.⁷ Abductions, assaults, attempted murder, death threats, property-related violations (theft and/or property destruction), and torture were all more commonly seen during election periods. There were no differences between election months and other times in respect of the other violations described above.

3. Overview & Conclusions

In this brief report we have not attempted to review the very extensive literature on organised violence and torture in Zimbabwe. There are a number of reviews, and the interested reader can go to these for the details.⁸ Here we have attempted a more empirical approach, using available data bases, and trying to examine the question about whether Zimbabwe is a violent country in a quantitative manner.

In using this approach, it seems to conclude that Zimbabwe is indeed a violent country as regards political violence. Comparisons with four other countries in the SADC region – Angola, Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa – clearly show Zimbabwe to be the most violent of the five countries now governed by former Liberation Movements. The rationale for choosing these five countries was deliberate. Countries that have a history of armed struggle against colonial domination usually end up with governments formed by the victorious armed movements, but not exclusively. It is debatable whether the independence gained by South Africa was a result of armed struggle as much as the internal struggles by labour, civics and churches, as well as an enormous international campaign and the position of the United Nations (Southall. 2013).

This case apart, it does seem that liberation movements, as Way has suggested (Way. 2011), find it difficult to overcome the narrow means-ends analysis of armed struggle when dealing with the problems of governance and dealing with contests over political power. Zimbabwe may be paramount in being unable to forsake this approach to politics. As the analysis of the ACLED data demonstrated, more cases of political violence were reported for Zimbabwe, over the period 1998 to 2018, than any other of the five southern African countries. The vast majority (72%) of the political violence was directed against civilians, and, as was demonstrated in a previous study (RAU.2016), Zimbabwe was unique in this in comparison with the four other countries. Zimbabwe was also unique amongst the five SADC countries in that the majority of the perpetrators (63%) can be described as *political militia*, meaning war veterans, youth militia (the so-called “Green Bombers and other groups), and ZANU-PF supporters.

Thus, in Zimbabwe, there is a picture of “directed violence” against civilians, and it becomes clear that this is both in defence of maintaining and capturing political power, with elections

⁷ For the purpose of this analysis, election months were taken as the three months prior to, and including, the month during which the election took place. This is somewhat arbitrary as some elections, such as 2002, were marked by a long period in which violations took place, and during which there were many violent by-elections. However, for ease of comparison, the selection was restricted to just the three months and the by-elections were deemed to be stand-alone events.

⁸ The Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, for example, has more than 40 reports since its inception in 1998, and these can be supplemented by visiting the Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Solidarity Peace Trust websites.

as the major terrain of contest. Zimbabwe, according to ACLED, is the most violent of the five countries when it comes to elections: Mozambique comes close, but none of the others. For most of the countries, political violence is seen in the context of riots or violent protests, particularly in Angola and South Africa.

When we examine what kinds of violence are seen during Zimbabwean elections, and it is evident that the worst violence is seen when the contest is for the presidency, the data from the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum is cause for deep concern. As seen in Table 5, abductions, assaults, attempted murder, death threats, property-related violations (theft and/or property destruction), and torture. These are all violations that are typically called “*gross human rights violations*”, and in violation of every international convention and treaty, let alone international humanitarian law.

These findings must be seen as the background for the forthcoming elections, and possibly the most contested elections in Zimbabwe’s history. No political party is certain of victory it would appear, and the ruling party, ZANU-PF, seems objectively weaker than at any time in the 37 years of independence, and it would seem unlikely that it will be able to pull all those purged back into the fold. Whilst it is commonplace to assert that the opposition is weak and fragmented, it may be that there is a greater possibility that all these parties can come together in an electoral alliance than ZANU-PF can coax the purged back.

In this very difficult situation, it seems well to remember a very robust psychological finding: nothing predicts future violence than a history of past violence. Whilst this is well-demonstrated for individual behaviour, it has application also for mass behaviour, and, on the evidence that we provide here, it seems advisable to pay close attention to Zimbabwe’s past.

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