



GWERU UNDER SIEGE

Events unfolding in Gweru bring to mind the literature novel titled “Coming of the Dry Season” While ordinarily the month of November heralds the opening of the season of goodwill the reverse seems to be true in the “tide of affairs” in the city. Daggers are drawn and being sharpened for the slaughter. In all this, the resident is the victim and always the loser.

Everything concerned with general service delivery and civic affairs governance issues seems to be on auto pilot heading southwards. Things are falling apart by each passing day. The genesis of a process towards the dreaded coming in of the widely abhorred Minister appointed Commission is fast gathering momentum. The seeds have been sown. The tell – tell signs of the laying of a solid base from which to justify the Commission’s appointment are being meticulously crafted by those who stand to benefit the most from the removal of a democratically elected Council and supplanting it with an un-elected grouping of people.

We wish to apologise for our unconventionally approach of “blowing the whistle before a crude foul is committed” but the love for our City of Progress weighs heavily upon us. It places the burden of seeking to avert the impending catastrophe on all caring residents of Gweru and all friends of Gweru” and to be vigilant and seek ways to avert this impending injustice.

The spectra of the coming in of a Commission to run the affairs of the City of Gweru is fast shaping up into a sad reality. It is “dejavu” – we have been there before. We have seen how this script played out in the past and an almost similar script has been crafted. From the way events on the ground are unfolding, if not checked this undemocratic contraption where the city affairs are placed in the hands of un-elected persons who are only answerable to the appointing Minister, shall soon be our miserable reality.

From our experiences as a Residents' Association during the Tsungai Mhangami led commission from 2014-2016, we noted that residents' voices and concerns are relegated to the periphery. The Commission comes in with a specific agenda (Terms of Reference) authored in the offices of the appointing authority without ever consulting the affected governed residents population and other stakeholders whose life and operations will be impacted upon. The Commission's tenure in the city is financed by the Local Authority (read Residents and Stakeholders) but the voices of the financiers are scantily considered in the programmes of the Commission.

A Commission epitomizes the closing down of democratic space. The people's democratically elected representatives (Councilors) are sidelined if not muscled-out, and replaced by unelected appointees whose only Key Result Area (KRA) is the fulfillment of the appointing authority's agenda. Citizens' concerns do not really matter. The people's popular sovereign agenda as demonstrated through the election of the Councilors is negated in this kind of set-up.

In February 2019, Councilors acting through the Mayor's office wrote to the Town Clerk in her capacity as the City's Chief Executive Officer to explain why the city was having service delivery challenges and also highlight intervention strategies and actions taken by management to address the challenges. The Town Clerk was given a 90 day time frame to respond via a Report, which she duly complied with. Councilors were not convinced by the response given because they felt it did not mirror the reality on the ground. The Councilors explored ways to get to the root cause of the service delivery challenges.

On May 2019, Councilors appointed a Committee of Inquiry in accordance with Section 100 of the Urban Councils' Act. The Committee was assigned to find the causes and challenges at Town House which were and are still causing serious service delivery deficits in the city. Cognizant of the fact that Council's core business is service delivery, Councilors had been inundated "and nausemi" with pleas from the residents and other stakeholders to address this chronic deficit in this key area.

The Committee of Inquiry which was properly constituted and properly mandated to carryout its mandate then diligently and meticulously went about its business. The Committee gathered information from such critical stakeholders as Residents Associations, the business sector, ordinary residents, Council employees among others. The thorough exercise which was conducted over a period of 4 weeks resulted in the compilation of a well-articulated Committee of Inquiry Report.

The Committee of Inquiry Report captured damning evidence exposing rampant systematic, systemic corruption at Town House. The Report exposed some alleged issues which pointed accusatory fingers directly at some, but not all, characters in top management. Clearly, it then logically became the natural course of action that Councillors through The Mayor ask the Town Clerk to respond to the damning allegations raised.

Initially Council appeared to pussy foot and delicately tread around the issue. Clearly internal organisational politics and possible “horse-trading” were taking place inside Town House. As Residents’ Associations we noted that the findings of the Report risked being “swept under the carpet”, obviously to the city’s disadvantage. Following unrelenting pressure from Gweru’s Civil Society, with most of the noise and pressure coming from GUPRARDA-Trust, mainly through the media, the Mayor was eventually cornered into suspending the Town Clerk to pave way for investigations into the allegations and charges laid against her.

Suffice to say that the suspension only came into effect after the Town Clerk had either failed, refused or neglected to respond to the Committee of Inquiry related allegations by the 16th August ultimatum which she had been given by council.

The Town Clerk was issued with the letter of suspension on 15th October 2019 and on 22nd October 2019, a week later, the Minister of Local Government initiated a Commission of Inquiry process into the affairs at Gweru’s Town House. He directed an official to appoint a six (6) member investigating team which had to carryout its mandate within fourteen (14) days.

The team had the following “Terms of Reference”

- 1) Establish the relationship between Council and management including Corporate Governance issues.
- 2) Establish the state of affairs in the Department of Engineering Services before and during tenure of the current Director.
- 3) Establish circumstances leading to the suspension of Engineering Staff.
- 4) Establish the relationship between Councilors and land developers.
- 5) Establish the circumstances leading to the Commission of Inquiry (SIC).
- 6) Establish the events leading to the suspension of the Town Clerk.
- 7) Establish the views of stakeholders on service delivery in Gweru and their views on Intest developments in the City.
- 8) Look into any related matters of interest, including procurement of services.
- 9) Make findings
- 10) Produce a Report on the findings, recommendations on way forward for the Honourable Minister.

A close analysis of some of the terms of reference by any person who has been closely following the unfolding drama at Gweru’s Town House reveals the deliberate duplicating of the Committee of Inquiry’s processes and apparent subtle intimidation of Councilors so that they do not follow through the investigation of the Town Clerk. The Director of Engineering Services and the Director of Finance are either directly or indirectly fingered in the Committee of Inquiry Report, so clearly the inclusion of Terms of Reference Number 2 and 8 raises eyebrows since these are part of the issues under investigation by Councilors appointed investigation team.

There appears to be a desired outcome for the Ministry’s investigating team. This suspicion is buttressed by a rumour which was circulating at the time the Town Clerk seemed to be snubbing councilors’ 16th August ultimatum. It was rumored that management had written to the Minister of Local Government to rein-in councilors who were allegedly “interfering with management operations”.

Terms of Reference number 7 alludes to the interviewing of stakeholders on service delivery issues. As residents we were never given a platform by the Ministry's team to air our views, we are the largest and most critical stakeholder constituency in the whole service delivery deficit matrix. What further irks us as residents is that the two weeks all expenses paid luxurious stay for the civil servants will be "legally siphoned" from the already emaciated Council coffers of Gweru City Council. This is residents' money which could have been put to better use instead of duplicating disrupting and probably seeking to stop the legally mandated Councillors' process.

If indeed management invited the Ministry then management did not do it on our behalf as residents. Management should be made to pay for the team's expenses. The residents' sovereign agenda was and is still safe in the hands of the elected Councilors and their investigating process should not be hindered in any way. The Councillors', the people elected representatives and custodians of the people's sovereign agenda have assured us that they never solicited for any intervention from the Ministry in this matter as everything was under control. The only logical conclusion is to align with the rumor and suspect that management, an unelected grouping of technocrats, some of who stand accused in the Committee of Inquiry Report invited the Minister. If indeed this is what happened, as it logically seems to be the case, the question then is:- Is management allowed to act outside Council resolutions? Are there two centres of power at Gweru's Town House?

As Guprarda Trust we waited in the faint hope that we would be invited to make our submissions by the Ministry's investigating team, but no such invitation materialized until the team left Town house on Thursday, 7th November 2019. We then decided to write a letter to the Minister registering our concerns.

Pastor David Chikore in his capacity as Executive Director – Guprarda Trust.

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