

**Keynote address delivered at the “Zimbabwe @41 Series: Unpacking A Progressive Approach Towards a Nation-State” organized by Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, 15 April 2021: 11am-13.00pm
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Introduction

Thank you for the invitation to speak at this important event: [Zimbabwe@41 Series: Unpacking a Progressive Approach Towards a New Nation-State.](#)

Let on this occasion speak as a concern citizen of Zimbabwe rather an academic. This will enable me to touch on the practical and existential issues and challenges facing as a people..

We are meeting at an important time when our beloved Zimbabwe is turning 41 years old on the 18th of April 2021 as an independent country. This is an independence which cannot be taken for granted because of the sacrifices made towards its attainment.

This event is also taking place at an important moment in the history of our beloved Zimbabwe characterised by animated debates about on the Patriotic Bill. A Bill which directly speaks to the core aspect of patriotism linked to belonging and citizenship in a nation-state.

The troubling issue is that every time we arrive at this important day of 18 April of every year, we not only reflect on the issue of sacrifices made for the attainment of political independence, we also reflect of the journey we have travelled since 1980 as a people.

It is a moment of remembrance and as well as auditing the journey travelled since 1980. Some of the most important matters arising include:

- The very meaning of being independent and being free: to what use have we deployed and put our independence?
- How we have created Zimbabwe and into what type of a polity?
- Have we managed to cultivate inclusive belonging, citizenship, unity, patriotism, dignity, pride & heroism?
- How we have we been distributing our national resources, who has benefited and who has not?
- How we have governed ourselves since 1980 and have we widened the scope of justice and rights which were denied under colonial rule?
- Have dealt effectively with problems of hetero-patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism
- On the infrastructure and development of the country, have we progressed or regressed?
- What has been our successes and failures on the pertinent social questions of health, education, and employment?
- More importantly have we ensured internal security and social peace of the citizens and indeed made life of citizen matter?
- Ho have we been using and abusing our national institutions for progressive and regressive purposes?

- Has our choice of leadership been according to our constitution and rule of law?

These to me, are pertinent patriotic questions which every Zimbabwean has to be concerned about and we must pose them without fear and favour if indeed we are patriotic because they are about us and our country—they constitute what amount to “national question”—a question which is always at the centre of the “nation-state building project”—the very making, creation and construction of Zimbabwe. They always take us back to the drawing board to assess our achievements and failures.

Increasing there is an emerging question of how does Zimbabwe exist. It is a patriotic question which cannot arise out of vacuum. There is a context in which it arises. It is a question which also troubled me and I wrote a book: *Do Zimbabweans Exist? Trajectories of Nationalism, National Identity Formation and Crisis in a Postcolonial State* (2009). The same question troubled Professors Brian Raftopoulos and Alois S. Mlambo to extent of editing a volume entitled *Becoming Zimbabwe: A History from Pre-Colonial Times to 2008* (2009). We can even flash back to Ibbo Mandza’s *Zimbabwe: A Political Economy of Transition* (1986) where questions of state-making and nation-building were posed. It is a question which is at the heart of the nation-state project?

Taking over the Rhodesian state is not the same as creating Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe has never been a given. Zimbabwe has never been a pre-existing formation. As a unitary nation-state, Zimbabwe had to be created. Zimbabwe has never been a successor state. The late historian Stan Mudenge was being ethnically mischievous to link postcolonial Zimbabwe to the pre-colonial Munhumutapa state. This argument of Zimbabwe as our modern creation must not be mistaken for a dismissal of our rich precolonial history. Our precolonial history is characterised by diversity of political formations, some small in scale existing as chieftaincies and other big in scale to amount to kingdoms and states. We can name some of them as Torwa, Rozwi, Barwe, Manyika, Ndebele, Gaza, Mutapa as well as numerous chieftaincies that rose, fell and resurfaced. This means that in our modern creation of Zimbabwe we are informed by a rich history. But we cannot choose one political formation and simplistically make it an antecedent of modern Zimbabwe because we come from diverse political formations. Nation-building is always about how to mould and forge a common identity out of people of diverse historical and social backgrounds.

Precolonial antecedents of Zimbabwe

The lands between the Zambezi River in the North and the Limpopo River in the South, was of course inhabited by African people of diverse identities. Of course, our pre-colonial formations contributed to rise of a national imaginary and national consciousness, for example, by providing the Great Zimbabwe monument around which the imagined nation would crystalize and the nationalist movements in the 1960s began to use the name Zimbabwe in their projection into a postcolonial sovereign nation-state. The early nationalists even toyed with use of Matopos—because of its spiritual and ritual significance as a possible source for a name for the imagined postcolonial nation-state. With hindsight we now realise that extreme care has to be taken in our selection, mobilization and deployment of pre-colonial symbols, heroes, and names so as to make sure we are sensitive to our diversity and ensure inclusivity not exclusivity. Coming from diverse backgrounds does not in anyway mean we are not one people just like different languages does not mean we are not one people. A nation-state is possible where commonalities are used to create an equivalential chain of unities.

Primary resistance of 1896-1897

The Ndebele-Shona Uprising of 1896-1897 provided a myth of foundation of African unity for a national purpose. The liberation struggle drew not only inspiration from this uprising but also examples of heroes and heroines. Again, hindsight tells us that our problems arise when we become careless in our selection of heroes and heroines and ignore others.

Colonialism and its rejection of existence of Africans as nations

Colonialism was against any notion of an African nation. The colonized Africans were nothing but inchoate and contending tribes. So, Zimbabwe was never in the minds of colonialists. Our historical record and experience, is that of persecution of those who developed the national imaginary and national consciousness of an African nation called Zimbabwe. But through colonial racism and exploitation of black people, colonialism provoked a nationalist sentiment on which a national imaginary and national consciousness emerged. Also, by drawing boundaries, and destroying precolonial social and political formations, colonialism brought black people together in the towns. Through provision of education, colonialism created the African educated elite who led in the struggle for an independent nation.

African nationalism and imagination of Zimbabwe

Nationalism itself had to be created and cultivated by the nationalists. History, symbols, songs, and grievances became important resources for the nationalists in their creation of nationalism. The wearing of skin-hats was part of creating nationalism. Popular nationalist consciousness had to be generated and sustained. Why the early educated elite chose to wear skin-hats together with modern suits meant that they were constantly navigating tradition and modernity carefully as they redefined themselves as African nationalists. Symbolism and particular nationalist pedagogy are always necessary for raising people's consciousness.

The result were mass nationalist movements like National Democratic Party (NDP), Zimbabwe African Peoples Union (ZAPU), Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU). Hope and expectation of a better life in an independent Zimbabwe had to be created as part of mobilization of the people for the struggle for Zimbabwe.

Nationalists had to develop skills in political persuasion of the black population. Of course, the ugly head of violence always reared itself also within the moment of building nationalist momentum itself. But persuasive ideology and slogans were far more effective than coercion and violence. While monolithic unity became a battle cry of African nationalism, within it there were serious power struggles which always brought in ethnicity, tribalism, regionalism, and death.

The challenge was about how to collapse ethnicity so as to raise a national consciousness. Perhaps, it was because of how hard it was to pull the people out of their ethnic identities into national identity that most leftists in the liberation struggles adhered to the idea of the death of tribe for the nation to live. One can posit the question of how can a tribe be killed without killing a people? Those who mistakenly believe that minority groups can sacrifice their identities while the majority groups retain theirs must have their heads checked. This is where the very concept of a nation-state become problematic in the sense that there is always an assumption of a pre-existing nation to form a fulcrum of the state. In a context where there is historical and social diversity, it is better to think of a 'rainbow nation' where diversity is celebrated and no ethnic group has more claim to belonging and the state than others because of numerical superiority. Perhaps a citizen-state is the best framework to work with in contexts of diversity. As Mahmood Mamdani has proposed it, this entails

de-coupling of the nation and the state. The result is a nation which is diverse under one state, with all the people enjoying common citizenship guaranteed by the constitution not ethnicity.

Unfortunately, even among the nationalists, ethnicity wreaked havoc and caused divisions and splits. We had to go into the armed liberation struggles without satisfactory resolution of ethnic divisions. Some of those who had imbibed African nationalism made it part of their lip service and they continued in practice to operate as divisive tribalists and regionalists. This gave African nationalism a bad name.

The armed liberation struggle as a school

There is no doubt that nothing could beat the armed liberation struggle as the moment of heightened national consciousness within the black population. It remains one of our proudest moments as a people where our love for the nation invoked sacrifices of lives. Armed guerrillas continued where the nationalists had left in mobilization and consciousness building throughout the liberation struggle. Therefore, the liberation struggle was and is a major base from which to build the nation-state.

Nationalism had successfully made the armed liberation struggle possible. Armed liberation struggle had to make Zimbabwe concretely possible. But there were always hovering global imperial designs consisting of the British who were not only responsible for the colony of Rhodesia but were interested in ensuring the future of the white minority settlers as well as Americans and South African Apartheid regime which were bent on containment of communism and comfortable with the birth of neo-colonies out of liberation struggles.

Lancaster house conference and negotiated idea of Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe was born on 18 April 1980 as a negotiated idea with a restrictive constitution, protection of material privileges of the white minority settlers, and an unresolved land question. One can also add an unresolved ethnic question and no clear nation-state building blueprint. Therefore, despite all the excitement, Zimbabwe was born with a very bad birthmark. Our sad reality is that when the nationalists and their armed liberation forces came back home, they had failed to sustain ZIPA and Patriotic Front efforts—they arrived divided and the consequences were yet to be seen.

Postcolonial problematic nation-building project

South Africa had the Freedom Charter of 1955 which captured what type of a nation-state they wanted to live in. Nothing like this existed for Zimbabwe. What we have are Sikombela and Mugagao Declarations, which were about power questions and not national question. In the South African case, it was stated clearly that South Africa belonged to all who lived in it irrespective of race and ethnicity. This is not to celebrate the Freedom Charter because South Africa has its own serious national question problems, but to make a case for a well-thought out charter of living together as citizens of created nation-states like Zimbabwe and other postcolonial formations.

In desperate search for a guiding document, the *Independence Reconciliation Speech of Prime Minister Robert Gabriel Mugabe of 1980*, is widely cited as a nation-building initiative. It was largely targeted at the white minority and its scope was thus very limited.

The second is the *coalition government of 1980 to 1982*, which collapsed within two years. Throughout its brief existence, ZANU-PF conducted itself as though Zimbabwe was a one-party state.

PF-ZAPU and ZIPRA were consistently belittled, provoked and its liberation war credentials down played.

The integration of forces into a Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA)

The integration of forces was a missed opportunity in nation-building. The exercise had a potential to contribute to nation-building if it was handled with care. But what started as integration of forces was allowed to degenerate into *Zanlafication* of the ZNA as its birth and marginalization as well as persecution of ex-ZIPRA elements.

Operation Gukurahundi (1983-1987)

This was a time when the masks of nationalism fell-off and the unresolved ethnic ghost marched naked across the Matebeleland and the Midlands regions of Zimbabwe resulting in the open and brazen attack by the Fifth Brigade on civilians and death of thousands.

This was the first moment signifying lack of commitment to nation-building and over-investment in consolidation of partisan political power at the expense of the nation. It was during this period that the idea of “rhudzhinji” (majority) was emphasized resulting not only in the typical tyranny of the majority but also mistaken idea that nation-states are made of majority ethnic groups.

What had emerged in the 1960s as popular African nationalism could not be translated into *postcolonial horizontal pan-ethnic patriotic comradeship*.

The question of being patriotic emerged during the time of Operation Gukurahundi in its most problematic renditions: *belonging to ruling party, having a ZANU-PF card, not belonging to opposition, and at times speaking Shona language*. This emerges from the way people in Matebeleland and the Midlands regions were forced to take ZANU-PF cards and to sing and speak in Shona whenever they encountered the Fifth Brigade. While we all have a patriotic duty to learn all other languages of our people, the idea of trying to force one language on the rest of the people using violence is out of order and will always breed resistance and seed ideas of secession.

Being a supporter of PF-ZAPU carried a death sentence. Speaking Ndebele carried a death sentence. Having fought for the liberation of Zimbabwe under ZAPU and ZIPRA carried a death sentence. Being a PF-ZAPU leader carried a death sentence. Even Joshua Nkomo had to survive by escaping to exile.

I think Operation Gukurahundi cannot be simply dismissed as a “moment of madness,” it was more than that: *our problematic nationalism with its haunting ethnic sub-texts hit its lowest ebb then*.

Pursuit of power and neglect of nation-building since 1987

Since 1987, one can notice the intensification of pursuit of power and less and less concern about nation-building.

a. Unity Accord of 22 December 1987

Elites accommodated each other and the ordinary people who bore the brunt of Operation Gukurahundi were never a priority. ZANU-PF used the conquest of PF-ZAPU to push its cherished agenda of a one-party-state. The current initiatives focused on reburials sounds like concern with destroying the evidence than the commitment of nation-building. The refusal to make an apology indicates that there is no change of political heart.

b. Global Political Agreement 2008

It was more comprehensive than Unity Accord but again there was more emphasis on revival of the economy than nation-building itself after another spate of violence and death of people. ZANU-PF used the period of inclusive government to regain absolute power in 2013.

c. Operation Restore Legacy November 2017

Again, the military coup was never followed by any clear nation-building project, instead two moments of military deployments against civilians have already been experienced and detention of members of opposition are not a good sign.

Reconstitution of the political

The hope lies with the progressive forces consisting of intellectuals, students, youth, workers, women formations, legal formations, and church formations constituting civil society and progressive politicians.

This hope is based on the work done by such formations as the NCA, ZCTU & MDC in pushing for reconstitution of the political through a people-driven constitution. The 2013 Constitution is a product of the efforts of these forces. Without a new constitution the political cannot be reconstituted. We have to make sure that our 2013 Constitution is alive and is the basis of our politics.

The essential pre-requisite for nation-re-building today

The open veins of the Gukurahundi problem offers us a key rallying point to bring the nation-building project back on the agenda as part of re-building a Zimbabwe that we all want. By making it a Matebeleland problem, we are again giving the perpetrators an escape route from accountability and minimizing its foundational negative consequences for governance and the nation. We can't be "spectators" if not "complicity" once more on an issue which has now engulfed the entire nation.

The nation first died in Matebeleland and the Midlands regions. What Professor Martin Rupiyah termed "governance by military operations" started with Operation Gukurahundi. Massive rape of women as a political tool and punishment started during Operation Gukurahundi. Denying people food because of political affiliation started during Operation Gukurahundi. Arrests and detentions of political opponents in manufactured charges became during Operation Gukurahundi. Deployment of the army against citizens began during Operation Gukurahundi. Open writing of a section of the Zimbabwean population out of the nation and beyond protection of the law began with Gukurahundi. The notion that patriotism can be forced through violence and prosecution began during Gukurahundi. Switching off media so as to commit atrocities began with Gukurahundi. Abduction and disappearance of people happened during Gukurahundi.

Operation Gukurahundi became a template for state terrorization of the people. Our silence, the silence of the region and the silence of the international community emboldened the politics of impunity, governance by violence, and intolerance of political dissent. Now the whole country is increasing being subjected to the Operation Gukurahundi shock-therapy of violence and death. Resolution of Gukurahundi genocide becomes our starting point for nation re-building. We only have to rise adequately to this genocide.

Conclusion: The question of patriotism

Where the nation-state building project has been abandoned there is no nationalism and patriotism. This is because, it is those in leadership that must embody and exhibit patriotism through love for

the people. The first essential pre-requisite for cultivation of patriotism as a child of nationalism is to respect and protect life of the people through the state. A state which terrorizes the nation cannot expect let alone cultivate patriotism. It is this type of state which end up conjuring the idea of generating patriotism through legal means of prosecution and punishment. When such an idea crosses the minds of the ruling elite and when such a moment visits a people, the nation-state building project would have long failed. This notion of trying to enforce patriotism through law only arises within a context of dismal failure to deliver service to the people. Service delivery and protection offered by the state to its citizens automatically generates love for the state from the people. Belonging to a particular state which generates embarrassment through its failures, undercuts patriotism. Ordinary Zimbabweans are the most patriotic citizens for enduring decades of suffering and not rising against the state. The unpatriotic Zimbabwean are those in leadership who loot the resources and have personalised the state.