

ECUMENICAL INGENUITIES AS INSTRUMENTAL POLITICAL TOOL OF CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION IN ZIMBABWE'S NEW DISPENSATION

Chimininge Vengesai, PhD¹

Abstract: *Following the political developments that took place in Zimbabwe from the 13th to the 24th of November 2017 that marked the end of Mugabe regime (1980-2017) and the inauguration of a new government, one can ponder whether this was a coup or not a coup? But it was very apparent that the people of Zimbabwe were happy and in support of the military operation that was underway. The churches through the Zimbabwe Head of Christian Denominations (ZHOCD) also added their voice in support of the events that were taking place. All these resulted to the swearing in of Mnangagwa as a new President of Zimbabwe. The new government under Mnangagwa has popularised itself as a “new dispensation” to signal a different approach to governance from that of Mugabe. However, the huge task confronting Mnangagwa’s government was to prove its political legitimacy. This paper explored the political role played by ecumenical movements in the ‘new dispensation’ in Zimbabwe. Published documents, pastoral letters, internet sources and fieldnotes were purposively selected and used to glean data for this paper. Through discourse analysis, the paper discovered that the Christian churches operating under the ecumenical body known as Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHOCD) is openly accusing the Zimbabwe African National Union- Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) government for the socio-political ills currently affecting the people. By closely analyzing its pastoral letters, one can observe that ZHOCD’s demands on political reforms to the government are no different to those pushed by the opposition party Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). For this reason, this paper concluded that the ecumenical initiatives are not the best political tools in resolving political conflicts in Zimbabwe since they seem to be partisan as we shall see as the paper unfolds.*

Keywords: *Churches, ecumenism, party politics, new dispensation, political legitimacy, Zimbabwe*

¹ Lancaster University, United Kingdom and Zimbabwe Open University, Zimbabwe, vchimininge@gmail.com, v.chimininge@lancaster.ac.uk

Introduction

In different parts of the contemporary world, strategic politicians are including religious symbols and narratives in their appeals for social cohesiveness. In this case, religion is one of the strongest components of social identity. This is because religion values and imposes rules about how we ought to relate to one another and helps us come to grips with where we think we fit in the world.

Considering the political developments that took place in Zimbabwe from November 2017 to August 2019, we witnessed Emmerson Mnagagwa using a famous religious adage of the antiquity that 'the voice of the people is the voice of God' while his rival Nelson Chamisa popularised his movement with a slogan, 'God is in it'. Be that as it may, one can question whether the role of the Church as an organised religious organization can be regarded as the best instrument in resolving the socio-political impasses affecting the new dispensation in Zimbabwe? What are the differences, if any, between the opposition political parties' grievances and those of the ecumenical movements? What is the role of African traditional leadership in the peace processes in new Zimbabwe?

To answer these questions, the paper is guided by the Lederach (1995)'s conflict transformation framework in analysing the church-state relationship in new Zimbabwe. This is done with the quest of understanding the Church's role in a conflict-ridden country like Zimbabwe. According to Lederach (1995), conflict transformation is to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships. For Lederach (1995), conflict transformation does not suggest that we simply eliminate or control, but rather recognize and work with its dialectic nature. This entails that human conflict is socially created by those who are involved in relationships.

The author of this paper is of the view that what appears as political conflicts between the ruling party Zimbabwe African National Unity-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) can also be interpreted as a religious conflict between Christian ways of mitigating conflict versus the African traditional approaches of resolving disputes. In this case, conflict transformation programmes in 'New' Zimbabwe should not ignore the fact that African Traditional Religion (ATR) and mainstream Christianity are at loggerheads insofar as political issues are concerned. The fact that Lederach (1995)'s conflict transformation model involves transforming perceptions of issues and actions of people or groups, this paper finds it useful in investigating the church-state relationship in Zimbabwe after Mugabe. This is so because conflict usually transforms perceptions by accentuating the differences between people and positions, and effective conflict transformation can work to improve mutual understanding. As a result, Lederach (1997)'s conflict transformation framework is apt for this study because of its applicability in providing a coherent and better understanding of the impact of religious belief systems and practices in the political landscape in Zimbabwe's peace and reconciliation processes under Mnangagwa government.

1. Methodological Framework

Is ecumenical ingenuity the best instrumental political tool of conflict transformation in Zimbabwe's New Dispensation? In a bid to answer this major question, the researcher used a historical approach to glean data for this paper. Thus, newspaper articles, internet sources and pastoral letters published during the period under study were used as research instruments. Fieldnotes of my research on African Independent Churches from my PhD thesis were also used in this paper. The sampled corpus of literature was then subjected to discourse analysis in order to understand church-state relationship in Zimbabwe after Robert Mugabe. Discourse analysis was employed simply because political and religious communication though used differently are both used to appeal and attract many people. It is through the media that we learn about these merging political and religious discourses.

Since there are several ecumenical movements in Zimbabwe, only pastoral letters published by the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHOCD) from November 2017 to 2019 were analyzed in order to understand the Church-state relationship in the new dispensation. This was so because the ZHOCD is a Christian body that purports to represent all ecumenical movements in Zimbabwe.

2. Conceptual Analysis

Before we examine the church-state relationship in new Zimbabwe, it is important, at the outset, to try and define the following concepts guiding this research – ecumenism, conflict and new dispensation.

2.1. *Ecumenical ingenuity*

The word ecumenism is derived from the Greek *'oikoumenē'* explained to mean the inhabited world and *'oikos'* whose English synonym is house (Beaver, 1962:225). Its etymological roots can be traced from the commands, promises, and prayers of Jesus. After the International Missionary Conference held at Edinburgh in 1910, Protestants began to use the term ecumenism to describe the gathering of missionary, evangelistic, service, and uniting forces. During and after the second Vatican Council (1962–65), Roman Catholics used ecumenism to refer to the renewal of the whole life of the church, undertaken to make it more responsive to "separated churches" and to the needs of the world (Ruzivo, 2017:149). Be that as it may, ecumenical ingenuities in this paper refer to those initiatives done by Christian movements in order to fulfill the needs and wants of the people. In the case of Zimbabwe therefore, ecumenical initiatives emerge when the Church as a united family is taking part to resolve some of the socio-political problems affecting the country.

2.2. New Dispensation

The phrase 'new dispensation' means different things to different people. According to the interviewee Shoko, the phrase signals a different approach to governance and modus operadi. Mupoperi in an interview indicated that 'new dispensation' simply means a period where the government of Zimbabwe is opening to the international community for businesses; having a president who listens to the voice of the people as well as making sure that government departments are easily accessible to the public. A government that is going to fix the economy by dealing with corruption, creating jobs, reducing government expenditure and above all a government that creates political tolerance amongst its citizens. Such a view was also buttressed by another interviewee Masango who indicated that 'new dispensation' simply means a new way of doing things. Masango concluded that "...all the anticipated changes in the way the new government under President Mnangagwa operates is known as the new dispensation" (Chimininge, 2019:37).

2.3 Conflict

For reconciliation and peace processes to take place in new Zimbabwe, it is crucial to define the concept conflict. Lederach (1997) defines conflict as the antagonistic relationship between two people or parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources and interference from the other party in achieving their goals. According to Shoko (2016), conflict can also be understood as a natural social consequence of fundamental change and an expression of desire for fundamental change. In this case, the writer of this paper is of the opinion that the religious clash between African Traditional Religion (ATR) practitioners and Christian Church is the microcosm of the macrocosm that is the wider political landscape in Zimbabwe today. The understanding shared in this paper is that the interreligious dialogue between the Church and ATR can promote justice, peace, reconciliation and national healing among victims of violence in Zimbabwe in transition.

3. Ecumenical Ingenuities in the New Dispensation

In order to examine the ecumenical initiatives done in the post-Mugabe era in Zimbabwe, we need to explore the background, type, divisions and characterisations of these movements.

3.1 Background and Characterisation of Ecumenical Movements in Zimbabwe

The history of ecumenical movements in Zimbabwe dates back to the colonial era. According to Ruzivo (2017:150), the first ecumenical body formed was the Southern

Rhodesia Missionary Conference (SRMC). It was formed in the city of Bulawayo in 1903 by Reverend Charles Daniel Helm, who was a member of the London Missionary Society. SRMC's aim was to delimit denominational boundaries and promote unity among various protestant churches operating in Southern Rhodesia. In addition, the SRMC was also formed to secure uniformity in dealing with native customs and affairs. This was so because the SRMC cooperated with and lobbied the government of the day to intervene on certain African social policy issues such as beer drinking, African marriages, education and religious beliefs (Ruzivo,2017:151). However, Roman Catholic Church at first did not join the SRMC, as they stuck to their motto of combating and extirpating the Protestant heresy wherever it appeared (Daneel 1971:188). The SRMC gave birth to the Christian Council of Rhodesia in 1964, which later came to be known as the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) in 1979. This was followed by the formation of the Rhodesia Catholic Bishops Conference (RCBC) on October 1, 1969 which later changed its name to Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference (ZCBC) in 1980.

In contemporary Zimbabwe, these ecumenical movements are of four types and they are classified according to their Christian denomination's background. These are the Evangelical, Catholics, Pentecostal and African Independent Churches. It is important to note that there are several movements within each of these categories. The Table below shows four broad categories of ecumenical movements and their affiliates.

Table1: Classification of Ecumenical Movements in Zimbabwe

Roman Catholic Church	African Independent Churches (AICs)	Evangelical Churches	Pentecostal Churches
Catholic Commission of Justice and Peace (ZCCJP)	Destiny for Africa Network	Zimbabwe Christian Alliance	National Pastors' Conference
Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference	Zimbabwe Amalgamated Churches Council	Zimbabwe Council of Churches	Zimbabwe Council of Pentecostal Churches
National Movement of Catholic Students	Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe	Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe	Christian Leaders Forum
	Apostolic Council of Churches in Zimbabwe	Ecumenical Support Services	Zimbabwe Divine Destiny
		Students' Christian Movement of Zimbabwe	Prayer Network of Zimbabwe
		Ecumenical Zimbabwe Network	Young Women's Christian Associations

Source: Researcher's fieldnotes

The general characteristics of the ecumenical movements from the Roman Catholic Church is that they are more organised as well as internationally connected. Therefore, they advocate for peace and justice to prevail in Zimbabwe. They operate as referee of the state since members of the clergy in this category are so privy to government operatives. Membership of the Roman Catholic Church are found in both rural and urban communities.

The African Independent Churches (AICs) ecumenical movements have a strong relationship with ZANU-PF as a revolutionary party. These churches are less organised and they are not linked to international donor communities and governments. Historically, these churches emerged against white-dominated churches during the colonial era. As such, their theology is very similar to ZANU-PF's political ideology. Most AIC members are peasants who live in the countryside (Researcher's fieldnotes).

The distinction between the Evangelical and Pentecostal ecumenical movements is not clear-cut. From my experience based on observations, the only difference between the two is that the former is not radical but very sophisticated and organised in its reactions to the state programmes, while the latter, because of its charismatic roots, is radical but less sophisticated in dealing with the state. Like the Roman Catholic Church, the evangelical churches have strong link with the international community and other ecumenical movements worldwide. It is clear from their sermons and pastoral letters that most of the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches are against ZANU-PF government since they openly criticised government programmes. As a result, their constituencies are a stronghold of the opposition parties. It is crucial to note the fact that Mnangagwa, the current president of Zimbabwe, is a member of the Methodist Church, which is evangelical, while Chamisa, the leader of the opposition MDC, is a Pastor in the Apostolic Faith Mission, one of the biggest and oldest Pentecostal church in Zimbabwe. Membership of these churches are found mostly in urban settlements where many people have experienced harsh socio-economic problems caused by massive job retrenchments and unemployment. Emanating from this background, this study discovered that most of the leadership within these ecumenical groupings are largely partisan in executing their ecumenical roles (Researcher's fieldnotes).

4. Formation of the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations

Having realised that the Church's efforts in dealing with the state were so fragmented, major ecumenical movements in Zimbabwe decided to form a one-size-fits-all ecumenical body known as the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations. On the 30th of October 2017, the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches and the Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe signed a Memorandum of Association (MOA) (Manayiti and Ndlovu, 2017). Just like the SRMC during the colonial era, the major objectives of the ZHOCD are to limit the denominational boundaries among Christians in Zimbabwe and promote unity of purpose when responding to national issues. On their signing ceremony of the MOA,

members of the ZHOCD expressed their dissatisfaction over the rough and exclusionary politics, characterised by amplified use of ethnic identities that was dominating the Zimbabwe public discourse during the Mugabe regime. In their statement, members of the ZHOCD warned the Mugabe government that if exclusionary politics went unabated it would further fragment and threaten the already weak solidity of the Zimbabwean community.

To those who were following the political developments that took place in Zimbabwe from November 2017 to December 2019, there is no doubt that the church through its umbrella body the ZHOCD was very visible in responding to the socio-political problems affecting the new regime of Emmerson Mnangagwa and his ZANU-PF party.

5. The Role of Ecumenical Movements in the New Dispensation

What follows is an attempt to explain the role played by the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations during the November 2017 coup; election campaign of July 2018 and the post-election violence of August 1, 2018.

5.1 The ZHOCD and the November 2017 Coup

It is important to highlight that prior to the occurrence of the coup in November 2017, a notable dynamic in the political arena is worth mentioning for the purposes of this article. The then Vice President Emmerson Munangagwa was fired on 8 November 2017 by the Mugabe administration, citing disloyalty and plotting to take power from him. In a press conference Mugabe told his supporters that Mnangagwa went to Apostolic church prophets to find out when Mugabe would die. But he was told 'he would die first' (Chiminge,2019). In his response to his dismissal from the government and the ZANU-PF party, Mnangagwa wrote a five-page letter addressed to Mugabe. In the letter, Mnangagwa indicated that he had been loyal to Mugabe, but he was vilified by people who draw their power "not from the people or party but from two individuals in the form of the first family". Shockingly, in his letter to Mugabe, Mnangagwa indicated that he was escaping from the country since he thought his life was in danger but was planning to return after two weeks to lead Zimbabwe. He then accused Mugabe and his wife of privatising and capturing the party. In his words, Mnangagwa bemoaned that, „We must reject this insane and 'idiotic' habit of expelling and suspending members of the party merely because we differ in opinion or have brighter and more progressive ideas of improving the lives of our people.”

In fulfilling his promise of coming back to lead the country, the military launched a campaign code named 'Operation Restore Legacy' in support of Mnangagwa and placed Mugabe and his right-hand men under house arrest while others were arrested or escaped from the country. Through the negotiations intermediated by the Roman Catholic Bishop Father Fidelis Mukonori, Mugabe and Army Generals reached a

consensus that he should retired from being head of the state. On 19 December 2017, Mugabe was eventually forced to resigne from the office of presidency (Chimininge, 2019). In support of the 'Operation Restore Legacy', the Zimbabwean Herald newspaper reported with enthusiasm that the military operations were 'launched to rescue the values and the ethos of the liberation struggle threatened by political upstairs and counter-revolutionaries.' So, in portraying the November 2017 events as the start of a new era, the coup leaders sought to distinguish themselves from ZANU-PF's record of repression, corruption and economic mismanagement and to fire people's imaginations for what Zimbabwe could be without Mugabe at the realm.

In response to the 'Operation Restore Legacy', Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations added their voice to support the new dispensation. In their Pastoral Letter of 15 November 2017 titled: 'Zimbabwe between a crisis and a kairos (opportunity)' the ZHOCD lamented that "Now we have reached a new chapter in the history of our nation. ...We see the current situation not just as a crisis in which we are helpless. We see the current arrangement as an opportunity for the birth of a new nation. Our God created everything out of chaos. For something new to be born we need to clearly define our problem. Proper naming of the problem will give us a clear sense of where we must go as a nation" (Manayiti, and Ndlovu, 2017).

The ZHOCD informed the people of Zimbabwe that the economic problems and myriad social challenges affecting the nation were merely manifestations or symptoms of a deeper disease that has affected the nation for a long time. For the ZHOCD, the major challenge was based on the loss of trust in the legitimacy of the national processes and institutions. According to the ZHOCD, the problems in Zimbabwe are hinged on the fact that there is no checks and balances on how the three branches of the State: The Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary are functioning. Furthermore, the ZHOCD indicated that there was no clear distinction between the ruling party and the Government. As a result, there was a major concern that the priorities of the poor have become relegated to the charity of those who have access to national resources without proper commitment to addressing the root-causes of these problems. The pastoral letter concluded that "There is a general feeling that the wheels of democracy have become stuck in the mud of personalised politics where the generality of the citizenry plays an insignificant role. It is this lack of democratic renewal and the resulting stagnation, sterility and fatigue that has culminated in the current situation". In their proposal of the way forward, the ZHOCD encouraged the people of Zimbabwe to *call to prayer for the nation; call to calm and peace; call for the respect of human dignity; call for a transitional government of national unity; and all for national dialogue* (ZHOCD Pastoral Letter, 15 November 2017).

In dissecting the contents of the pastoral letter, it is apparent that the tenor of the declaration suggests that the ecumenical bodies were in support of the military operation that led to the ouster of Mugabe. This implies that ZHOCD blessed the military coup as a process of giving Zimbabwe an opportunity for change. According to the ZHOCD, the Zimbabwean crisis can not only be squarely blamed on the government and the ruling

party but rather all Zimbabweans at some point failed to adequately play their roles and therefore they all share the blame. They further blamed the complicity of the church and civil society. According to the mother of all ecumenical movements in Zimbabwe, the church has lost its prophetic urge driven by personality cults and superstitious approaches to socio-economic and political challenges.

In as much as they embraced and welcomed operation restore order, the ZHOCD recommended and encouraged the military and government to formulate a transitional government of national unity that was to oversee the smooth transition to a free and fair election. According to ZHOCD, 'Operation Restore Legacy' had created an opportunity for dialogue which they thought could not happen within the ruling party alone (*ZHOCD Pastoral Letter, 15 November 2017*). They suggested the need for a National Envisioning Process (NEP) that could have captured the aspirations of all the sectors of society. The church alongside other stakeholders in the private sector, academia, and other spheres could establish this NEP as an inclusive space enabling Zimbabweans from all walks of life to contribute towards a democratic transition to the 'Zimbabwe all people want'.

5.1 ZHOCD and July 2018 Election Campaign

It is crucial to note that the Church was shocked by the position taken by President Mnangagwa soon after assuming presidency on 24 November 2017. Instead of forming a Government of National Unity and establishing a National Envisioning Process as was proposed by ZHOCD during the coup to run the country during the transitional period up to the election period, Mnangagwa retired most of the key military figures to occupy cabinet posts in the new government. Among others, Constantino Chiwenga the then Army General was appointed to the office of Vice President. Air Marshal Perence Shiri was appointed minister of lands and agriculture while General Sibusiso Moyo was appointed minister of foreign affairs. In this case, the majority of high-ranking officials in the military, intelligence and police forces were given ministerial and other positions in the state by Mnangagwa. Against the wishes of the voice of the church, President Mnangagwa pronounced that Zimbabweans were to brace for July 31 harmonised elections as prescribed by the Zimbabwean constitution. For Mnangagwa, the election process was going to be transparent, free and fair for the progressive good of the country. In his presidential campaign, Mnangagwa sought to gain support from the church and went on to appeal to God using religious language. In his first speech (<https://news.sky.com/story/zimbabwe-president-designate-emmeron-mnangagwa-vows-jobs-and-new-democracy-11139206>) as President-designate at the ZANU-PF headquarters, Mnangagwa bemoaned: "Former president, "the people have spoken, the voice of the people is the voice of God." He promised people to deliver the 'Zimbabwe They Want' as was enshrined in one of the pastoral letters published by the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, Evangelical Fellowship and Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference in 2006.

In his campaign of the July 2018 elections, Mnangagwa posits that "We cannot have a 'New Era' if we keep the same electioneering methods. So instead of intimidating

people to come to our side, let us convince them, charm them. This is not to say people are being intimidated (Mnangagwa's First Speech, 2018). But if how we do things makes people feel scared then we should review it and make sure our message and intentions are not misinterpreted." This, in turn, meant that Mnangagwa and his ZANU-PF party had a good product to sell which received a lot of cheerful acquiescence from the majority of people in Zimbabwe. Nevertheless, such benevolence does not come free. The price to pay was to do things the right way to have a buy-in from the people in the July 2018 harmonised elections.

In order to support his sweet promises on the future of new dispensation, Mnangagwa emphasised the issue of forgiveness and urged people to shun against revenge. In his inaugural speech he pleaded to people of Zimbabwe that 'let bygones be bygones' (<http://www.chronicle.co.zw/president-mnangagwas-inauguration-speech-in-full/>).

On the question on forgiveness, Mnangagwa made a significant development in the new dispensation by signing the "National Peace and Reconciliation Commission Bill" (NPRC) into law as well as making operational a Commission that was appointed by Mugabe in 2016 (Murambadoro, 2019). The ZHOCD considered the signing of the NPRC bill into law as one of the significant steps towards raising optimism in a country. However, what worried the people of Matebeleland (mostly the victims of the 1982 genocide) was the composition of the NPRC which they accused of being dominated by the Shona (mostly the perpetrators of the 1982 genocide). The Ndebele people were also not happy with the pace in which the commission was progressing in its enquiry. This implies that Mnangagwa was looking for the moral right from the citizens to govern Zimbabwe. According to Murambadoro (2019), Mnangagwa was fully aware that without political legitimacy or moral foundation from the local churches, his regime was not going to survive beyond the July 2018 harmonised elections. So, the challenge that he was facing was to make the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission functional before the July 2018 elections and beyond. The Church wanted to see the results of the Commission and action taken against the perpetrators of the Gukurahwundi massacre of 1982 before the much-anticipated elections.

However, despite all these promises and developments, Mnangagwa acted very slowly on political and electoral reforms as enshrined in the constitution of Zimbabwe. In fact, Mnangagwa was silent about electoral reform while ostensibly preaching that the July 2018 elections were going to be free, fair and credible. However, this triggered many critics to raise a major question on how the elections can be credible since the election business is not an event but rather a process. As a result, the ZHOCD, opposition political parties and some civil society organisations that were members of the National Electoral Reform Agenda (NERA) demanded that electoral reforms be completed before the harmonised elections of July 2018.

According to Mandikwaza (2019), the Church partnering with opposition parties and civil society organisations pressurised Mnangagwa's new dispensation to address problems that compromise the credibility of elections such as the Public Order Security

Act (POSA), the alignment of electoral act with the constitution; the judiciary; the security sector; bureaucracy and state media. However, such demands fell on deaf ears.

According to the submission of NERA, the Electoral Act should be aligned with the new Constitution. In this case, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) should be censured to find whether some of the officers are not ZANU-PF supporters. The problems raised by NERA was that ZEC has no credibility and has long been considered independent organ on paper while in practice is furthering the ruling party's agenda (Chiminge,2019). MDC Alliance presidential candidate Nelson Chamisa in his 2018 election campaign insisted that the opposition was not going to boycott the July 2018 elections, but instead vigorously push for electoral reforms before the polls. For Chamisa "It's either reforms or there will be no elections which are not free and fair. That is our position and we are prepared to surrender ourselves before we surrender our victory." This view was also echoed by Tendai Biti the Vice President of MDC when he argued that Mnangagwa cannot stage a coup in order to lose the elections. What it means therefore was Mnangagwa and his ZANU-PF were paying lip service to a free and fair election.

As part of the electoral reforms, the major opposition MDC together with ZHOCD demanded to have an input on who was to print the ballot papers as well as subjecting the biometric voters' registration (BVR) to an audit by all registered parties before the elections. In his own words, Chamisa (2018) proclaimed that, "We have said until and unless we have a voters' roll audit, we are not going to accept any process that is outside that. Number two, we want to make sure that there is going to be an agreement on who is going to print the ballot papers. This thing of trying to clandestinely print ballot papers through Nikuv or Israeli, Chinese or any other, we will not accept" (Chiminge, 2019).

The other targets for reform pushed by the ZHOCD and opposition parties was a challenge to Mnangagwa to include the question of the independence of judiciary and state media. Many opposition players were of the idea that most judges were sympathetic to the ruling party's interests because they were part of its patronage network. Opposition parties were demanding equal opportunities on the airwave to present their manifesto during their election campaigns. The state media was accused of being biased towards ZANU-PF propaganda. Be that as it may, most of these reforms were not done and the July 2018 elections were conducted under such a circumstance. As a result, opposition supporters were so worried that the promises of free, fair and credible elections by Mnangagwa were mere myths. In the interview with the News Day, (<https://www.newsday.co.zw/2018/03/16Chamisa-takes-mnangagwa-to-task-over-reforms/>), Chamisa confirmed that he reached out to President Mnangagwa through a letter with a list of all the critical issues that required immediate attention related to the reforms for a free, fair and credible elections. However, the requests were falling on deaf ears and up to the July 2018 elections nothing changed and yet Mnangagwa promised the local, regional and international communities to change Zimbabwe's political climate which he characterised as "poisonous, rancorous and polarised."

So, the question of the composition of the peace commission, independence of judiciary, voter registration, biased state media and many others caused the major

opposition political party the MDC to reject the results of 31 July 2018. Mnangagwa and his ZANU-PF party won with 50.8% of the vote to Chamisa's MDC Alliance 44.3%, giving him the majority needed to avoid a runoff. Mnangagwa won six of the country's ten provinces, while Chamisa won four, including the two metropolitan provinces, Harare and Bulawayo. As a result, violence erupted between members of the opposition parties and the state security on August 1, 2018. Media reports indicated that six unarmed civilians lost their lives and several others were wounded by government soldiers who opened fire on people protesting alleged misconduct by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/01/zanu-pf-wins-majority-of-seats-in-zimbabwe-parliament-elections>). The protesters accused ZEC of delays in announcing election results and vote rigging. Even before the July 31 general election, ZEC, a body responsible for ensuring that elections are transparent, free and fair, was consistently challenged in court by civic groups for failing to address the abnormalities in the voter registration roll. These protests and anomalies were overlooked by ZEC and no effort was made to resolve these contentious issues by the NPRC (<https://www.voazimbabwe.com/a/zimbabwe-police-vote-in-what-opposition-parties-say-is-a-gigantic-fraud/4480047.html>). Just like in the First Republic Zimbabwe, the Mnangagwa government has proved beyond reasonable doubt that when election-related protests erupted, the ZANU PF government responded by using violence, intimidation, and other repressive actions to suppress the protestors. Restrictive statutes, such as the Public Order and Security Act of 2000 were evoked to prohibit citizens from holding public gatherings, rendering those found participating in public gathering lawbreakers who deserved to be punished. Despite the high levels of election-related violence in the country, the peace commission was largely ineffective in addressing any of the pressing issues which ended up precipitating violence on August 1, 2018. Thus, the post-Mugabe regime according to the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum (2019), appears to be ruled by a militarised government, many of whose members have been implicated in the violence that the commission ought to address. These political figures have been accused of using the commission as a political ploy to garner support from voters and be seen as compliant to international norms of justice and respect for human rights (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2018-08-06-trauma-revisited-understanding-the-impact-of-zimbabwes-post-electoral-violence>).

In response to the post-election violence, the ZHOCD issued a pastoral letter titled: Deteriorating human security and economy in Zimbabwe. In their propositions, the ZHOCD proclaimed that Church leaders were learning with deep concern the deteriorating human security situation especially as demonstrated by the mass killing and abductions of civilians by state security. For the Church this situation was deeply worrying because none of the reported cases of murders, abductions and tortures have been successfully investigated and prosecuted (<http://kubatana.net/2019/09/16/deteriorating-human-security-and-economy-in-zimbabwe/>).

According to ZHOCD the situation was further disturbing because there was government communication suggesting that there was a possibility of a third force.

Apart from it being too coincidental that this third hand was only targeting civil society activists and other dissenting voices, it was worrying that after so many reported cases, not a single person has been arrested. This has put the security of citizens at the highest level of vulnerability. This being the case, the church leaders were much worried about politicisation of the security sector in the context of deep inter and intra party fragmentation that puts the whole nation at the highest levels of security risk (<http://kubatana.net/2019/09/16/deteriorating-human-security-and-economy-in-zimbabwe/>). In response to election violence the church proposed that the government of Zimbabwe stop conducting elections for the next seven years. In a pastoral letter titled: call for national sabbath for trust and confidence building, the ZHOCD in its opening remarks indicated that:

“We, the leaders of the ZHOCD made up of EFZ, UDACIZA, ZCBC and ZCC, met at the Africa Synod House on the 7th of October 2019 to consider the currently unfolding national crisis in its totality and to propose what we believe is a comprehensive but sustainable solution to it. We have prayerfully come to the conclusion that in light of the current political paralysis, deepening mistrust and the dehumanizing economic decline, the nation will need to take a bold decision to address the root causes of our national challenges that have a very long history and will not be fully resolved by one entity. In this light, we are calling the nation to SABBATH on all political contestation for a period of seven years to allow for the rebuilding of trust and confidence, reset our politics and chart a shared way forward towards a comprehensive economic recovery path in a non-competitive political environment” (<http://kubatana.net/2019/10/07/call-for-national-sabbath-for-trust-and-confidence-building/>).

6. Dissecting the Ecumenical Ingenuities in the New Dispensation

As indicated above, the New Dispensation is experiencing political and economic challenges since it came into power in November 2017. The nature and origins of the crisis are varied making it impossible to present a single dimension conflict resolution strategy. However, many scholars and human rights activists are of the opinion that the Church with its ecumenical bodies can be on the frontline of the national dialogue process. They hasten to say so because they think that the Church has a wider follower about eighty percent of the total population of Zimbabwe. They argue so because they thought that the Church is composed of various groups of society that have diverse backgrounds and bring with them various skills and expertise this makes it perhaps the best institution to lead the peace and reconciliation process (Munemo and Nciizah, 2014). For this reason, the Church is regarded as the conscience of Zimbabwean society. It is perceived as the moral guardian of society; hence it should interpret and teach people its biblical standards of justice and righteousness and articulate what is wrong in Zimbabwe and why it is wrong and then advocate for an end to oppression. Under the new dispensation, the Church should be providing leadership and guidance and playing

a key role in promoting national healing and reconciliation as opposed to the situation where it has been pushed to the margins of the whole process during Mugabe era.

Applying Munemo and Nciizah (2014)'s role of the Church during the GNU (2009 to 2013), one can be persuaded to think that under the New Dispensation, the Church should be in the forefront of de-escalating the crisis in Zimbabwe. However, these scholars tend to forget that just like political parties, the Church in Zimbabwe is highly polarized and fragmented. This entails that there are divergent views on the role of the Church in responding to the challenges of healing and reconciling Zimbabweans in the aftermath of political violence. Differences on how the national peace and reconciliation programme can be promoted have not only been found amongst political players but have also been found in the church resulting in deep divisions which have hindered church efforts aimed at uniting the country. For instance, other ecumenical movements of African Independent Churches and those from the Pentecostal Churches which are not members of the ZHOCD such as Amalgamated of African Churches Council (AACC) rallied behind Mnangagwa's pronouncement of conducting the elections in July 2018 (despite the clarion call of the ZHOCD to have a Government of National Unity during the transitional period) by urging Christians to be peaceful before, during and after the harmonised elections.

The ZACC' patron Jimayi Muduvuri's remarks were supported by other representatives of the denominations that fall under ZACC, including Pastor Nyasha Chivhuna of Mugodhi Apostolic Faith Church; Richman Nyamombe of Zviratidzo Zvavapositori Church; Bishop Nehemiah Mutendi of the Zion Christian Church and Apostle Rose Kazembe, the founder of Restoration International Ministries. All these leaders and others unanimously agreed and echoed that all Zimbabweans should respect their leaders and believe that leadership comes from God himself and therefore there is need to respect whatever decision made by the president. They emphasised that their duty as a Christian community is to pray for free and fair elections. These same churches quickly endorsed that the July 31, 2018 elections were free and fair.

These differences have ranged from uncompromising condemnation and rejection of Mnangagwa's new dispensation to non-confrontation and even practical engagement with the ruling party. For instance, traditional leaders like Fortune Charumbira as well as some leaders of African Indigenous Churches like Bishop Nehemiah Mutendi of the Zion Christian Church and Bishop Andrew Utaunashe of the Family of God Church have largely thrown their weight behind Mnangagwa's ZANU PF. It should be noted that while some Mainline Churches are ambivalent about getting involved in the political dialogue issues, the Roman Catholic Church and Zimbabwe Council of Churches have been critical of government's repressive policies and actions. The above-mentioned ecumenical groups have taken such positions but most churches have fallen into the pit of political appeasement at the expense of maintaining the integrity of the Church, making them officious bystanders caught in-between two political gladiators at each other's throats instead of transforming relations between them (Sibanda and Maposa, 2013).

Even in the new dispensation, the willingness of the Church's ecumenical movements to facilitate political dialogue is treated with suspicion. It is now perceived as the enemy of the State and has also been accused of aligning with drivers of regime change. It is against this backdrop where the effectiveness of the ZHOCD as a promoter of democracy and instrument of national healing and reconciliation has been compromised. It has been cowed by hardliners and has become cautious about taking an overt political stand regarding the crisis in the country.

Conclusion

It seems as if the ZANU PF government treated the church with a lot of suspicion and suspected it to be an instrument of some European governments to effect regime change in Zimbabwe. This acrimony can be traced back from the role of the Church during the liberation struggle as well as its role in the constitution making process during the GNU. Under Article 6 of the GPA of 2009 the government allowed the church to participate in the writing of a new constitution. Thus, the ZHOCD made its submissions to be included in the new constitution. The Church has been seeking to restore harmonious racial co-existence but the constitution that was adopted barely reflects the input made by the church. Church efforts directed at fostering race reconciliation have put it under scrutiny. Racial reconciliation was viewed by the government as a betrayal of the people of Zimbabwe and perceived as a steppingstone to neo-colonialism. Likewise, the Church's input in the new dispensation is therefore sacrificed at the altar of political expedience. As a result, the ZANU-PF government prefer to listen to the voice of African traditional leaders and bishops of African Indigenous churches than the voice of the Christian Churches insofar as political issues are concerned. As a result, ecumenical ingenuities through the ZHOCD are not the best political tools to transform the political landscape in Zimbabwe in transition. Because of this lack of trust between the government and the church, there is need for the ZHOCD to partner with traditional chiefs and headmen in addressing socio-political problems in Zimbabwe.

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