Zimbabwe’s Trauma: Impunity, Disappearances and Torture

By Tinashe L. Chimedza

Taking the latest protests engulfing Zimbabwe since the 16th of August 2019, the article looks at how state repression against the opposition and the brutal crackdown on civil society activists are remnants of the country’s historic liberation war days. Instead of ‘smashing’ the colonial-settler brutal state security apparatus, the post-colonial nationalist class re-fashioned it and used its Chinese/Russian trained officers to build a total surveillance state that abducts, kidnaps, tortures, kills, and brutalises citizens, especially those belonging to the opposition.

This article gives the example of three activists who were abducted, tortured, and some who disappeared and points to how the state security apparatus has remained outside the bounds of accountability, and is funded heavily through budget and extra-budget means. To achieve its political ends, the ruling class is deliberately tiptoeing around much needed legislative and political reforms set out by the 2013 Constitution, which was won after a decade of political contest.

The article ends by pointing out that the opposition has qualitatively changed from the ‘old guard’ like Morgan Tsvangirai to a new younger and more impatient leadership under Nelson Chamisa. Add to this, the explosive concoction of unemployed, poor working-class conditions, economic informality, urban slums and the ruling political class, already suffering from intra-party factional fights, has a real political contest on its hands – in Zimbabwe a hungry man is very angry.
State-sponsored abductions, kidnapping and torture

Three people.

The first, Tonderai Ndira.

A young activist belonging to the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) led by the former Prime Minister of Zimbabwe, Morgan Tsvangirai. He was an activist from the poor working-class neighbourhood of Mabvuku-Tafara, a few kilometres east of Harare that was a hotbed of opposition activism.

When they came for him, it was just before dawn on the 14th of May 2008. Just weeks from an election. In the cover of darkness. They rammed in into the house. No warrant. Just brutal force. They were almost a dozen of them, some clad in balaclavas, brandishing the infamous AK-47s in front of his wife and two young kids. He had no chance. Outnumbered. Outgunned. Dazed in his sleep. His wife and children screaming and all caught up in the maelstrom. They dragged him out with only his underwear. That was the last time his family saw him alive. As soon as the wife realised what had happened, she alerted neighbours, the party leadership and human rights activists. The search began and it led nowhere. After a few days those searching for ‘Dread’ Tonde turned to hospitals.

When they finally found him, it was a harrowing scene. They discovered his body by mistake on the Parirenyatwa morgue. Tonderai’s body had been left to rot in an open field in Goromonzi, which is rumoured to have the intelligence torture chamber built under Ian Smith in the 1960s. His bones were broken in several places. His jaw bone was shattered. There were multiple stab wounds. His tongue had been cut out. There was a bullet wound through the heart indicating that he was shot at close range. His skull had been clobbered with what looked like a blow from a steel hammer. It was an extra-judicial sadistic cold-blooded murder. His almost decomposing torso had evidence of extreme torture.

His wife would only identify him from a ring he had. His father had problems identifying his son. It is likely that they would have drugged him to make him unconscious, cuffed his hands, tied his legs, put the dreaded hoodie around his neck and then severely tortured him. They knew he was a fighter and they would have come prepared. Morgan Tsvangirai called the murder ‘callous’ at the funeral and a researcher, Sam Wilkins, would conclude in the Journal of Southern African Studies (Volume 39, December 2003) that Tonderai Ndira was ‘legendary’, a ‘peacemaker’, a ‘street fighter’, ‘charismatic’, ‘visionary’ and a ‘comedian’.

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It would later emerge that the violence of May, June, July and August in 2008 was a well-coordinated military operation, that the commanders who executed the coup of 2017 were in control and that the current president, Emerson Mnangagwa, was the anchor of that unprecedented mayhem. They wanted to send a message to the core activists of the MDC that the state was watching and to strike fear. By the time that orgy of violence was over in 2008, the MDC would allege that over 500 of its activists had been murdered and some had just simply disappeared. Since then there are rumours that just outside Marondera, less than 100 km to the east of Harare, there is a dam where locals
claim ruling party activists tied ropes and granite stones around opposition activists and threw them
to sink to the bottom.

The second, a young radical journalist. **Itai Dzamara.**

He was vociferous about the socio-economic collapse in Zimbabwe. Itai was daring. He had been
arrested, beaten up and roughed up a few times. Despite this, he kept going back to Africa Unity
Square in the middle of Harare not far from the Munhumutapa Government complex and right
adjacent to the Parliament building. With a few comrades they had started what was called Occupy
Africa Unity Square Movement. Sometimes they slept there, sometimes they held placards but they
kept going back.

The nation was starting to notice and the opposition leader made a visit. What was initially an
inconvenience for the Robert Mugabe regime was becoming a rallying point. They went for him first
with the usual propaganda and when that didn’t seem to deter him, they finally went for his neck.
Itai had become a vocal critic of the Mugabe-led government. He was arrested. He was beaten up
and detained on several occasions. His protest message was simple: ‘**FAILED MUGABE MUST STEP
DOWN**’.

When they went for him it was in broad daylight. Witnesses said they saw an all-terrain vehicle
circling the barbershop. Itai Dzamara was convinced that it was a vehicle that belonged to the
intelligence services. In the poor urban streets of Glen Norah, the expensive car, the well-fed men
and the guns stuck out like a sore thumb. They pounced on him stealthily, accusing him of being a
‘cattle rustler’. The kidnappers cuffed him, threw him into the vehicle and sped off. The vehicle had
no number plates. They were armed with the infamous AK-47s. It was a signature state-sanctioned
operation.

Since then the young journalist has never been seen. The ruling political class said the journalist had
arranged his own abduction. His wife and two kids were left in the horror and constant trauma that
they too could be targeted by the state security. Since then accusations and counter-accusations
have flown around. The state propaganda even went as far as claiming that Itai Dzamara had
organised his own kidnapping. It would later take a High Court application and several pleadings in
Parliament for the police to even feign some level of investigation into the disappearance.

The third, a human rights activist. **Jestina Mukoko.**

She now chairs the NGO Human Rights Forum. She was the Director of Zimbabwe Peace Project
(ZPP). Jestina had also worked for Radio Voice of the People whose studio in Harare was bombed in
the middle of the night in August of 2002. The printing press of the *Daily News* had suffered a
similar fate days after Professor Jonathan Moyo had declared that it was time to “put a final stop to
this madness”.

While ZPP is a small organisation, they had devised a network of peace activists across the country
who document political violence and they filed detailed reports of who was doing what, when, how
and against whom. The security apparatus was watching and they feared the concrete evidence that
ZPP was slowly and meticulously gathering. They went for her in the dead of the night. In the cover
of darkness, with no warrant, no identification cards, bundled her into a car in a nightdress, firearms openly displayed, drove off into the night and definitely not to a police station.

She would later testify that she was blindfolded on several occasions, threatened with execution, severely beaten with a piece of iron and horse pipe under her feet until they were swollen (falanga method) and interrogated almost daily by people who were demanding ZPP documents. By the time they were done, in three weeks’ time, she mysteriously appeared at court charged with ‘recruiting’ or ‘attempting to recruit’ young men to ‘undergo military training’ in order to commit ‘insurgency, banditry, sabotage or terrorism in Zimbabwe’. When she challenged the prosecution in the Constitutional Court, the court stayed the prosecution and the learned judges were stating the following:

*It is clear from the facts that at the time the State security agents kidnapped the applicant from home and later detained her at the secret place, they did not have reasonable suspicion of her having committed the criminal offence she was later charged with. They then used torture, inhuman and degrading treatment during interrogation to extract from her information or evidence on which they expected that the public prosecutor would act as a basis of a reasonable suspicion of her having committed the criminal offence with which she was then charged.*

(Judgment No. SC 11/12 Const. Application No. 36/09)

Jestina Mukoko, supported by the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) sued the Ministry of Home Affairs and was awarded damages. The people behind the unlawful abduction and torture were never exposed or prosecuted. She would later write a book titled *The Abduction and Trial of Jestina Mukoko: The Fight for Human Rights in Zimbabwe* chronicling the most sordid and chilling details of Zimbabwe’s ‘shadowy’ state.

Jestina Mukoko’s and the pattern of abductions of activists reads like the scripts from colonial Rhodesia, apartheid South Africa or the scenes described in *The Gulag Archipelago* by Aleksander Solzhenitysn. In defence of its class position and the ruling networks, Zimbabwe’s state security apparatus has flourished, with largesse straight from the state. The country’s presidents have shown no appetite for making them accountable.

**Trauma and tactics of war: Impunity and unaccountability**

In the 1980s, the then president, Robert Mugabe, appointed the Chihambakwe Commission to investigate the now infamous killings called Gukurahunnd, by the 5th Brigade of the Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA). The commission report was never published.

The current president appointed the Motlanthe Commission to investigate the 1st of August 2017 killings in Harare just after the elections of July 2017. The recommendations of the commission remain unimplemented. Prosecutions have happened. In an interview with the Zimbabwe Television Network (ZTN), the Chief of the Defence Forces, Commander Valerio Sibanda, blamed a ‘third force’ and claimed after that after one year investigations are continuing. But once in a while the president revealed openly the way the state, party and military have become deliberately conflated:

*We must be respected. We are the majority. We are the people. We are the government. We are the army. We are the army. We are the Air Force. We are the army. We are the police. We are everything you can think of. We determine who can do mining in Zimbabwe. We determine who can construct a railway line in Zimbabwe. We determine who can build a road in Zimbabwe. No other party can do so.* (President Emerson Mnagangwa, 8th of May 2019)

But to learn how this came to be we have to look into the history of the liberation national liberation
movement in Southern Africa. Liberation wars were a very, very messy affair. Comrades turned on comrades, colonial governments infiltrated liberation movements and, in extreme cases, used targeted assassinations to eliminate leaders.

In the midst of that maelstrom, liberation movements developed very cruel and brutal means of dealing with opponents. These divisions went to the heart of the movements and the nationalists became paranoid. Those with political ambition exploited the lapses and fanned ethnic and regional differences. The contradictions were captured in a former liberation army commander’s autobiography written by Wilfred Mhanda: Dzino: Memoirs of A Freedom Fighter (2011) and also in Fay Chung’s Reliving the Second Chimurenga: Memories from Zimbabwe’s Liberation Struggle (2006)

In the liberation camps itself, faction turned against faction with fatal consequences. This security paranoia spilled over into the independence era and the nationalists found a network of state institutions, detention facilities and torture tactics that had been developed by the settler-colonial regime. To the very brutal, totally vicious security apparatus left by white colonial-setter colonial Rhodesia, the national liberation movement added lessons from China and Russia who had often trained both the military and intelligence officers.

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Zimbabwe’s current president was in charge of that state security apparatus, which was fanned across the country and embedded into society, from overt intelligence officers in every district office to covert intelligence officers across the major institutions across the country ranging, from universities and straight into hotels. The current First Lady is a former intelligence officer deployed in the hospitality sector. The country has become a total Stalinist surveillance society.

**Trashing or fulfilling the Constitution of 2013?**

As Zimbabwe’s political class pushes the country to the brink, the Constitution of 2013 has become a new battleground pitting the ruling party against the opposition led by Nelson Chamisa. The government is engaged in a very deliberate process of watering down the liberal rights regime introduced by the Constitution of 2013. On the other hand, the opposition has started to push back, arguing that the ruling political class is delaying reforms and making sure the old political landscape of authoritarianism is entrenched. This was captured well by journalist Hopewell Chinono:

> We have a newish constitution, newish because it is now six years old. It was put to a national vote through a referendum and agreed upon by the whole country. Up to now the laws of our country have not been aligned to that constitution which was put in place just a few months before the current President became Minister of Justice in August of 2013. He held this Justice portfolio until November of 2017 when he subsequently became the country’s President, so he is aware of what needs to be done to fix this issue, all he needs is the political will to do it.
> (Nehanda Radio, 15 June 2019)

Zimbabwe’s nationalist-military class is also building and serving conspiracy stories in large doses. At some point they blame the opposition for not joining a state-directed dialogue process; at another time they blame ‘foreign nationals’ of training bandits, at another time they arrest civil society activists for attempting to ‘subvert an elected government’ and yet another time they blame the
collapse to ‘sanctions’. *The Sunday Mail*, a government-controlled paper, continues with this line, stating that “Government and security officials have been consistently warning that there is a ‘third hand’ behind the disturbances that have been plaguing Zimbabwe since the July 30 2018 elections.” (18 August 2019).

The president preaches reform but only tinkers with the Public Order Security Act (POSA), promises media reform and opening up the media landscape but appeals a judgment by the High Court that the public broadcaster is biased. The president promises a crackdown against corruption but appoints the wife of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and one of his key allies as Chair of Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission (ZACC).

The charade then consists of a few arrests of bureaucrats and a minister but totally ignores a damning disclosure by the Ministry of Finance, in Parliament, that they do not have paperwork to account for US$3billion disbursed under the ‘command agriculture’ programme. Command agriculture superintended by the military continues to be funded from the budget and was arguably used as an open cheque to fund the military coup of November 2017. The president preaches ‘austerity for prosperity’ but charters luxury jets. But this state of affairs is driving a new wave of despair and more protest.

**Winds of protest: The qualitative change in the opposition**

In February of 2016, the leader of the main opposition, Morgan Tsvangirai, passed on after a battle with cancer. Initial instability in the party has quietened down. But there is also another qualitative change in the opposition. The MDC Alliance leadership is now dominated by former student leaders. These former student leaders are not afraid of protests; most of them have been tortured, detained in jails before, some have been charged of ‘treason and subversion’, some have been exiled before and they all share strong levels of solidarity. They have no links to the liberation movement and they have a long-running disdain for the ruling political class.

The MDC Alliance have started a national mobilisation process aimed at having rolling mass protests. While the High Court stopped the initial protest on the 16th of August 2019 and the police issued ‘prohibition orders’, Nelson Chamisa, the leader of the opposition, stated that they will not backing down, saying the following:

> 7/15.**Throughout the course of history no oppressed people have achieved freedom by complying with the dictates of an unjust system. They have challenged it. This is the historic task of our people our generation. The system a vicious machinery but the people have a valiant spirit.**

> 15/15.**In the days, weeks and months ahead, peaceful action is our force. To the people who will come out to express themselves we say it’s important to exercise your rights and to do so peacefully.** (Nelson Chamisa, Twitter posts, 17 August 2019)

The United Nations has estimated that close to 5 million people will need food aid in the 2019-2020 farming season. In urban areas, the socio-economic crisis is radicalising unemployed youth and the routine deployment of police, army and security services is putting the national psyche on knife’s edge.

Electricity is gone two-thirds of the day, cholera and typhoid is stalking the urban populace, jobs are nowhere to be found, inflation is spiralling out of control, fuel shortages are the new normal, income is fast collapsing, unions are threatening strikes and the ruling party is beset by far-reaching factional contests. If one were to place a finger on the nation’s urban areas one can feel the intense palpitations of a nation-state hurtling on auto-pilot and the political class is preaching to itself about
‘third force’ conspiracies.

The political class would do well to heed that warning by Bob Nester Marley – *in Zimbabwe a hungry man is an angry man.*

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