



COVID-19 and the Future of Democracy in Zimbabwe

By Tamuka Charles Chirimambowa



The world has been teetering on the precipice ever since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan city in Hubei province, China. Since then, the disease has been classified as a global pandemic by the [World Health Organisation](#) (WHO), leading to countries adopting drastic measures to combat it.

In a majority of countries, state security institutions have been activated and deployed to help enforce the lockdown, and the stay-at-home and social distancing policies. Inasmuch as these strategies are practical measures to combat COVID-19, they have inadvertently created opportunities for [authoritarianism](#). Jared Rodriguez aptly surmises the situation: "[The pandemic creates extraordinary circumstances for restricting civil liberties, free speech and human rights while intensifying the possibilities of an emerging authoritarianism.](#)"

In countries like Zimbabwe, which are rife with authoritarianism, it seems the pandemic has provided a perfect opportunity to checkmate the ever nagging opposition and civic movement. The strategies adopted so far by the government point only to one goal: achieving unimpeded imperial rule for the incumbent.

The responses of the pro-democracy movement have been largely premised on a neoliberal framework to politics and state-craft despite the existing material and social conditions pointing

otherwise. The pro-democracy movement has mainly pursued constitutional reformism and electoralism in an economy that is predominantly agrarian, informal, and dominated by natural resource extraction and the service industry. This brings into question these strategies, and more importantly, the future of democratic politics in Zimbabwe.

Democracy under threat

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed democracy under one of its biggest threats. Authoritarian strategies have become the de facto norm adopted by governments. Singaporean Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan, makes an important observation on the three pillars that may make any country manage to respond effectively to Covid-19: *"In fact, this is an acid test for every single country's quality of healthcare, standard of governance and social capital. If any one of the pillars in the tripod is weak, it will be exposed, and exposed quite unmercifully by this epidemic."*

It is important to note that governance is one of the key pillars for the state's capacity to respond effectively to COVID-19; a failure within that realm may mean disaster in the end. In this case, governance speaks to how public power and policy are deployed and used within the state. This poses questions on how public officials and institutions are operating and guiding their conduct in seeking to enforce laws meant to contain and suppress the spread of the virus. There have been widespread reports of heavy-handed approaches that have seen the rise of what Jared Rodriguez calls the "[...support for pedagogical apparatuses of spectacularised violence, fear mongering and state terror...](#)", thus "[...creating fertile grounds for the cultivation and inclusion of authoritarian politics...](#)".

China instituted a total lockdown of the country that has been reported to have been accompanied by the erosion of people's freedoms in the name of fighting the virus. Human Rights Watch has accused China of resorting to "[automated tyranny](#)". Reason Foundation's [Shika Dalmia](#) argues that beneath the veneer of China's so-called impressive response to combat the virus, the Chinese authorities used a variety of tools to infringe on the privacy of people, including pharmacies to spy and collect data on customers, social platforms AllPay and WeChat to install tracking software on their users, and China Telecom colour-coded phones to screen people. It also paid close to 300,000 volunteers to spy on residents and report to the police, and rewarded neighbours to spy on each other. The police barged into homes to forcibly take away suspected COVID-19 patients.

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These tactics mirror heavy surveillance of citizens in Nazi Germany. The reports of China [building a hospital in 10 days](#) whilst democracies such as the United States of America, United Kingdom and India dithered on responses inadvertently led to a discussion on which form of governance is better. The net effect has been lethal propaganda that created a fallacy of an efficient system, especially after reports of China building the hospital. Western media and scholars fell for this propaganda charm offensive that projected the Chinese system as efficient and superior while Western democracies were seen as slow and sloppy. For instance, Yale professor, [Nicholas Christakis](#), ran a thread on [Twitter](#) praising China's collectivist culture and authoritarian government as unprecedented and impressive.

Yet, the global media and leading scholars have been silent on how democracies like [Taiwan](#), [Iceland](#), [South Korea](#) and [Germany](#) have managed to successfully and effectively respond to

combating COVID-19. In South Africa, President Cyril Ramaphosa undertook widespread consultations with a wide variety of key stakeholders, and cobbled a national consensus with the opposition, civil society, churches and business leaders. In addition, the country adopted an open and transparent information management system and tapped into expert scientists for advice. By the 9th Of April, South Africa was reported to have increased its testing capacity of [5,000/day by six-fold after adding 60 more mobile testing units to the existing 7, combined with 180 testing sites and 320 testing units across the country](#).

Similarly, according to Don Reisinger, "[Germany has had remarkably few Covid-19 deaths, which experts attribute partly to its high number of hospital beds and ICU beds](#)". Despite having a high numbers of people infected by the coronavirus, Germany has managed to lower its fatality rate, which in March 22 stood at 0.3 per cent. The death rate as of 29 March 2020 was much lower than that of China, Italy and many other countries around the world. Germany is stated to have "[8.1 hospital beds per 1,000 people and 6.1 ICU beds per 1 000 people](#)", something highly remarkable in comparison to "[Italy has 3.2 hospital beds per 1 000 and 2.6 ICU beds per 1 000](#)". It is these positive stories from democracies that have not gained prominence in comparison to the ones from the Benevolent Brutal Dragon's propaganda.

Africa's emerging trend of authoritarianism

Images of security forces beating and torturing civilians to enforce COVID-19 lockdowns in Africa have been dominating social media. [Trevor Nnabugu of Ventures Africa](#), an online news site, provides a chronicle of human rights abuses in Rwanda, Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria. In these cases, security forces are accused of using indiscriminate and disproportionate force, including murder, rape, beatings and public humiliation, in a bid to enforce the lockdowns. The rising cases of police brutality in Africa, while not unique to the region, signify the tendency of our security apparatus to revert to the default logic of violence.

In Zambia, the [Independent Broadcasting Authority](#) (IBA) took no time to suspend the licence of Prime TV on the 9th of April 2020 on the basis that it was unpatriotic and threatening public safety after the media outlet refused to air the government's COVID-19 commercials for free. Before that, the government had banned its officials from conducting business with and appearing on Prime TV broadcasts. It also barred Prime TV's journalists from attending official events. In addition, on 27th March 2020, Top Star Communication Limited Company, a partly state-owned television signal carrier, informed Prime TV that it would stop carrying its broadcast in a bid to blackout the television as punishment for its consistent criticism of the ruling party, the Patriotic Front (PF). In all these acts, the hand of the state is quite visible in attempting to close an independent media that has always been critical of government.

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A leading African Women's Rights Activist, Nancy Kachingwe, quipped on Twitter: "*Dear African leaders, a pandemic isn't a war, it's a public health crisis made worse by your failures to build strong public health systems you've not been attacked, you've been found wanting batons & beatings solve nothing...*"

The tweet surmises the logic and attitude of African leaders, where every solution is perceived as a

nail and that needs a hammer.

[Dr David Ndi](#), in an [interview](#) with *The Elephant*, warned us extensively:

We have to guard, organise and push back against what I see as an opportunistic clawback of civil liberties in the days of disease emergencies, as well as human rights violations. And I have already talked about default police brutality, which is already the default of many of our states with a legacy of repressive regimes. So that is something which I think particularly organised civil society has to be very vigilant because you can see some of these people cynically even using this to suspend civil liberties. They have been trying to do it, even before coronavirus. So now they have this perfect excuse to do what they want.

Nowhere does this warning ring more true than in Africa, and more specifically in Zimbabwe. The beleaguered Harare regime has wasted no time to use the opportunity availed by COVID-19 to [usurp legislative authority at the expense of promoting executive authority](#) in a patently unconstitutional manner and to decimate the opposition and civil society.

Zimbabwe, the unrepentant child

On Friday, the 27th of March 2020, President Mnangagwa announced a 21-day national lockdown to be implemented starting from midnight of 30th March 2020. This move came after some dithering by the Harare authorities, which were heavily criticised for failing to prepare for an impending medical disaster.

The announcement of the lockdown was positively received and praised across the political divide, a rare moment in Zimbabwe's political history. However, the positive vibe and bipartisan consensus, and the possibility of an elite cohesion towards cobbling a national response, was quickly lost. The Ministry of Information Secretary, Nick Mangwana, through his TL @nickmangwana forewarned what was to come: "[The total lockdown to contain the spread of Covid-19 will start at midnight with the Government passionately calling on citizens to comply with the directive and instructions from security personnel deployed to enforce the law.](#)"

Already the government was psyching itself into a combative mood. The Presidential Spokesperson, George Charamba, through his TL @jamwanda2, threatened the unleashing of the army in the low-income suburbs: "[MaFACE angu ekumaGhetto, kindly note that pranks and drinking sprees in streets this evening will come to grief!!!! THE BOYS ARE BACK IN TOWN!!!!!!](#) Loosely translated: *My friends from the low income suburbs, kindly note that pranks and drinking in streets this evening will come to grief!!!! THE BOYS ARE BACK IN TOWN!!!!!!*

Indeed, soldiers were deployed and immediately the cries of agony echoed all over the country, as videos of residents being either beaten or tortured by security forces started to circulate on social media.

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In Karoi, [Masvondo](#), a local resident, had to petition the court after some members of the Zimbabwe National Army allegedly barged into her homestead and assaulted everyone within her household under the guise of enforcing a lockdown. In Mutare, [police burned agricultural produce headed for](#)

[the markets](#), insisting that everyone should observe the stay-at-home instruction. Harare's popular vegetable market, Mbare Musika had saddening [stories of farmers and vegetable vendors, whose produce was getting rotten](#) because of lack of access to the market.

The government had to recant some of its policy directives after there were huge outcries, even from its traditional support bases. The planning and implementation of the lockdown was not well thought-out, hence the disastrous results from the onset. As of 16th April, the [Media Institute in Southern Africa-Zimbabwe](#) (MISA-Zim) had recorded several cases of downstream vendors whose rights had been violated under the pretext of enforcing the lockdown.

Most journalists have been facing harassment over accreditation, despite the [Zimbabwe Media Commission](#) (ZMC) having acknowledged to have failed to approve the registration of journalists for the year 2020. Pursuant to that, the ZMC issued a communique that [journalists' 2019 accreditation had been automatically renewed](#) and could be used for the year 2020. Despite this policy position of the authorities, the security services have been acting on the contrary and continue to harass journalists. Even the pro-government newspaper, the *Herald*, had to break with tradition and pen an editorial comment on the 13th of April 2020 [rebuking and questioning the motives of the police](#). The Zimbabwean High Court also went further by barring the police's heavy handedness.

The judiciary in Zimbabwe has also come under heavy criticism during the pandemic after issuing a [judgment](#) that has fundamentally reconfigured the opposition in Zimbabwe. Earlier on, the judiciary had issued a notice that it was suspending court processes and would only attend to urgent cases related to the implementation of lockdown measures. Bail hearings were suspended and even new cases were not going to be dealt with until after the end of the lockdown.

Interestingly, [Dr. Thokozani Khupe](#), one of the claimants to the heir of the Movement for Democratic Change, tweeted on the 31st of March that the [Supreme Court will deliver judgment](#) on the long standing matter on the legitimate heir to the throne after the death of founding leader Morgan Tsvangirayi on the 14th of February 2018. What followed became an intriguing and choreographed series of events that cast further doubts on the independence of the judiciary.

Dr Alex Magaisa of Kent University in the United Kingdom gives a nuanced analysis of this drama in his Big Saturday Read blog. He summed it as [compromised and selective](#). State security institutions have been heavily compromised and made partisan, and this has been very evident during their operations during COVID-19. Ever since the Supreme Court judgment, dramatic and bizarre events have followed, where the main opposition MDC Alliance has lost its elected representatives (Members of Parliament and Councillors) and party offices to a party that it contested against in the 2018 elections. A significant number of lawyers associated with the MDC Alliance have also been arrested and charged with spurious allegations. Three ladies from the youth assembly who dared to protest were abducted from police custody and sexually abused, and also later arrested for violating lockdown rules despite the government failing to come out clean on the abductors.

[Blessed Mhlanga](#), one of Zimbabwe's top journalists, through his TL @bbmhlanga on the 16th of April 2020, tweeted the case of [Senator Tofa from the leading opposition Movement for Democratic Change Alliance who was barred by the police from donating humanitarian aid to the needy](#). In the same tweet, Mhlanga further claimed that the police went further to instruct millers not sell Honourable Tofa any mealie-meal. Earlier, on the 8th of April 2020, Honourable Caston Matewu of Marondera Central constituency [claimed that the police in Marondera had refused his donation to fight COVID-19](#) on political grounds. Such stories are not surprising in Zimbabwe, [where state security institutions have been compromised by the ruling party](#).

A close reading of these cases and many others show that the security services are using the logic of

force to deal with purely civilian issues. A tweet by [@matigary](#), a pro-government online troll, surmises the thinking in government: "[SA military SANDF is kicking ass & bashing heads. I am inviting Dewa Mavhinga & his nywe nywe \(talk too much\) human rights crowd to test SANDF by defying the lockdown.](#)"

This celebration of spectacularised violence within the security services' response to public health issues, which are largely civilian, are very worrying and also indicate that Zimbabwe is still an unrepentant child, despite claims of a "New Dispensation" after the fall of Robert Mugabe.

An alert but limited pro-democracy movement

Zimbabwe has had an alert and very lively pro-democracy movement that has managed to successfully call out the government and ruling party whenever they fall out of line. This pro-democracy movement has been composed of the loose alliance of the main opposition, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), and democracy and human rights advocacy NGOs.

For instance, during this COVID-19 lockdown, the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) has been at the forefront of providing legal defence to human rights defenders, journalists and ordinary citizens who found themselves at the mercy of authorities. The ZLHR has also funded public interest litigation that has also seen the High Court directing the Ministry of [Health to provide professional protective equipment \(PPE\) to health workers and roll out testing to the public](#). A significant number of NGOs and business and church leaders have also come to the fore, establishing charity platforms to mobilise humanitarian aid to support the vulnerable and refurbish medical centres and equip them with the necessary resources to mitigate the effects of the pandemic.

A close reading of the responses of the pro-democracy movement in Zimbabwe clearly shows that it is very active and vibrant but always gets checkmated by its limited approach in dissecting national questions. Civil society in Zimbabwe has hardly questioned the role of the state, focusing more on legalism and litigation to discipline the errant state. This has seen the promotion of civil liberties at the expense of material and cultural rights.

It is abundantly clear that from the foregoing observations that the current architecture of the state has put into sharp relief the limitations of the neo-liberal state and markets. The question therefore, that beckons is: How do post-liberation movements deal with the question of material rights and redefine themselves? This is the elephant in the room that the pro-democracy movement in Zimbabwe has to tackle.

The responses to COVID-19 require to be put in a broader structural framework that is historical and not only driven by the moment. As Dr. Balakrishnan cautioned, "[But let me tell you as a doctor, these are things you cannot just build up overnight. It takes years and years of investment in people, in systems, in capacity.](#)"

A close examination will reveal that the countries that have managed to effectively respond to the pandemic are those with strong investments in public health. This brings us back to the question of the role of the state.

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Zimbabwe's economy has been largely agrarian, natural resource dependant, dominated by the

service industry and characterised by high levels of informality and precarity. The labour force survey of 2014 estimated that 94.5 per cent of Zimbabweans earned their living in the informal sector. In 2017, artisanal/small-scale miners [accounted for more gold output](#) than large-scale miners. In 2012, the Environmental Management Agency of 2012 estimated their number to be around 500 000, a figure that should have grown by now.

In the 2018-2019 season, tobacco farmers [recorded an all-time high yield of 258 million kilogrammes](#). Estimates put the number of small-scale farmers to between 80,000 and 90,000. Professor Brian Raftopoulos in his 2013 article, "[Zimbabwean politics in the post 2013 election](#)", asserts that the country's political economy had been reconfigured, giving rise to a new social base and thus calling for new forms of organising. This new social base is characterised by high levels of de-industrialisation and informality. The coming of the COVID-19 pandemic further problematises the role of the state and politics of public goods, especially in highly informalised economies like Zimbabwe. It's quite clear that the issue of public goods can no longer be reduced to either the magic of the market or benevolent philanthropy and celebrity activism.

Looking ahead

It is patently clear that the COVID-19 response in Zimbabwe has seen an absent state. The state has largely relied on benevolent philanthropy and celebrity activism whilst looting the public purse. The Ministry of Health and NatPharm (the national pharmaceutical company, a public enterprise) have been embroiled in one looting scandal after another. An investigation and expose by two online websites, ZimLive and [The Zimbabwe Morning Post](#), implicate high profile government officials and the president's children in fleecing the treasury through overpricing of medical supplies under the guise of dealing with COVID-19-related emergencies. These corruption scandals even gained the attention of Interpol, the international police agency, after a [two-week-old company](#) got paid US\$2million by the Zimbabwe government.

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Meanwhile, the opposition has failed to make the government accountable as it is embroiled in internecine fights arising from the Supreme Court judgment of 31st of March 2020. At best, the main opposition has managed to issue a series of press statements without showing any clear direction on how to move forward.

Looking ahead, Zimbabwe's pro-democracy movement may need to learn from [Professor Issa Shivji's wise words](#) extensively quoted below:

The contemporary neo-liberal discourse has one fundamental blind spot. It treats the present as if the present has had no history. The discourse on democracy in Africa suffers from the same blindness. The struggle for democracy did not begin with the postcold war introduction of multi-party system. The independence and liberation struggles for self-determination, beginning in the postworld war period, were eminently a struggle for democracy. Neither formal independence nor the victory of armed liberation movements marked the end of democratic struggles. They continued, albeit in different forms...the great democratic struggles of the African people expressed in their independence and national liberation movements remain incomplete. The so-called democracy constructed on ahistorical and asocial paradigms of neo-liberalism are an expression of renewed imperial onslaught, which is profoundly anti-

democratic...

This would mean a return to a political economy for the pro-democracy movement in Zimbabwe, which should begin to articulate the democratic struggle within the lived realities of the cross-border trader, the vegetable and fruit vendor, the small-scale farmer, the artisanal miner, the slum dweller in Hopley, the informal taxi operator, the menial worker and all the subalterns within Zimbabwe's informalised economy. Doing so means bringing in class analysis and social and economic justice-based solutions to the core of public policy.

The current COVID-19-induced response of the state has shown why the pro-democracy movement should disentangle itself from the fallacious promise of neoliberal democracy and the magic of the market. Only when and until the pro-democracy movement in Zimbabwe realises that democracy needs to shift from just fighting for civil liberties to articulating how public goods and services can be rescued from the profit motive to bring about a better quality of life to humanity can it checkmate the reigning authoritarianism. This is the same way that the liberation movement was able to checkmate the Rhodesian Gulag State, despite its last leader, Ian Smith, proclaiming that "never in a thousand years", will there ever be black rule.

[Professor Shivji's wisdom is instructive](#) here:

The struggle for democracy is primarily a political struggle on the form of governance, thus involving the reconstitution of the state. No one claims that democracy means and aims at social emancipation. Rather it is located on the terrain of political liberalism so, at best, creating conditions for the emancipatory project. This is important to emphasize in light of the hegemony of neoliberal discourse, which tends to emasculate democracy of its social and historical dimensions and present it as an ultimate nirvana.

The question is: What would state reconstitution look like? Is it a return to socialism, the democratic developmental state or the social democratic state? The answer lies in any path that straddles through any of those types of state or their combination.

However, it is clear from the foregoing that the neoliberal state is not the solution. To respond to the rising authoritarianism, the pro-democracy movements need to return democratic politics to the core of delivering public goods and services and not servicing profits and the market. Doing so may mean designing critical intellectual projects meant to push back nationalist authoritarianism, increasing public litigation on the enforcement of the expanded bill of rights in the 2013 Constitution, building people's movements anchored in collective action and solidarity around public goods rather than electoralism, and shying away from oligarchic tendencies.

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