

July 2020

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Theophilus Nenjerama

Dublin YMCA, DUBLIN IRELAND, tinashenenjerama@gmail.com

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Recommended Citation

Nenjerama, Theophilus (2020) "A Subaltern Pastor Versus a Dictator President in the #ThisFlag Movement in Zimbabwe," *Irish Communication Review*. Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/icr/vol17/iss1/4>

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A subaltern pastor versus a dictator president in the #ThisFlag movement in Zimbabwe

Theophilus Nenjerama

Abstract

Social movements that challenge political infrastructures require substantial themes that resonate with the masses. The #ThisFlag movement was the first massive post-independent social media engendered protest that left an indelible mark on Zimbabwean politics and history. This study deem the movement the 'cult of Mwarire' due to the centrality of compelling issues used in galvanizing the masses to action. The cult is a force navigating sacrosanct issues of identity, politics, and nationalism as inscribed in the flag and the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe. To make meaning of the messages conveyed by Evan Mwarire, the study references to the videos posted by the pastor on his Facebook and Twitter accounts which can also be found on YouTube.

Introduction

A wave of protest social movements mobilized through social media activism have recently occurred in many nations, especially those facing political, economic and social challenges (Stanko 2013; Sabao and Chikara 2018). Commercial social media such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp and Sina Weibo have taken a central role in protest communication and mobilization (Sabao and Chikara 2018; Poell 2014). Countries like Zimbabwe, South Africa, Tunisia and Egypt are among examples of contexts where social media amalgamated collective protest voices in speaking against issues ranging from deteriorating economies, exorbitant living expenses, and social injustices to tyranny. In South Africa, through the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall media campaigns, social media was employed as a strategic and effective communication method to disrupt the status quo and pursue an activist role in communicating the poor's grievances over tuition increases (Mpofu 2015).

In the Arab Spring, not only was social media useful in protesting against socio-economic and political injustices, Asif and Yousif (2014) explain that it was instrumental in the downfall of the Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, respectively. This protest wave further intensified mass opposition to regimes in Libya, Bahrain, Syria and Yemen (Asif and Yousif 2014), changing the political terrains in the Middle East and North Africa.

Ndlela (2009) hypothesizes media democratization as a result of globalization. Though the idea is contestable, however, with growing inequalities especially in repressive contexts, voices of dissent utilize every communicative strategy available to promulgate narratives relating to standard of life, freedoms (of speech and assembly), equality and media liberalization. Zimbabwe is one such case where voices of dissent keep on rising regardless of the government's oppressive nature. In 2017, the index of freedom of expression in Zimbabwe recorded a worrying 37.6%.¹ The government exerts control on mass media and independent media houses, and it is unsurprising that during the #ThisFlag movement, it shut down the internet for almost two days to halt internet use by protesters. After the protests, data prices increased up by 500%, with 1GB of data costing US\$30.106; and many Zimbabweans believe this was meant to stop protest continuation and organization which primarily happened over applications such as WhatsApp (CANVAS, 2016). Such stifling efforts by the government oppose dictates of expressionism enshrined in the Constitution, a statute meant to govern activities in Zimbabwe.

While the government suppresses incongruous voices both on cyber and physical spaces, it also utilizes media in various ways. Firstly, it influences mass media platforms to promulgate its ideologies, and secondly, resorts to using online media services to convey its political ideologies to the general populace. In the build up to elections in 2018 in Zimbabwe, the government reduced data prices which it had initially increased in 2016 after the massive #ThisFlag campaign (Magaisa 2018; CANVAS 2016). Magaisa (2018) suggests that the price reduction might have been because the government anticipated the use of social media, as it campaigned even through social media platforms, and post-election period the president's office launched a mobile application. Though the government exerts

¹ Ibrahim Index Of African Governance (IIAG)
<http://iiag.online/>

media control as witnessed during the #ThisFlag movement in 2016 and the January-February 2019 general protests by ordering telecommunications service providers to shut services, it also acknowledges the power of this communicative platform through the implementation of the presidential mobile application and social media accounts on both Twitter and Facebook.

Taking advantage of social media, Pastor Evan Mawarire took to Facebook and Twitter to communicate his disquiet. The #ThisFlag movement started with a single video which the pastor posted on his Facebook timeline on 19 April 2016 (Oberdorf 2017). With the Zimbabwean flag as its symbol, #ThisFlag has remained independent from any political party, with the message of the movement focusing on anti-corruption and lack of basic services (CANVAS 2016). The pastor – pained, he said, by not being able to pay for his children’s school fees – posted a video online in which he, with the Zimbabwean flag wrapped around his shoulders, passionately describes the official meanings of the colours of the flag: green for vegetation, yellow for minerals, red for the blood of those who fought for Zimbabwe’s freedom, and black for the majority people; he then revisited each in a patriotic telling of the meaning of each (CANVAS 2016). With a large following of 57,178 on Facebook and 292,000 on Twitter as of November 2019, Evan Mawarire has become a symbol of a historical movement created using social media services as a new phenomenon in Zimbabwe.

In its creation, the movement became a mobilising tool, and a shrine of mass engagement on issues pertaining to survival in Zimbabwe. This study defines social media as the interactive platforms potentially offering collectivism in challenging exploitation and exclusion; in this case, it was employed by the subaltern who had limited direct involvement in political dialogues. For this study, the subaltern presents the overall position of oppressed peasantry, the underclass of society, people whose voice has been silenced (Rukundwa and Van Aarde 2007; Van Zoonen 2002). As a variant of new media, social media is used by the subaltern activist to question the fundamentals of Zimbabwean identity, citizenry’s exclusion from politics, economic exploitation, liberation struggle and the flag’s ethos. By questioning these issues, does Mawarire fall within the nationalist paradigm? This is foregrounded by advancing that the #ThisFlag movement became a ‘cult of Mawarire’ with the pastor as the populist activist due to compelling narratives’ centrality on concerns resonating with the masses who

participated in the viewing and sharing of his videos on social media – leading to the ‘shutdown’ of Zimbabwe on 6 July 2016. (The word ‘cult’ is used neutrally here.)

Post-colonial crisis and state laws on media, journalism and activism

During colonial times, Zimbabwe’s white minority ran critical affairs affecting the existence of both blacks and whites. As power was concentrated to the minority, media was subsequently state owned as an ideological tool of repression and control (Ndhlovu 2015; Moyo 2003). Divergent black nationalist voices emerging as opposition were refused a platform (Ndhlovu 2015). Upon the attainment of independence from British minority rule in 1980, the black government inherited the same repressive system used under minority rule. The need to redress this system was apparent but strides to do so came with challenges for the young state. As a way to amend these exclusive policies, Mugabe advanced a socialist ideology (Moyo 2003; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2002). The confidence to embrace the socialist policies was inspired by global bipolar politics, and the country’s intimate relationship and indulgence with the socialist block during the struggle for independence (Moyo 2003). However, this socialist base was challenged profoundly starting in the early 1990s as the new decade saw the spawning of a crisis in Zimbabwe. Voices of dissension grew and criticized the socio-political challenges but the government sought to control these alternative voices which it regarded as threats to its hegemony. The private press vehemently called for the democratization process by articulating alternative opinions from mainly the opposition, civic organizations and the masses (Moyo 2003). The private media alternatively allowed for the expression of divergent voices criticising the government.

From late 1990s to 2008, the country witnessed massive political, economic and social problems resulting in a crisis (Chivandikwa 2012; Raftopoulos 2006). The crisis period was differently named by scholars: Bond (2006) named it the ‘Zimbabwe’s plunge’, while Raftopolous (2006) named it the ‘Zimbabwean Crisis’. Others saw the crisis as a result of ‘patriotic history’ (Ranger 2003), a failed patriarchal model of nationalism (Campbell 2003), along with it a growing and vibrant oppositional political party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) formed in 1999. This nomenclature trend captures a society highly defined by

economic struggles, models of ill-defined political ideologies resulting in contestations over humanitarian and democratic concerns and a volatile political space. For instance, the intimidations and violence perpetrated upon Morgan Tsvangirai and his subordinates during the 2008 elections, the abductions and disappearances of activists like Itai Dzamara at the wake of an autocratic leader who regarded, “democracy as a difficult proposition in Africa”.²

With such a volatile political environment, Zimbabwe became a grieving nation. The list of longstanding grievances included corrupt and oppressive government, growing inequalities, looming unemployment, and the rising cost of living (Lim 2012). The escalating list of grievances and the deterioration of the economy invited numerous opinions of dissent (Chivandikwa 2012). The dissentious articulations emerged through different platforms and persons, such as, protest theatre, song, political and human rights activists (Mpofu and Nenjerama 2018), and recently social media. The rise of social media activism in Zimbabwe marked a different trajectory in protest mobilization and expression of majority resentment towards the hegemony and status quo.

However, realizing the centrality of social media in countering propaganda by state owned media and constructing remonstrative movements against the political, the government devised different ways including force and stringent media laws targeted expression in Zimbabwe. Activism has also faced the wrath of the regime, evidenced by the mysterious disappearances of political activists, intimidations and abductions. Msonza (2015, 38) points out two unrelated events where there was the forced disappearance of civil society activist Itai Dzamara on 9 March, and the raid on *The Source*, a local online news service, on 26 March. Dzamara’s disappearance sent a message to activists that freedom of expression in Zimbabwe was indeed an illusion (Msonza, 2015), curbing independent media growth and resulting in self-censorship by activists and others in fear of facing arrests or intimidations. At the time of writing this article, the whereabouts of Itai Dzamara were still unknown.

The Media Monitoring Project in Zimbabwe, an independent organization that monitors and safeguards freedom of expression and the output of news on radio

² Robert Mugabe 2008 speech at the signing of the Government of National Unit with Morgan Tsvangirai and Arthur Mutambara under the facilitatorship of SADC delegates led by Thabo Mbeki at Harare International Conference Centre, Harare, Zimbabwe.

and television, has expressed concerns over the existence of media laws infringing on freedom of expression and access to information in Zimbabwe (MISA 2013). Mass media is propagandistically used by the ZANU PF hegemony in seeking legitimacy from the majority while denying them any platform to present their trepidations. In broadening control on media, the government enforced the Access to Information Protection and Privacy Act (AIPPA), Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and the Codification and Reform Act. In light of this, MISA (2013) states that the, POSA and particularly Section 121 of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act, have been influential in harassing media practitioners and ordinary Zimbabweans, thereby creating an environment hostile to media freedom and human rights. These regulations negate the stated aim of media regulation to promote media pluralism by controlling entry to the media (MISA 2013). Although freedom of expression and media democratization are inherent in the Constitution of Zimbabwe, the realities on the ground speak otherwise.

Further, critical political and human rights activism faces state suppression. For instance, the artistic memorialising of the Gukurahundi genocide of 1983 by an Ndebele artist Owen Maseko, at the Bulawayo gallery was censored and destroyed by the government security officials and resulted in the arrest of the artist (Mpofu 2015). In response, the concerned Ndebele ethnic group and a sympathetic populace resorted to using platforms such as Facebook and Twitter as 'safe' harbours to discuss the issue of the 1983 Gukurahundi genocide, which has been strategically ignored by the ZANU PF government (Mpofu 2015 – social media functions as a platform for citizen engagement and expression in manoeuvring around state control).

Social media and the subaltern

For this study, the subaltern is used as a concept locating a given group of people from within a society in their own segment, with limited access to governance, economic and political participation. Though the Gramscian concept of subalternity is complex to attach to any group since Gramsci coined the term referring to workers oppressed by Mussolini's Fascist Party in Italy, the subaltern, in that context, were not uniform (Mpofu 2015); a common characteristic defining the subaltern is the group's relation to cultural imperialism (Ravengai 2011; Louai

2011; Spivak 1998). Subalternity refers to a condition of subordination particularity expressed in various ways such as race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, age, class or any condition which creates a space for difference and resistance (Ravengai 2011). Ravengai's depiction of the subaltern as a 'subordinated particularity... of difference and resistance' implies a dislocated individual or group seeking a restoration of their rights and belonging. It implies clear contestations between the powerful and the powerless, the marginalised and the marginaliser.

Social media therefore in this context turns communication into interactive dialogues among communities and individuals (Sabao and Chikara 2019; Stanko 2013). The services that social media offers can be understood as 'alternative spaces' to traditional media, offered by new media to present 'secure' spaces for deliberation (Mpofu 2015). Congruently, in the 'Arab spring' movement social media was a space for expanding and sustaining the networks upon which social movements depend, and this revolt exemplify how online social networks facilitated by social media have become a key ingredient of contemporary populist movements (Lim 2012). Cyber-enthusiasts expressed a good deal of optimism about the ability of the new media to empower people living in non-democratic societies (Wolfsfeld *et al* 2013). Now internet citizens, known as netizens, make their innermost thoughts known to the world through social networking sites and blogs without anyone's permission (Stanko 2013). As demonstrated by the social media discussion of 'taboo' issues such as the 1983 genocide (Mpofu 2015), this perspective translates social media into a subversive platform which allows for connectivity among the marginalised and disenfranchised.

Social media initiates a representative usage by the populist in political discourses. It becomes a strategic tool used by populists to circumvent and interact with traditional media coverage, and also as a tool that simultaneously shapes the populist message in the act of mediation (Sorensen 2016). It is not simply a neutral tool to be used or adopted by social movements, but rather influence how activists form and shape the social movements (Lim 2012). The platform is used to arbitrate messages that pertain to a people's struggle and the remediation of key issues affecting their belonging and survival. The medium becomes a part of the message: populists utilise social media affordances and cyber-utopic ideology to answer the challenges of modern mediated representation (Sorensen 2016). It becomes a contrivance for a challenging mobilisation against a hegemony and the

perpetration of civil rights as it offers a space for interactive conveyance of protest sentiments, action and social movements.

Making the #ThisFlag movement

The study is centred on the use of social media in the creation and sustenance of the #ThisFlag movement. The study advances that the #ThisFlag movement became a cult of Mawarire as the populist activist due to different compelling topics that resonated with the masses and convinced them to partake in the July 6 'shutdown'. For this cult to function, the centralization of the flag in challenging nationalistic identity discourses and political dominance against a struggling socio-economic unstable nation became a key point. In the analysis of Mawarire's videos, three fundamental topics characterising the movement emerged: (i) the flag, nationalism and an identity in crisis; (ii) the continuing crisis as the citizens' grievance, (iii) the liberation struggle and the state. These are explained in sections below, using excerpts of the messages expressed by Mawarire in the videos he posted on his Facebook page, which are also available on YouTube.

[i\) The flag, nationalism and an identity in crisis](#)

Flags resemble nations through their distinct decorative features. The Zimbabwean flag with all its colours and decorations marks what Zimbabwe is in discourses of nationhood and nation making. This can be understood given the background of declaration of independence and transition of power from white minority rule to black governance on 18 April 1980. This transition ushered in a new beginning and meaning to what being Zimbabwean was – as the Union Jack was lowered, a new Zimbabwean flag was installed. This historical event marked a new trajectory in Zimbabwean politics and its nationalistic discourses, with political leaders basing their rhetoric on sovereignty and independence. However, the challenge that befell Zimbabwe is that nationalism in the post-colonial state became a pervasive principle used to advance an agenda created for and by the government. Nationalism became a tangled concept with varying contestations. That is, a people called 'Zimbabweans' became a product of the nationalist struggle rather than a pre-colonial or primordial identity (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2011). These contestations and nationalist struggles are evident in Mawarire's narratives as he centres the flag in messages of identity and citizenship.

A nation's identity is first physically shown by the flag, a symbolic representation with varying meanings. The adoption of a new flag at the Independence Day marked an installation of a new identity which characterized what Zimbabwe was and was to be. Evan Mawarire constructs the movement around these shifted dynamics: the flag being a bearer of a Zimbabwean identity born out of colonial conquest. The movement also relates the flag and its importance as a symbol of cultural identity in the modern world (Eriksen 2007). With this, the movement defined itself as purely Zimbabwean, and with no third force behind it as is usually deemed any oppositional voice by the government. Mawarire asserts:

The flag is my country, they tell me that the black is for the majority people like me and yet for some reason I don't feel like I am a part of it. I look at it sometimes and I wonder is it a story of my future or of a sad past. Wherever I go, I put on the colours, they look at me, as if they want to laugh, they ask me, are you from Zimbabwe? Vachiseka (mockingly) (Evan Mawarire, Day 1 Video, 19 April 2016).

Mawarire conjures up a revived nationalism foregrounded on and compared with the one that prevailed during the colonial times. However, critical questions arise as to what nationalism is and its constituents especially in contexts marked by contestations and varying beliefs and opinions in relation to nationhood and identity. Mawarire brings to the fore questions asked by Msindo (2005 in Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2011, 31) about nationalism and how it functioned pre independence in Zimbabwe. Was nationalism about defining a nation in which questions such as 'Who are we?' and 'Who should be part of the nation?' The cult centralizes the flag in forging a treatise that resuscitates influential principles constituting liberation struggles and their relevance post-independence. The pastor's messages contests nationalist politics marked by coercion and violence; the promises and values of nationalism also became important reference points for community demands on the political parties and the post-colonial state (Raftopolous and Mlambo 2009, 12). Thus, the protest cult of Mawarire resuscitated and revived a modified sense of nationalistic demands based on non-violent protests in a post-colonial state – especially so, with the flag as a reference point to his demands as a citizen of the country.

Inherent in the Zimbabwean flag and nationalistic rhetoric is black as an identity. This identity greatly influenced the mobilization of black Zimbabweans during the colonial era. It was therefore perpetuated in ZANU PF ideologies as the basis of

legitimacy and connection with the citizenry. However, the populist cult challenges this principle as concept that has lost meaning in the face of post-colonial troubles in Zimbabwe. He challenges identity and nation-making attempts. Mawarire says:

They tell me that the black is for the majority people like me and yet for some reason I don't feel like I am a part of it (Evan Mawarire, Day 1 Video, 19 April 2016).

At the core of his sentiments is the revelation of an ill-defined identity leading to, perhaps, systemic exclusion. There is a disjoint between the government's actions and the meaning portrayed by black as a colour on the flag. Explaining the importance of national symbols, particularly Zimbabwe's, (Ndimandea and Moyo 2018) observe that anthems are both 'inward looking and outward looking', they shape and advance a self-conceptualisation of what the Zimbabwean nation state is, its virtues. However, Mawarire decries the Zimbabwean national project as affected by the tribulations, crises and problems that continue to affect the national making project (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2011). To Onslaw (2011), it has also become 'a battle for the state', and this battle is continuing to play out in present-day Zimbabwe. The state has concentrated on defining itself and Zimbabweans, consequently with uncertain results especially in the backdrop of a hegemonic power that relentlessly manoeuvres credible electoral processes to initiate change in Zimbabwe.

The different colours on the country's flag are key representative elements used to justify and speak of the 'Zimbabweanness' of the Zimbabweans. Black represents the black majority, the black persons who Mugabe regarded as the rightful owners of the nation. The colour is also representative and useful in identity creation in Zimbabwe and this is used in driving forward the ZANU PF ideology of creating a nation which the political want. While to Ndimandea and Moyo (2018) national symbols are important markers in imagining the nation-state and in understanding nationalism, to Mawarire the flag has become a resemblance of an identity characterized by contestations, vagueness and mockery due to the seclusion of the citizenry in making pivotal decisions pertaining to their survival and belonging in the nation. Mawarire interrogates his identity, belonging and citizenship and how the hegemony and the status quo has led to the deprivation of the Zimbabwean ordinary citizen. Implicitly, the movement

portrays the ordinary Zimbabweans' sentiments on accepted norms of how the flag is a pillar of nationhood, along with institutions such as the shared historical narrative (Eriksen 2007; Hobsbawm 1990). The pastor quests for a (re)creation of a Zimbabwe truly reflective of the flag since the current state contradicts the flag's ethos.

To the cult, the flag implies collectivism. The pastor shows a people fighting for well-defined common causes as the dominant tropes and images of suffering in #ThisFlag are unflattering to post-independence Zimbabwe and even question the perception of the once-imagined collective aspirations of the majority (Rwafa and Vambe 2007). In post-colonial Zimbabwe, the government imagined a Zimbabwe characterized by socialist and collectivist theories. However, even as the Zimbabwean state has asserted its Pan-Africanist and anti-imperialist credentials in fostering collective understanding to nationhood viz-a-via economic challenges, the main opposition group MDC, labour and civic movements called for different forms of solidarity and sovereignty that have democratic rights of citizens at their centre (Raftopolous and Mlambo 2009). The delicate issues of realizing a state-as-nation are fundamentally evident as portrayed by disagreeing opinions between the state and the majority, and in this case, the movement is against government which has failed to lead the realization of a Zimbabwe once imagined in early years of independence. The flag which once was a unifying factor at independence now exhibits the divide between the state and the masses, consequently imperilling the Zimbabwean identity.

In addition, Mawarire decries an identity in crisis. The pastor reveals doubt, uncertainty, darkness, instability and fears about his social identity, as he feels excluded from the vocabulary of Zimbabwe's political and cultural nationalism (Rwafa and Vambe 2007). He declares:

This flag...I don't feel as if I want to be part of it... It feels as if I want to belong to another country. Wherever I go I put the colours of Zimbabwe and as if they want a laugh they ask me are you from Zimbabwe? (Evan Mawarire, Day 1 Video, 19 April 2016).

Critical in Mawarire's message is the relationship between the flag-as-a-national representation, and citizens-as-a-nation represented by the flag. The cult usurps politics surrounding citizenry political participation as elite nationalists defines the ordinary Zimbabweans into homogenous categories such as 'workers', 'peasants',

or more worryingly, the so-called 'masses' (Munochiveyi 2011). It reveals how in post-colonial Zimbabwe, the nationalist struggle only succeeded in creating the nation-as-state but failed dismally to create the nation-as-people (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2011). The populist's cult is a constructs demystifying the concept of 'patriotic history' as an ideology constructed through the grounding of legitimacy in a historical narrative of the 1970s liberation struggle that asserted the ZANU PF party's dominance and exploited its seniority in terms of liberation struggle credentials (Alexander and MacGregor 2013). This ideology excluded voices of dissent against violence, corruption, authoritarianism as voices characterised by western influence, especially the MDC which exists as variant to ZANU PF regime. It further created a divide between partakers and non-partakers in the liberation war, exemplifying the serious limitations of patriotic history as dangerously one-sided, narrow and divisive (Raftopolous and Mlambo 2009; Ranger 2004). The meaning of the colours black and red on the flag therefore became entangled in the perpetuation of a one-sided narrative of history favouring the ZANU PF hegemonic ideologies. The idea and belief of a unified national identity becomes endangered as dissent voices are refused space in Zimbabwe. The #ThisFlag cult therefore marshals the ordinary people to an insightful understanding of the limited or none existence of democracy, political injustices and political segregations based on historicity.

ii) [The continuing crisis as the citizens' grievances](#)

An analysis of the videos by Mawarire reveal a repressive state and a dangerous political field where protest voices are suppressed. In forging the divergent cult, the populist acknowledges that traversing on sensitive issues may result in his arrest. With his acknowledgement, he also motivates people to sustain the movement as it seeks to instigate change in Zimbabwe. He states:

You can arrest Mawarire if you want but takawanda (there is many of us to sustain the movement) You can take one person but you can't take the whole country (Evan Mawarire, Day 12 Video, 15 May 2016).

The political terrain and activist activities have been characterised by intimidations and violence justified by the need to protect the sovereignty of the people. To Mugabe, the political terrain is sacrosanct and reserved for ZANU PF to deal with. This implies that talking, commenting and criticising negatively about the hegemony is to play with fire, hence Mawarire acknowledges that his recalcitrant actions can get him arrested. This was also confirmed by Mugabe in his speech in

the aftermath of July 6 massive stay-away that, “those who protest against us are not one of us”³. To Mugabe, the post-independent state should not be challenged and any contrarian voice does not fit within discourses of belonging and citizenship in Zimbabwe, as the usual understanding is that protest voices are characterised by Western dictates and discourses of regime change. Reactionary, the government promulgated and enacted into law the Cybercrime and Cybersecurity Act, which saw Patrick Chinamasa being appointed the first minister of the newly created Ministry of Cyber Security (Sabao and Chikara 2018). The government’s exposes its baseless social support behind longstanding authoritarian rulers, and its trust in the use of force and the culture of threat (Asif and Yousif 2014).

The citizens’ political participation is one tenet enshrined in discourses of democracy. However, the movement’s messages reveal the citizenry’s and ‘non-governmental organizations’ complaints about the centralist thrust of state policy (or state centred development), and about the inaccessibility of policy decisions’ (Kerkhoven 1992, 22 in Murisa, 2010, 16). The government maintains a policy of exclusion resulting in civic calls for public engagement in policy making processes. The pastor suggests an alternative for both the masses and the government officials:

You cannot ignore us anymore, stop talking to yourselves, taurai nevanhu kunoku (government officials talk to the citizens). We are the people that are being affected by the things you are doing. What happened to talking to us? This flag is citizen’s movement, citizens get your own phone, make your own video... (Evan Mawarire, Day 10 Video, 15 May 2016).

Mawarire’s call to action reveals critical points which are; the grandiose possibility of social media to foster citizen-citizen dialogue, and also citizen-government dialogue. Though the later may not occur instantaneously, but because social media allows the distribution of content, there is a possibility of messages to reach the government officials’ accounts. Mawarire exploited the significance of alternative digital public sphere to empower, coordinate and popularize political processes and protests at both national and international levels (Sabao and Chikara 2018).

³ Robert Mugabe’s Speech 2016 at the 1 Million-Men march which was organized to show support for the president and the party.

The movement reveals the state ideology and dominant party political rhetoric as one which emerged from the hegemonic and authoritarian circumstances of the nationalist liberation struggle (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003), whose political and economic policies favoured white colonialists. This has been further compounded by contestations around election results and the 'rule of law' in general (Murisa 2013). The pastor denounced officials' failure:

The policies that the government has had in place have not worked for us the people, you've failed us, matikanya (you've inconvenienced us), matisiya panze panotonhora (you've left us in the cold) (Evan Mawarire, Day 22 Video, 22 May 2016).

Recognizing policies of separatism by the government officials, Mawarire takes to social media to castigate the officials and the economic meltdown whose causes are multifaceted, ranging from economic mismanagement on the part of government to structural constraints within the local economy and also the international economic system (Murisa 2010). The pastor lampoons the government concentrating on methods of clinging to power at the expense of the generality.

Mawarire uses populist terms to amalgamate and appeal to people in his messages. The populist pastor identifies a jobless society, and a jeopardized sociality. He reveals Zimbabwe as being marred by economic meltdown, shrinking industrial activity, closure of manufacturing companies and downsizing of some, and consequent high unemployment rates (Murisa 2010).

We are still without jobs, mabasa hatina (we do not have jobs), chikafu hatina (we do not have food), we are still without 15 billion dollars. It is time for us as citizens to organize ourselves and find a better Zimbabwe (Evan Mawarire, Day 26 Video, 30 May 2016).

[W]e are protesting against the Zimbabwean government, leaders and ministers saying enough is enough. We have had enough of corruption, injustice, poverty and unemployment (Evan Mawarire, Day 3 Video, 21 April 2016).

The use of the collective term 'we' contextualises Mawarire's message as a representative claim (Saward 2006 in Soresen 2016, 3). He encapsulates and expresses the ordinary Zimbabwean's concerns on nepotism, corruption, a failed economy and wealth amassing by the political elite. The pastor challenges nationalism as the taken-for-granted ideology which binds the citizenry to the

state, or the nation (Bechhofer and McCrone 2009). For instance, he questions the whereabouts of the proceeds from the Marange diamonds and other minerals in Zimbabwe. The pastor removes the veil of hypocrisy surrounding the ideology of patriarchy and cultural nationalism, all of which insist on enforcing notions of collective identities that valorise 'national visions' at the expense of individual and personal experiences (Rwafa and Vambe 2007).

iii) *The liberation struggle and the state*

The liberation wars of brought about independence in Zimbabwe. During the first democratic elections held in Zimbabwe, leading to her liberation, ZANU PF leader Robert Mugabe won the elections in 1980. With this achievement Zimbabwe entered the crucial 'moment of arrival' that saw ZANU PF taking over the state and making efforts to mobilise the general population behind a vanguardist party and a vanguardist developmental state (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems 2009). Coupled with it was the land and race question which formed the centrepiece of ZANU PF's definition of belonging, citizenship, exclusion and the whole history of Zimbabwe as a nation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2011). ZANU PF therefore endeavoured to be the watchdog of the liberation struggle, its promises and the projected future brought about by the political change. It thus hoped to define the trajectory on which Zimbabwe was to take as a post-colonial state.

However, with the rise of critical divergent political voices criticizing the hegemony, especially at the turn of the new millennium, ZANU PF – trying to protect and maintain its political base and relevance – created a political participation mythology based on liberation credentials, especially in key positions like the presidency. Commenting on liberation and post-liberation oppositional voices, Mazingi and Kamidza (2011, 322) assert that, 'the need to redress inequalities was part of the broader agitation for an end to colonialism, however, the widening of inequality since the mid-1990s continued to occupy the agenda of opposition political parties and broader sections of civil society'. These formative discourses have continued to forge political cultures dominating the domestic political arena post-independence (Onslaw 2011) even recently as evidenced the #ThisFlag. The cult of Mwarire revisits the principles that resulted in Zimbabweans forging a violent movement against white rule from both the first liberation struggle and the second liberation struggle. These principles were

characterized by calls for equality, democracy and a non-elitist rule and political participation and involvement of the majority.

In post-colonial Zimbabwe, the ideology of the liberation struggle became a base for differing opinions. To ZANU PF, nationalism became a mobilising ideology, with far more influence on the course of the liberation struggle and the politics of the postcolonial state especially to cadres of the liberation struggle and people with a link to the movement (Raftopolous 2006). Differently, to the populist cult, liberation struggle defined a sense of nationalism that is non-exclusive of the commonality, advancing a message with an agency of non-politicization of natural resources and their distribution. In one of Mawarire's videos he questions where the proceeds of the diamonds have gone and if they benefitted the Zimbabwean generality. The #ThisFlag movement speaks and interrogates the liberation struggle in relation to 'the material inequalities that have divided Zimbabwean society into classes (rich and poor). The cynicism expressed at this uneven sharing of the country's resources is captured in a manner that brings out those excesses which underpin the vulgarity of power and powerlessness in [...] Zimbabwe' (Rwafa and Vambe 2007, 78). In this sense, the liberation struggle becomes an insignificant element upon which to base the legitimacy of the state – since it has failed to uphold the principles that led to the forging of the struggle. ZANU PF becomes a hegemony that has gone astray.

The movement further questions ZANU PF's hegemonic legitimacy in post-colonial Zimbabwe against a background of a suffering populace. Raftopolous (2006) chronicles the birth of post-independent leftist voices as having begun to emerge out of the struggles of civil society against the postcolonial state, firstly the late 1980s activism of students and workers, and secondly with the mobilisation of civil society against state authoritarianism from the late 1990s. The #ThisFlag movement forms a part of the fabric of opposing voices demanding redefinition and revival of the meaning of Zimbabwe in relation to the liberation struggle. Thus he asks:

If those who fought for our independence were to come back and see what has happened...if they were here they would demand that their blood be brought back (Evan Mawarire, Day 1 Video, 19 April 2016).

Mawarire's sentiments fall into the paradigm of thoughts that 'students, workers and some intellectuals developed [as a] growing critique of the postcolonial state,

[with critical] attention to rethinking the legacies of the liberation struggles and placing more central attention on the struggles for human and civic rights' (Raftopoulos 2006, 206). The pastor creates the movement juxtaposing the current state of the nation and liberties, freedoms, political and economic emancipation fought for during the struggle. The state, however perpetuates a dogmatic identity hinged on liberation struggle, a tradition which leads to the rise in civil voices calling for an inclusive identity based on the meaning of being a citizen of the nation than on historicity which excludes a particular group based on age, sex or tribal origins.

The movement further analyses nationalist projects and policies as tools in nation-building and how they have failed in the post-colonial context which has been marred by economic imbalances due to authoritarian tendencies. The government is exclusive in engaging the masses in nation-building projects; thus the pastor fights for policies of inclusion:

We are demonstrating to you, about what it is about what we want you to take note of, stop talking to intellectuals only, talk to us the ordinary people. Stop ambushing us with policy changes overnight. What happened to talking to us? Munongomuka makachinja zvinhu (you suddenly change things without engaging the masses) Kudhara (before) you used to announce 6 months before explaining why you were doing it, the consequences. Talk to us don't ambush us with policies (Evan Mawarire, Day 10 Video, 15 May 2016).

Since independence there has been a growth in the divide between the political elite and the citizenry. Social media has galvanised a movement to provoke the state into initiating dialogue with the masses.

As nationalism is centred on the characterisation and definition of particular nation through key including shared historicity and identity, the movement culminates as a point to the reviewing of the political performance of the post-independent government in Zimbabwe. Wolfsfeld et al (2013) theorize that for a movement to occur there should be fundamental aspects inspiring it. Inspired by political ideologies such as nationalism, which insists on making people seek the political kingdom first, under the assumption that other worlds (such as economic freedom and social justice) will automatically open up (Rwafa and Vambe 2007). Similarly, it is a disclosure of the failure of the state and the use of the liberation struggle,

Nyika yapara necorruption, injustice, poverty, nehudzvanyiriri, nenhamo nyika haichagarika ino iyi, hurumende yedu zvakwana, hamungarambe muchitibata zvamurikubata muchiita. Nyika yafa.

The country is greatly affected by corruption, poverty and a dictatorship. This country is no longer favourable and conducive for us to live in. We tell our government that enough is enough, they can't keep treating us like this. Our country is dead (Evan Mawarire, Day 13 Video, 15 May 2016).

As the post-independent state insisted on nation-making agendas by maintain the nationalist-revolutionary ideologies with the liberation war as the main foundation myth of the new nation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems 2009, 5), the pastor, however, suggests that the Zimbabwean spirit of collective good has been worn out in the wear and tear induced by individual greed for both political and material power (Rwafa and Vambe 2007, 82). The social movement cult refuses to confirm and conform to the myth of national stability that is peddled by those 'eating on behalf of the majority' (Rwafa and Vambe 2007). The movement represents collective grievances against the government, a fundamental element to the creation and maintenance of his cult, which he used to find legitimacy with the masses as he conjures up daily themes affecting them.

Conclusion

The study focused on analysing the making of the #ThisFlag movement through the use of social media. It provided three theoretical frameworks that functioned significantly for the movement to leave an indelible mark on Zimbabwean history and political terrain especially in discourses of citizen activism. The study also alluded to the movement as a cult of Mawarire premised on the national flag, it explored issues of identity, nationalism, liberation war and socio-political spheres. To this study, the movement became a cult because of the influence of the populist pastor. Due to the exertion of control on media by the state through legislation, the cult amalgamated the citizenry's voices through social media to challenge the government's violation of human rights, authoritarianism and the legitimacy of the ZANU PF hegemony.

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