

‘From Voting to Torture’: Examining the psycho-social effects of the 2008 political election processes in Zimbabwe.

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Abstract

This paper is an assessment of the psycho-social effects of the harmonised elections of 2008 in Zimbabwe. After the highly contentious election results in which the main opposition party, the MDC³ defeated the then ruling ZANU-PF party, calculated violence broke out⁴. The general elections were held on the 29th of March 2008, but it took the ZEC⁵ two months to release the election results. In the first round of the elections, Morgan Tsvangirai of the MDC was said to have won 47.9% of the vote and Robert Mugabe 43.2%, necessitating a run-off which was to be held on the 27th of June 2008. It is during this period after the announcement of the first round of results and the preparations for the second round of voting that extreme violence ensued, perpetrated mainly against the opposition MDC party supporters by the ZANU PF organs. This forced Tsvangirai to withdraw his candidature from the run-off. The ‘political bases’ created by ZANU PF members especially in the rural areas, but also in the high-density urban areas, opposition supporters were subjected to extreme torture, killings and sexual abuse. This led to the discreditation of the second round of results by the AU and the SADC, prompting the formation of an inclusive government. Despite the fact that there was the creation of an Organ of National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration after the formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU), the paper argues that it did not do enough to ‘heal’ the victims of the post-election violence. Many people are still suffering from the psycho-social effects of the 2008 election violence; therefore, the paper makes some recommendations that would assist the victims and ensure a more effective national healing process.

Key words: Violence, Zimbabwe, Emotional well-being, Loss and Grief, National Healing

Introduction

Globally, violence consumes the lives of more than 1.5 million people annually, and for each single death due to violence, there are dozens of hospitalisations (Andrew et al. 1998).

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Moreover, violence often has lifelong effects on the victims' functioning and also hampers economic and social development. According to Wainryb and Pasupath (2007), violence is the expression of physical or verbal force against self or others, compelling action against one's will or the pain of being hurt. It is the designed use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against a person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in physical injury, psychological harm, mal-development or some other deprivation or death (Ahmed, 2004).

According to Muchai et al. (2014), violence is one of the leading causes of human migration, mobility, and mortality around the world. Young people (adolescents) are the most affected, and disproportionately represent both the perpetrators and victims of violence. Violence can perpetuate itself over decades, long after a country has suffered an initial traumatic experience (CITK, 2002). This predisposes the victims of violence to be more impulsive, reactive and violent themselves. Thus, violence could breed more violence in the future.

In post war periods, political violence has occurred in many countries, especially in countries south of the Sahara. Notable examples are the 1994 Rwandan genocidal conflict between the Tutsis and the Hutus which some scholars such as Bernett (2003) say, claimed some 800 000 lives within a hundred days. In Somalia, the civil war claimed 21 000 people and led to a great exodus of people (Munene, 2011). The election disputes that brought about the post-election violence in Zimbabwe in 2008 are not a unique experience as similar turmoil was witnessed in Kenya, the Ivory Coast, and the 'walk to work' protests in Uganda in more recent times.

Violence has been woven through the intricate fabric of Zimbabwe's political history in various forms which include murder, rape, beatings, death threats, abductions, arbitrary arrests, torture, forced displacement, property damage, harassment, intimidation and terrorisation. It has been used as the weapon of choice by the governments in power since the Universal Declaration of Independence (UDI) in 1965 through to post independence as a measure to ensure holding of power at all costs (Zimbabwe Independent, 2016). Zimbabwe has a continuous history of violent conflict, dating back to the original occupation in the 1890s. The liberation war, while beginning in the aftermath of the UDI, reached a peak in the 1970s; with over 30 000 killed, maimed or injured, tens of thousands tortured or abused, and tens of thousands displaced, either to neighbouring countries or forced into protected villages (Reeler, 2004) (any direct statistics?). Following a brief period of peace, the country was once again wracked by violence

between 1982 and 1987, the so called *Gukurahundi*⁶. According to the CCJP and LRF 1997; Amani Trust, 1998), about 20 000 civilians were killed during this time, and once again torture was endemic? Outside these two very serious periods, violence, the Liberation War and the *Gukurahundi*, virtually all elections since 1980 have been marred by political violence (Makumbe and Compagnon*, 2000). Some were much more violent than others, especially since 2000 with the emergence of a strong opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Presidential elections seem particularly violent, as the stakes were high for retaining the presidency. The 2008 election was marred by the torture and tormenting of mainly opposition party supporters by the ZANU PF supporters; and it did not receive the usual support from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU), ZANU PF was forced into a power sharing arrangement with the MDC resulting in the formation of an Inclusive Government

All of this violence had a marked effect on Zimbabwe leaving numerous victims in need of rehabilitation and assistance (Parsons et al. 2011).

The study assesses the impacts of the 2008 post-election violence (PEV) on the Zimbabwean general citizenry. The study examines the following questions: What is the influence of violence on emotional wellbeing? What are the effects of loss and grief on the citizenry? And what are the effects of the post-election violence on women's rights?

It uses the quotes from relevant sources and tries to be as objective as much as possible since the topic is very controversial.

Background: History of Political Violence in Zimbabwe

According to RAU (2011), in Zimbabwe, politically motivated violence dates back to the pre-colonial era. In the pre-colonial era, violence was mostly driven by the struggle for land, resources and chieftainships, while in the colonial era it was mostly centred on the struggle for land and ethnic recognition. In the post-colonial era, however, violence became much more pronounced and was mostly centred on the struggle for political ascendancy. This saw many being exposed to various forms of violence particularly before, during and after elections.

Inter-party violence and terror reached its climax between 2000 and 2008 when ZANU PF increasingly employed State agents, war veterans and militia during election campaigns

⁶Gukurahundi is a Shona word which loosely translates to "the early rain which washes away the chaff before the spring rains." ZANU then defined it as an ideological strategy aimed at carrying the war into major settlements and individual homesteads.

(Sachikonye; 2011). Hundreds of opposition party activists, mainly from MDC-T were killed in the pre and post-election period. The ferocity of the violence resulted in the discrediting of the 2008 run-off presidential elections. Before the 2008 elections, the ZANU PF government had implemented the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP), which was violent in nature to lure back the support of the War Veterans and the masses in general that was fast waning from its grip in favour of the MDC.

Mude (2011), postulates that the youth militias were seen as the major perpetrators of political violence. Politically sponsored violence has manifested as the major socio-political consequence of urban youth unemployment. Since Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980, the youth, during election periods were used as tools to target opposition members. According to the *Newsday* newspaper (2012), power hungry politicians turned youths into political thugs for selfish political agendas. It was the decade of a long political and economic crisis that the urban youth unemployment sky-rocketed. It is the very same era that saw the unprecedented increase in political violence in Zimbabwe. Mude alludes to the fact that ZANU PF had never been strongly opposed since independence, so the emergence of the MDC was seen as a threat to its survival. Hence, the ZANU PF government resorted to the use of violence to suppress the opposition parties as a survival strategy. In wider society, this had the effect of triggering terror and the revival of the 2008 trauma. In this scheme of things, the levels of human insecurity were high because the police and other security agencies were viewed as partisan and unreliable custodians of the safety, law and order.

Influence of violence on emotional wellbeing

According to Gitahi and Mwangi (2008), violence is the major cause of trauma. It does not matter whether trauma results from psychological, emotional or sexual abuse, war or hunger. The experience may change the way a person operates in life. Experiencing trauma can alter the human brain patterns in intense ways such as preventing individuals from placing boundaries on appropriate behaviours (Anderson and Bushman; 2002). Trauma may also cause negative emotions such as toxic shame, feelings of abandonment, prolonged fear, anxiety, rejection, loneliness and despair. On the other hand, trauma may be defined as bodily injury, shock, or an emotional shock having lasting psychic effects. According to Masters (2004) in Muchai et al. (2014), events perceived as traumatic can change brain chemistry and can result in behaviour such as violence, crime, depression, change in thinking patterns and other behaviours. It is a feeling of being very upset, afraid or shocked after a bad experience. The

post-election violence in Zimbabwe was a situation which caused trauma and affected the emotional well-being of the affected individuals.

According to Mckeown et al (1998), depression is an emotional state usually characterised by prolonged feelings of gloom, despair, futility, profound pessimism and a tendency towards excessive guilty and self-reproach. It may also include cognitive symptoms, motivational symptoms and somatic symptoms. Research has shown that experiencing the death of a loved one while young is associated with a great risk of later depression (Browlby; 2000). The children who lost parents and loved ones during the 2008 election violence in Zimbabwe are at great risk of developing depression.

Extreme experiences of violence may bring traumatic experiences for the individuals and families which may negatively affect the emotional wellbeing as noted by Ulberlher (2002). They may also directly influence the co-existence of the people and community. In Zimbabwe, a combination of violence and official neglect has created an endless cycle of grudges which can fuel more violence during the upcoming harmonised elections in 2018 if not checked. One situation that may produce psychological after effects involves experiencing interpersonal violence, according to the American Psychiatric Association (2000).

The post-election violence which was experienced in 2008 involved interpersonal violence which may give rise to trauma. This is a disability condition that may result from experiencing an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury or from witnessing such an event happening to a family member or close friend.

Effects of loss and grief

Post-election violence in Zimbabwe resulted in the death of many people, especially amongst members of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party. Losing someone that one loves is very painful. According to Worden (1991), if loss is unacknowledged or unattended, it can result in disability. Grief refers to the emotions and sensations that accompany the loss of someone dear to a person (Aileen; 1999). People experience the cycle of grief differently. According to Milne (1999), some find that within a few weeks or months, the period between waves of distress lengthens and that they are able to feel peace, renewed hope, and enjoy life most of the time. Others may face fears of being hit with what feels like relentless waves of grief (Warden; 1991). This suggests the possibility of the loss and grief suffered by victims of violence to hold them back for years to come unless counselling services are made available.

According to Crandell and Crandell (2000), social support can be a source of healing and adjustment- people who receive the support and comfort of family and friends typically have a lower incidence of mental and physical disorders. The process of grieving is painful and may be experienced and resolved by most individuals. Three types of grief reactions are delayed reactions, distorted reactions and pathological mourning (Warden; 1991). It is important to establish whether the post-election victims went through the whole process of grieving in order to adjust to life.

Impact of post-election violence on women

In most patriarchal societies, Zimbabwe included, the role of women in the political discourse remains marginal, yet they are the most affected when election violence breaks out. In the 2008 election violence in Zimbabwe, many women suffered serious trauma due to beatings, rape, murder and verbal abuse. Shaba (2011) argues that women were the majority of victims in pre and post 2008 election violence in Zimbabwe. Throughout the world accounts of war tend to portray men as the conflict evolves and women as passive innocent victims. In conflict, women are much more disadvantaged compared to men. They suffer disproportionately from displacement and deprivation (Boulding, 1988). Women are, thus, trapped in a vicious paradox; while they are often powerless to prevent the conflicts, and negotiations. According to RAU (2011), the phenomenon of violations against women is a common phenomenon in the post-election period in Zimbabwe. Politically motivated sexual violence against women in Zimbabwe has taken many forms. These include extreme violence such as gang rape and the insertion of objects into women's private parts. RAU goes on to note that circumstances of extreme conflict unquestionably fuel the flames of politically motivated violence against women in any given conflict, as warring parties continue seeking to outmanoeuvre one another. This has largely been the case with Zimbabwean elections, particularly during the 2000-2010 election periods that saw many of the Zimbabwean women, young and old, rural and urban, being exposed to various kinds of politically motivated violence prior to, during and after these elections, particularly during the year 2008. Many women were victims of violence, regardless of whether one was directly or indirectly involved in politics. For instance, most women were left with permanent physical, psychological and emotional scars, which have caused life changing adverse effects to their health. Others, however, on top of being sexually abused, had

to live with constant reminders such as falling pregnant and/or contracting deadly HIV⁷/AIDS⁸ virus and other STIs⁹.

In the 2008 election period, there was the creation of ‘political bases’ in the high-density areas by ZANU PF supporters. It is there, where women were subjected to torture and sexual harassment, and in most instances, the rape was committed at the instigation of a political leader, showing that it was a strategy to intimidate political opponents. Often used during election periods, it is quite evident that rape was used as a psychological weapon in order to humiliate the opposition and undermine their morale. According to RAU (2011), sexual harassment affects more than the survivors’ physical wellbeing, but also impacts upon their psychological and political status. Rape is an extremely effective wartime weapon used by most revolutionary groups because by systematically raping women and girls, armed groups assert power and domination over not only women, but their husbands as well. The men whose women have been raped feel totally helpless and the rape to them can symbolise defeat. So, in essence, women are attacked to destroy their mental and physical integrity, and they were attacked publicly during the 2008 post-election violence to destroy their mental and physical integrity; and they were attacked publicly to demonstrate the powerlessness of the men to defend the community.

Politically motivated rape is often systematic and well thought out (RAU, 2011). ZANU PF cadres, especially the youths, used politically motivated rape to punish individuals, families and communities who held alternative political views, according to the Amnesty International’s Report on Zimbabwe in 2010. This happened before the 2008 elections (RAU, 2011), and one woman quoted stated that the perpetrators said to her:

You are the same people messing around with Tsvangirai¹⁰ for the love of sugar.
You are Tsvangirai’s prostitute, a prostitute for sugar. So now we have found you, we are going to sleep with you.

This statement clearly shows that the rape was political. In 2008, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) voted unanimously in favour of a resolution classifying rape a weapon of war.

⁷ Human Immune Virus

⁸ Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

⁹ Sexually Transmitted Infections

¹⁰ Tsvangirai is the leader of the main opposition party in Zimbabwe, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC-T).

The resolution is a vital step towards the fight against sexual violence against women, and an addition to previous international legal instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (CEVAW) and the United Nations Council Resolution 1325 which ‘‘calls on all parties to respect humanitarian law and to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape. According to the CCJP (2009), there have been increasing numbers of reports alleging politically motivated rape, but no specific examination of the issue. Women in RAU’s study exhibited high levels of sleeplessness, nightmares, flashbacks, and helplessness. Traumatic memories may continue for extended periods of time.

Conclusions and Recommendations’

The study determined that the post-election violence in Zimbabwe in 2008 had negative impacts on the generality of the citizens, especially women. The paper has argued that despite the fact that it is now ten years since the 2008 election, the psycho-social effects are still being felt amongst the victims and there is need for an effective healing process to assist the victims.

The following recommendations were made:

1. The Government of Zimbabwe should invest more in the National Healing and Reconciliation Commission, and actively engage with the communities, survivors and victims of politically motivated violence, so as to ensure a peaceful environment in the future elections.
2. There is need to enhance counselling services to the victims of the post-election violence
3. There is need for outreach programmes to train Traditional Leaders on the negative effects of political violence, as they are the custodians of national values
4. There is need to de-politicise the security sectors so as to ensure that no one enjoys immunity and all citizens receive equal protection from the state.
5. Rape survivors need the cooperation of all sectors –government departments, civil society and development partners for proper healing processes to take place.
6. The government needs to ensure that national sexual violence laws are enforced and the culture of impunity is done away with in keeping with global standards and instruments, and also that crimes against women will be investigated and the perpetrators will be brought to justice so as to send the message to would be perpetrators.

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