

Values versus Power: Responsible Sovereignty as Struggle in Zimbabwe

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I am writing this in Harare which is an interesting place in which to reflect on a state's responsibility to protect its citizens. Reading through the Secretary General's report before arriving in Zimbabwe, it was the section on the importance of values that caught my eye. Like many others, the Secretary General points out that the predominant values in a society and its institutions will determine whether or not a state is likely to protect or assault its citizens.

This is certainly true. But it is not always true enough. A critical mass of good values will not always protect people. A society can be full of people with good values but if the state apparatus around that society is captured by a clique with very different values, then a profusion of good values is seldom an immediate match for a concentration of power. In such a situation, without a major war, those who want positive change are usually left only with the option of protracted struggle in which they must erode the power of the clique while gradually securing their own strength. This is particularly difficult to do when the clique's significant political machinery is using murder, intimidation, torture, populist politics and an entrenched obsession with 'enemies within' to smear all opposition as dissident, treasonable and unpatriotic.

Recent Zimbabwean experience shows how irresponsible sovereignty is very hard to shift even by a majority of people with good values.¹ The conflict of the last ten years in Zimbabwe re-emphasises the significance of struggle in the protection of civilians and the emergence of responsible sovereignty. Struggle is a good leftist seventies word which was, of course, also the key word to describe the process of independence in Zimbabwe and the anti-apartheid

¹ For a good summary of recent history in Zimbabwe, see Martin Meredith, *Mugabe: Power, Plunder and the Struggle for Zimbabwe* (Public Affairs: New York, 2007).

movement in South Africa. Since the 1990s, however, the idea of struggle has been superceded in United Nations politics by a more technocratic discourse of capacity-building, training, conflict resolution and peace-building. These more anodyne phrases – often found in UN and donor policy documents – may mislead us into thinking that the quest to protect citizens and civilians is simply a matter of values and improved state management rather than a hard struggle for good politics. The murder, battered faces and broken legs of MDC leaders over the last year remind us that ‘peace-building’ is usually bloody in states which are not liberal democracies. The recent election of two British Nationalist Party candidates to the European Parliament also suggests that liberal democracies need to struggle too if they are to retain the values they already have. As the Secretary General says: ‘we are all at risk if we believe it could not happen to us.’

The absence of the idea of struggle in R2P thinking and policy is a serious deficit in the movement for the protection of civilians. In reality, responsible sovereignty is achieved by struggle and suffering in most conflicts around state-formation. Values are pitted against one another, not just taught, discussed and agreed. Avoiding the idea of struggle de-politicises what is involved in the making of responsible sovereignty in many states. It also fuels criticisms of R2P – either of its naivete or of a covert political agenda which it deliberately masks. The latter is certainly Robert Mugabe’s view of R2P efforts – nothing more than the ‘Trojan horse’ of regime change with a human rights face.

Responsible Values and their Limits

In their pastoral letter at Easter in 2007, Zimbabwe’s Catholic Bishops made a point about the significance of values, behaviour and political culture in Zimbabwe’s conflict:

If our young people see their leaders habitually engaging in acts and words which are hateful, disrespectful, racist, corrupt, lawless, unjust, greedy, dishonest, and violent in order to cling to the privileges of power and wealth, it is highly likely that many of them will behave in exactly the same manner. The consequences of such overtly corrupt leadership as we are witnessing in Zimbabwe today will be with us for many years, perhaps decades to come.²

The report of the Secretary General takes a similar view. At the heart of its ‘Pillar One’ is a focus on values. The report quite rightly places great emphasis

² Cited in Meredith, *Mugabe*, p. 244.

on the fact that ‘responsible sovereignty’ emerges from sound values that are based on human rights and an acceptance of diversity. It also observes that a sense of ‘individual responsibility’ in all members of society is crucial to this process. Like Zimbabwe’s Bishops, the Secretary General suggests that good people make good states and bad people make bad states. And, then, that bad states tend to make brutal wars.

There is certainly a strong element of truth in this reading of the importance of values, liberal education and inclusive politics in the prevention of anti-civilian ideologies, atrocity and mass killing.³ There is also little doubt, as the Bishops and the Secretary General imply, that cultures, patterns and traditions of violence can become fixed and be passed from one generation to another. This means that a society can exist in a particular paradigm of enmity and cultures of violence which are very hard to shift.

However, in civil wars and protracted political violence, what remains remarkable is how many people do not succumb to negative values of hatred or wilfully join in with a culture of violence. The people of Zimbabwe are a case in point. To date, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and its followers have resisted copying the violence and hate-filled discourse of their ZANU-PF rivals. In recent years, the MDC have, in an important way, led a values break-through and shifted the paradigm of Zimbabwean violence. They have been able to do this partly because Zimbabwe is such an educated nation, already full of liberal values of rights, respect and the rule of law. Therefore, the MDC have proved the liberal values argument in the creation of responsible sovereignty. But, in the process, they have suffered a lot and they have not yet won. They are only sharing power in a regionally imposed Government of National Unity (GNU) and next year will tell whether ZANU-PF continues its custom of using violence and intimidation in its electioneering in an attempt to steal back total power.

Zimbabwe’s conflict, therefore, also shows the limits of values in the pursuit of protection. Values are necessary but not sufficient in the creation of responsible sovereignty. In Zimbabwe, as in so many other states, values are one thing and power is another. If the powerful clique that controls state power is prepared to be ruthless, then even a groundswell of liberal values can be held in check and state sovereignty may remain profoundly irresponsible even when levels of individual responsibility are very high. And, of course, such power can also eject a large proportion of responsible individuals. Some 3 million

³ See Hugo Slim, *Killing Civilians: Method, Madness and Morality in War* (New York: Hurst and Columbia University Press, 2007), chapter 7.

Zimbabweans have fled or left the country because of ZANU-PF's extremism and its economic consequences. Tragically, violent and irresponsible sovereignty can be sustained by a clique for many years regardless of the positive values of the majority.

Responsible Struggle

If recent experience in Zimbabwe shows that the protection of citizens is a struggle, it also shows how such a struggle for values can be highly responsible in line with R2P values. ZANU-PF has been consistently irresponsible in its treatment of its citizens. By contrast, the MDC has been consistently responsible.

Since 2000, ZANU-PF has routinely used violence and intimidation to maintain their grip on power and to push through an incompetent and venal programme of much needed land reform. ZANU-PF's land reform has had a rural and an urban dimension. The rural reforms have involved the forceful reclamation of farms by 'war veterans' – the shock troop of ZANU-PF's land policy – always acting with the full support of the police and armed forces. This 'fast track' land reform programme displaced hundreds of thousands of farm workers while it also intimidated and dispossessed thousands of white farmers and their families. ZANU-PF's land reform has also had an urban dimension in the sudden forced displacement of informal town populations in Operation *Murambatsvina* ('clear up the filth') in 2004. This targeted the growing informal sector in urban Zimbabwe in a massive 'slum clearance' programme in Harare and other cities. *Murambatsvina* involved the forced displacement of 700,000 people and the destruction of their homes, stalls and shops by the police and ZANU-PF youth groups.⁴ In both rural and urban land reform, ZANU-PF has acted brutally with no responsible government programme to support the citizens they have displaced and dispossessed.

ZANU-PF has been similarly brutal in its electioneering. The party has used intimidation and 're-education' as an integral part of its political repertoire around elections since the original election in 1980. Despite its capitalist economics, ZANU-PF has maintained a vicious fetish for one-party politics. ZANU's suffering in prisons, in the bush and its numerous martyrdoms in the war of liberation has given the party a sacred obsession with the idea of its

⁴ 'Report of the Fact Finding Mission to Zimbabwe to Assess the Scope and Impact of Operation Murambatsvina by the UN Special Envoy on Human Settlement Issues in Zimbabwe, Mrs Anna Kajumulo Tibaijuka', 18 July 2005.

blood-given role as the only true priesthood of Zimbabwean politics. This means it will not tolerate the impurity of any kind of dissent. All heretics must be challenged and punished if necessary. Robert Mugabe has often made clear his 'right to bash' the opposition. He has always seen any opposition as 'the enemy' with whom he must make 'war'. He is a distinctly bi-polar (or bi-politic) politician who quietly talks of unity and reconciliation when he has won and spits hatred whenever he feels challenged. And many of his colleagues – living and dead – have done hate equally well. People like Perence Shiri, Chenjerai Hunzvi, Ignatius Chombo, Philip Chiyangwa and Sabine Mugabe. The discourse of hate, betrayal and supremacism put out by ZANU-PF leaders has been profoundly irresponsible.

The MDC has been different, managing to be both strong and responsible. Since its formation from an alliance of trade union and civil society organisations in 1999, the MDC has consistently built a coalition and an opposition around positive values of the rule of law, democratic elections, free speech and the protection of Zimbabwean citizens. It has consistently advocated non-violent struggle while routinely being the victim of violence. On several occasions, the MDC has also acted against its immediate interests in order to protect citizens. The most obvious instance of this protective instinct was Morgan Tsvangirai's withdrawal from the Presidential election in 2008 when continued campaigning would have put more lives at risk.

In many ways, the MDC's policy and conduct in the protracted conflict in Zimbabwe is a model of responsible struggle for responsible sovereignty. It is an approach which has cost lives and saved lives. By not going to war, the MDC has shifted the paradigm of violence that has so damaged Zimbabwe: its earliest Shona-Ndebele wars; its forceful conquest by British 'pioneers'; the brutal Rhodesian counter-insurgency against the liberation struggle; and ZANU's equally vicious counter-insurgency against the Ndebele led by Perence Shiri and his Korean Brigade in the 1980s. In the face of responsible MDC resolve, using violence has only disabled ZANU-PF which now finds itself in a power-sharing arrangement that it may not win.

R2P and Political Struggle

States are made on the land they inhabit. They do not drop ready-made and liberal from the sky. Modern Zimbabwe has been forged from several race-based conflicts; from the conquest and humiliations of colonialism; from its overthrow; from its legacy of land ownership; from the one-party supremacist ideology of ZANU, and now from the non-violent struggle of the MDC.

In between these conflicts, the exceptional infrastructure, legal system and human capital of the Zimbabwean state has been shaped by the extraordinary economic, social and political efforts of its Rhodesian and ZANU founders.

There is no doubt that Zimbabwe's extraordinary levels of education and most people's deep commitment to democracy and the rule of law – their high sense of 'individual responsibility' – have been vital to the MDC's ability to lead a non-violent and responsible challenge to ZANU-PF's excess. The Secretary General's report is right: values are key. But politics in Zimbabwe also shows that values do not necessarily win out without a hard and painful struggle. This struggle has been supported by the R2P community in Zimbabwe. Humanitarian assistance has kept people alive as the economy went into free fall. Western donor governments and NGOs have consistently supported civil society groups, lawyers and human rights groups who have courageously kept pushing the values that can protect citizens and civilians.

Often, these programmes of support have been described in the sterile diplomatic discourse of capacity-building. Maybe it has to be. Using this kind of technical R2P discourse has been tactically wise and necessary in Zimbabwe's conflict. But, as the MDC's experience has shown, 'doing R2P' is not just a technical exercise. It is often a deadly struggle. Because, when power is concentrated and ruthless, even a predominance of good values can be crushed. The challenge for the R2P movement in such conflicts is how to present such struggles diplomatically and how to find ways to support them on the ground. Zimbabwe's recent struggle should provide an important learning ground for the R2P movement. In future, perhaps, UN reports on R2P might talk as much of struggle as of capacity-building.