

Social Research and Civil Society in Zimbabwe

By

Lloyd Sachikonye

Background

- 1980s as period of laying foundations of a new society under majority rule and nationalism
- Social contract between new state and society – high social expenditure and better conditions for labour and rural society
- Honeymoon lasted till end of 1980s; then followed by structural adjustment and reversal of earlier social gains (education/health etc.)

Mobilization in Civil Society

- Response to neo-liberal structural adjustment was strong via labour movement organized under the ZCTU. It pushed for more autonomy but also wider reforms in the 1990s.
- Students, intelligentsia and women groups pressed for constitutional reform compelling the government to respond through its own exercise but a defective one in 1999/2000.

Cont'd

- Polarization in society, especially state and civil society sharpened in late 1990s. Feeling threatened by upsurge in civil society, state resorted to authoritarianism: repression and use of war veterans etc.
- Crisis from 2000 to 2008 was a watershed in Zimbabwe's fortunes as economy contracted by about half, and massive job lay-offs followed.
- Large-scale migration (both economic and political) followed and this had an impact on civil society (skills and human resources).

Civil Society under Authoritarianism

- Several tendencies are discernible when CS is operating under authoritarian conditions.
- First, CS cannot afford to be detached from struggles for reform hence tendency to participate or form broad opposition movements. Examples were MDC following the MMD model in Zambia in early 1990s.
- Second, another tendency is for the best and brightest in CS to be co-opted into the new opposition movements and weakening the leadership of CS.
- Third, it is a challenge for CSOs to retain their autonomy both from state and parties. Divisions in parties replicated in CSOs.

Cont'd

- Fourth, an ever present challenge is co-optation and fragmentation by the state. It uses its resources to set up rival labour, student, youth, media and business organizations for example.
- A related challenge for CSOs which seek to retain autonomy from the state is funding, and often dependence on external funding from solidarity organizations or donors. Dependence can be a source of weakness.

CSOs in the Zimbabwe Stalemate

- CSOs operate in a context of fragmentation and factionalism in both ruling and opposition parties. Need to maintain their autonomy although dilutes their overall impact on the political process.
- Engagement with state institutions is difficult, and has to be highly selective and strategic. Need to probe more space for developmental role/constitutional watchdog role.
- Restrictions on human rights probes/electoral monitoring likely to continue.
- Internal leadership struggles a setback in some CSOs.

Peering into a post-Mugabe era

- Fixation with the role, power and ubiquity of the Founding Father does not allow a closer scrutiny of the party-state system that has been built over the past 35 years. System could outlive the strongman.
- System is not only one of authoritarianism but also of extensive patronage, corruption, opaqueness and surveillance.
- Civil society has to struggle for its survival but also plan for the future.

New Generation, new prospects?

- Will there be qualitative change in CSOs as economy and society undergo change.
- Structure of economy undergoing change: de-industrialization and upsurge in service economy and ICTs.
- Informal economy expanding but vulnerable to state manipulation
- Vast expansion of university education in context of few jobs
- Waning of the liberation dividend and aura

Developmental Civil Society?

- Current fad is the imperative for a developmental state motivated by an ideology of 'developmentalism'.
- Conceivable to see shift towards a developmental civil society as emphasis increases on growth in an Africa 'on the rise'.
- Development question no less urgent than the democracy question.

References

- Bond and Manyanya (2002) Zimbabwe's Plunge Harare: Weaver
- Sachikonye, L. (ed.)(1995) Democracy, Civil Society and State Harare: Sapes
- - Zimbabwe's Lost Decade Harare: Weaver
- Tengende (1994) Workers, Students and Struggles for Democracy in Zimbabwe, Ph D thesis