

STUDENT ACTIVISM¹ IN A TIME OF CRISIS – ZIMBABWE 2000 – 2010: A TENTATIVE EXPLORATION²

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Abstract

The article examines student activism in Zimbabwe between 2000 and 2010 to investigate how Zimbabwe's economic meltdown and political challenges influenced the nature and forms of student responses. While conceding that student activism was not as well-coordinated and as unified as it had been in earlier periods of Zimbabwean history, it argues that student activism, nevertheless, continued despite relentless efforts by state agencies to violently stifle student protests and also in spite of the debilitating economic problems confronting the students. It is argued that the lack of unity among students can be explained in part by the lack of consensus among students regarding the challenges facing them and how to resolve them. It can also be seen as a result of the fact that students belonged to different and, sometimes, antagonistic political parties resulting in a fractured student movement that could not speak with one voice. Finally, the article contends that despite facing serious economic hardships, which partly fuelled their discontent, students did not focus only on economic grievances but married these to wider socio-political issues and regarded their struggles as part and parcel of the national fight for good governance and democracy.

Keywords: Activism; crisis; democracy; human rights; education; governance.

Stelutwoorde: Aktivisme; krisis; demokrasie; menseregte; onderrig; regering.

1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, students in Zimbabwe have played an important role in the struggle for democracy and human rights. Indeed, much has been written on student activism in the country during the colonial and early independence years, with a focus mostly on student activities at the University of Zimbabwe (UZ), for a long time the only

1 The term “student activism” is used in this article to refer to student activities either in defence of their interests as students or in pursuit of political, environmental, economic and social change in the wider society.

2 The author wishes to acknowledge the Leverhulme Trust for funding the *Comparative History of Political Engagement in Western and African Societies* project of the Universities of Sheffield, Le Mans and Pretoria in which he participates and where at one of whose conferences the early version of this article was presented. He also wishes to thank the various reviewers for their comments and suggestions.

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university in the country. It has been widely noted that, from being supporters of the liberation struggle in the 1960s and 1970s, students became major allies of the ruling party in the immediate post-colonial years, before turning into its staunchest critics in the 1990s, as economic challenges, public corruption and misgovernment became prevalent in Zimbabwean society. Students also played an important role in opposition politics in the 1990s and beyond. Not much scholarly attention has been paid to student activism during Zimbabwe's economic and political crisis in the decade up to 2010, however.

A study of this cohort of students is of particular interest because, perhaps more than any other groups of Zimbabwean students before them, they have had to survive in exceedingly harsh political and economic conditions characterised by an increasingly repressive political regime which seems to regard student activists not as young men and women exercising their democratic rights, but as enemies of the state to be ruthlessly suppressed. They have had to contend with a rapid economic meltdown and astronomical inflationary levels, a massive exodus of lecturers from the country in search of greener pastures abroad, dwindling student financial support, growing political interference with academic freedom and the gratuitous use of state violence to suppress any political protests.

Such conditions made it difficult for students to engage politically with the state through peaceful methods such as lobbying, petition writing and other forms of political activity that often characterise student activism in more democratic countries. Therefore, the prevailing circumstances predisposed student-state relations to be predominantly confrontational rather than being based on peaceful negotiation and constructive dialogue. Economic and political conditions also weakened and fractured the student movement, making it impossible for the country's student body to speak with one voice, as in the past. At the same time, the students that engaged in protests increasingly saw the struggle for their betterment as students as one and the same struggle against bad governance and human rights abuses in the country.

Using student organisations' publications, student leaders' public statements and press reports, the article suggests that current Zimbabwean students have been forced by the prevailing economic and political circumstances to become actively politically engaged, as their very existence and survival have depended on their continued struggle for economic, political and other rights. It challenges the view that regards only overtly ideologically inspired student activism as revolutionary, while student protests about bread and butter issues are regarded as of lesser value and significance. It will suggest that, in the case under study, the two are, in fact, part of the same student struggle. These and other issues are explored below.

2. DECLINE OF STUDENT ACTIVISM

Because of the important role that students played in past struggles for political change in Zimbabwe, there has been a tendency to focus primarily on this aspect of student activism in evaluating student actions in the country's changing socio-economic and political context, with little attention being paid to students' economic and educational demands and grievances. This seems to be true also of analyses of student activism elsewhere in Africa, which also focus mostly on student participation in anti-colonial struggles and post-colonial campaigns for good governance, with student protests in Kenya, for instance, being characterised as traditionally "informed by a democratic agenda and the desire to create democratic spaces within and outside the university" and students being presented as ideologically focused "representatives of the left" and ideologues of the common man's struggle.⁴

While the deteriorating post-colonial economic context and its negative impact on the students' daily lives is acknowledged, it is sometimes presented only as background to the larger, and presumably more significant, ideologically-driven student struggles. Thus, where student concerns with economic grievances seem to be particularly prominent, this is sometimes taken as symptomatic of a decline in meaningful student activism. As Nkinyangi observes, there is a widely held view in academic circles that the lot of African students are concerned largely with "simple matters such as poor school food (literally, bread and butter issues) while on the other hand the struggles of some other groups of students, e.g., the Chinese, focus on more substantial issues".⁵

In the Zimbabwean case, specifically, perceptions of recent student activities as largely driven by economic grievances have led some commentators to argue that the current cohort of students is not active in the struggle for human rights, democracy and good governance as compared to previous generations. For example, a recent newspaper article entitled "Student activism slowly dying" lamented the decline of student activism at Zimbabwe's various universities and claimed that current student activism compared poorly with student protests during the colonial period and the immediate post-colonial era of student leaders. It argued that at that time students "made an important contribution to the struggle for democracy in the country" by demonstrating against public corruption and human rights abuses and by providing a voice for the voiceless.

4 WN Amutabi, "Crisis and student protest in universities in Kenya: Examining the role of students in national leadership and the democratization process", *African Studies Review* 45(2), September 2002, pp. 157-178.

5 JA Nkinyangi, "Student political activism and attitudes", *Higher Education* 22(2), September 1991, pp. 157-173.

Examples provided included student demonstrations against “corruption at Willowvale”,⁶ the proposal to establish a one-party state, and the introduction of a Western-backed economic structural adjustment programme in the early 90s. Lastly, the writer hailed generations of students for joining forces with the National Constitutional Assembly and the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions to defeat the “government-led Godfrey Chidyausiku draft constitution in 2000”.⁷ Unfortunately, the article maintained, student activism was slowly dying and “has become an old shell of itself”. The decline was because the country’s tertiary institutions were “facing serious problems to do with high tuition fees, educational funding, college accommodation and a mass exodus of seasoned lecturers”.⁸

For former student activist, Earnest Mudzengi,⁹ student activism was, in fact, already dead. He maintained that it had been killed by the repressive UZ Amendment Act of 1990 which had given excessive powers to discipline both students and lecturers to government-appointed vice chancellors, thus effectively bringing institutions of higher learning directly under government control and destroying academic freedom. In his view, the “UZ Amendment of 1990 made sure that student activism was taken to the graveyard. Students were disempowered economically so that they would cease to care about national issues but concentrate on their well being only. Beggars do not become activists.”¹⁰ Another view lamented the periodic infighting within the student movement ZINASU¹¹ due to different political affiliation, especially since the emergence of the MDC and its subsequent split and also due to the “commodification of resistance”, as international donors have become more involved in civil society organisations’ campaigns in the country

6 A scandal involving the abuse of power by politicians who purchased cars at low prices at the government-controlled Willowvale car assembly plant and resold them at exorbitant profit later, taking advantage of a severe shortage of new cars in the country due to the inability of people to import cars because of a lack of foreign currency in the country.

7 This was a government-sponsored constitutional draft that was rejected in a referendum whose result was largely influenced by the “No Campaign” of activists that included students, human rights campaigners and the recently formed Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). See P Muzulu, “Student activism slowly dying”, *The Independent (Zimbabwe)*, 9 December 2010.

8 P Muzulu, “Student activism slowly dying”.

9 A leading student activist, while studying at the University of Zimbabwe in the 1990s, Mudzengi, later joined the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) as Information and Advocacy Officer and, later, became the Director of the NCA. See “Zimbabwe-broken promises or progress?”, <www.afrika.dk/kalender/udviklingen-i-zimbabwe>, accessed 3 October 2011.

10 Muzulu, “Student activism slowly dying”.

11 Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU) is the umbrella body that represents all students in the country and to which individual institutional student representative unions are affiliated. It represents all tertiary institutions in the country.

and “mobilisation is increasingly paid for from donor funds”. The availability of donor funds led to fighting for positions and control of student organisations.¹²

Emerging from the above is a view that student activism among the current generation of students is not only much lower than in the past and noticeably declining but also that, unlike earlier generations, current students are mostly preoccupied with bread and butter issues and are not doing much to contribute to the fight for democracy and human rights. While conceding that, compared to earlier periods of coordinated, focused and broad-based student activism against the colonial dispensation, the current level of student activism is rather uncoordinated and not as effective, this article argues that, far from dying, student activism in the past decade has contributed immensely to the ongoing struggle for democracy, as students have routinely linked their struggle for specific student rights with the national struggle for good governance. Thus, bread and butter issues pertaining to the campus have blended with national demands for democracy and respect for human rights as part of one struggle against an unjust system. Indeed, as the economic condition of the students deteriorated in the country’s economic meltdown, their identification with the suffering of the ordinary workers, which had already become evident in the ESAP-days¹³ of the 1990s, intensified, as they increasingly saw themselves as part of the struggle against a regime and a system which was impoverishing and oppressing them all.

3. STUDENT ACTIVISM BEFORE 2000

Students at tertiary institutions nationwide, and particularly students at the main national University of Zimbabwe, played an important role in the struggle for democracy in the colonial period. Mlambo, Zeilig, Tengende,¹⁴ and other university students were closely tied with the national liberation movements and the African struggle against colonial oppression from the 1960s onwards. From this early

12 L Zeilig, “Increasing my value proposition to the struggle: Arthur Mutambara and student politics in Zimbabwe”, *African Sociological Review* 10(2), 2006, pp. 94-115.

13 The Economic Structural Adjustment Programme was a World Bank and International Monetary fund-sponsored economic austerity programme that arguably worsened the performance of the country’s economy and brought much hardship to the poor majority of the population. For an analysis of the programme, see AS Mlambo, *The Economic Structural Adjustment Programme: The case of Zimbabwe 1990-1995* (Harare, UZP, 1997).

14 AS Mlambo, “Student protest and state reaction in colonial Rhodesia: The 1973 Chimukwembe student demonstration at the University of Rhodesia”, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21(3), 1993, pp. 473-490; N Tengende, “*Workers, students and the struggles for democracy: State-Civil Society relations in Zimbabwe*” (PhD, Roskilde University, Denmark, 1994); L Zeilig, “Increasing my value”; L Zeilig, *Revolt and protest: Student politics and activism in Sub-Saharan Africa* (London, IBTauris, 2007); L Zeilig, “Student politics and activism in Zimbabwe: The frustrated transition”, *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 43(2), 2008, pp. 215-237.

period, in which student activists were harassed by the colonial authorities and rusticated from the only university in the country, the University of Rhodesia, to the *Chimukwembe*¹⁵ demonstrations of 1973, students across the country protested colonial injustices, as part of the nationalist onslaught on colonial rule.

The symbiotic relationship between student activism and the nationalist struggle for independence is evident in that, in the 1970s, hundreds of students from educational institutions throughout the country absconded to join the fighting forces of the two leading nationalist parties, namely Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), in Mozambique and Zambia, respectively. Indeed, some became high-ranking members of the guerrilla forces, while others were to become members in the first independence government in 1980.¹⁶ This phase of student activism ended with independence.

For most of the 1980s, as Zeilig has correctly observed, student activists saw themselves as defenders of the revolution whose task was to support the independence government, which they regarded as their own. So supportive of the government were the majority of the students at the country's only university, that there was not a single public condemnation of, or student demonstration against, the human rights abuses and massacre of the Ndebele-speaking people in Matebeleland during the Gukurahundi campaign of the early 1980s, which saw thousands of people killed by the Korean trained Fifth Brigade of the Zimbabwe National Army.¹⁷ In fact, the ZANU-PF-aligned student movement of the early 1980s marginalised students belonging to the opposition ZAPU-PF party so that, in the words of former student leader, Itayi Zimunya, "the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) Students Union acted as the 'educated' wing of the [ruling] party's 'Youth Brigade'... glorifying the Zanu (PF) leader Robert Gabriel Mugabe and other national figures" and taking sides in the conflict between the two major political parties.¹⁸

The government's honeymoon with students ended towards the close of the 1980s because of growing public corruption and the ruling party's insistence on establishing a one-party state. This was followed by violent confrontations between students and the police, especially on the University of Zimbabwe campus. The relations between the two soured further when the government introduced economic

15 *Chimukwembe* was a euphemism for *Chimurenga*, the first anti-colonial armed uprising in 1896, a term that students could not openly use for fear of reprisals from the colonial state.

16 Among the prominent names that come to mind are Josiah Tungamirai, Claudius Makova, Witness Mangwende, Simba Makoni and Ibbo Mandaza.

17 IM Zimunya, *Claiming our future: A focus on the students movement in Zimbabwe* (Harare, Softprint, 2007), p. 6. For an account of the Gukurahundi atrocities, see Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace & Legal Resources Foundation, *Breaking the silence, building true peace: A report on the disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands 1980-1988* (Harare, CCJPZ, 1999).

18 Zimunya, *Claiming our future*, p. 22.

austerity measures in the early 1990s, more so since this directly impacted very negatively on the students' own standard of living, as student grants and loans were cut in line with the belt-tightening ethos of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-inspired economic programme. The deteriorating economic situation in the 1990s alienated the students even more and drove them closer to the organised workers under the leadership of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) who were also protesting growing economic hardships. This resulted in the formation of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 1999 as a worker-led coalition movement, which included students, among other interest groups. The central role played by the students in the rise of opposition politics is well documented and is also reflected in the number of student leaders who became founding and leading members of the MDC, some of whom became members of parliament and officers of the Zimbabwe government thereafter.¹⁹

Prior to 2000, therefore, student activism in Zimbabwe fell into three phases: the colonial period, the honeymoon years of the first independence decade and the polarisation between students and government of the 1990s.²⁰ It is particularly student activism in the 1990s that the author of this article remembers nostalgically as having been dynamic, as opposed to what may be characterised as the fourth phase of student activism, namely after 2000. To this we now turn.

4. THE ZIMBABWEAN ECONOMIC CRISIS AND HIGHER EDUCATION, 2000-2011

As noted earlier, student activism in recent times has lacked the coordination, unity and broad-based character of the earlier anti-colonial struggle days. Partly contributing to this was the debilitating impact of the Zimbabwean economic crisis on both the quality of life of the students and on the education sector throughout the first decade of the new millennium. Indeed, any discussion of student activism after 2000 must take into account the debilitating impact of the Zimbabwean economic and political crisis on the country's education system in general and higher education in particular. With regard to the country's economic crisis of the new millennium, much has already been written and there is no need to deal with this in detail here. For a variety of reasons, including unbudgeted payouts of millions of dollars to Zimbabwe's liberation war veterans in November 1997, the country's costly military involvement in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the increasing ostracism of the country by Western powers due to its growing

19 Among the leading former student leaders who became MDC politicians and government officers were Job Sikhala, Tafadzwa Musekiwa, Nelson Chamisa, Learnmore Jongwe, Arthur Mutambara and Tendai Biti.

20 Zeilig, "Student politics and activism in Zimbabwe", pp. 215-237.

human rights infringements, the Zimbabwe economy went into a tailspin that was to reduce it to a proverbial basket case by 2008.

Statistical evidence tells a dismal story. Real gross domestic product (GDP) was estimated to have fallen by “about 14 per cent in 2008 (on top of a 40 percent cumulative decline during the period of 2000-07) ... (while) poverty and unemployment” rose to “catastrophic levels, with 70 percent of the population in need of food assistance”.²¹ Meanwhile, inflation rose from under two digits in 2000 to over one million percent by May 2008 and exports, which in 1997 had accounted for 33,5% of the country’s GDP, were worth only 9,9% of the GDP in 2007. As a result, the incidence of poverty increased by 30% between 1995 and 2003, with 72% of the population below the poverty line in the latter year, compared to 55% in 1995. Average earnings in 2004 were lower than in 1975-1979, while unemployment levels were estimated at over 90% by 2008.²² By 2005, manufacturing “had shrunk by 51% since 1997 and exports (had) fallen by half in the past four years”.²³ Zimbabweans also had to contend with crumbling social services and infrastructure, frequent power cuts, factory closures, a worthless national currency, and intermittent domestic water supplies and the breakdown of the country’s urban water reticulation systems and the infrastructure supplying clean water to urban households – resulting in a horrendous cholera outbreak in 2008. Clearly this economic crisis impacted negatively on students’ education and quality of life.

In tandem with the economic crisis was an equally acute political crisis, as the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party faced its most serious political opposition from the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), a workers-inspired political front founded in 1999. The mayhem that ensued as the ruling party hit back at the opposition and the white farmers who were seen as its backers characterised what came to be known as the Third *Chimurenga*, which took the form of widespread invasions of white farms, the displacement of farm workers and intimidation and violence against anyone suspected of being anti-government. This political crisis also affected the country’s students in a variety of ways, which will be discussed below.

The damage inflicted by these crises on what had been, until then, one of Africa’s most envied national educational systems cannot be overstressed. As is well documented, among the major achievements of the post-colonial government in the early years of its administration, was the expansion of the education sector which

21 *The Economist*, 6 May 2009.

22 Dan Ndhlela, “Human security in Zimbabwe: Economic meltdown” (2008), <<http://www.africanreview.org/events/ndhlelajimjun08.pdf>>, accessed 2 March 2012.

23 Clemens Michael and Todd Moss, “Costs and causes of Zimbabwe’s crisis”, Centre for Global Development, July 2005, <http://cgdev.org/files/2918_file_Zimbabwe_Crisis.pdf>, accessed 2 February 2012; Dan Ndhlela, “Human security in Zimbabwe - Economic meltdown”.

saw the number of schools and student enrolments increase tremendously, with greatly improved access to educational services and a suitably impressive rise in national literacy levels. The country's student enrolment increased by a phenomenal 72% between 1980 and 1990 at a time when primary education was both free and compulsory and education was regarded by the government as a fundamental human right.²⁴ This trend began to change after the adoption of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in 1990, when the government came under pressure from international financial agencies to implement cost-recovery measures that required, among other things, that parents pay school fees for their children's education.²⁵ The subsequent collapse of the Zimbabwean economy and increasing abuse of human rights by the ruling party, as it tried desperately to crush opposition politics, led to a brain drain that saw large numbers of lecturers and professors emigrating to South Africa, Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States.

This is hardly surprising, given the prevailing political instability and intolerance, mounting cases of victimisation of suspected opposition supporters and the very low salaries offered to lecturers. With respect to the last, as of February 2010, it was reported that the highest paid lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe earned US\$290.00 per month.²⁶ Already in 2004, the lecturer vacancy rates at the University of Zimbabwe are documented in Table 1 as follows:

Table 1: University of Zimbabwe vacancy rates October 2004

FACULTY/DEPARTMENT	VACANCY RATE (%)
Faculty of Medicine	51,5
Faculty of Science	43
Dept of Veterinary Sciences	36
Faculty of Education	35
Faculty of Engineering	34,6

Source: "Shortage of lecturers at UZ persists unabated", *Sunday Mail* (Zimbabwe), 24 October 2004.

24 "Right to education", *Human Rights Bulletin* 40, July 2006, <www.hrforumzim.com>, accessed 5 October 2011.

25 AS Mlambo, *The Economic Structural Adjustment Programme*, pp. 82-95.

26 "UZ funds looted, intakes frozen", *Zimbabwe Metro*, 28 February 2010, <www.zimbabwemetro.com/news>, accessed 5 October 2010. For a detailed account of the decline of post-colonial higher education in Zimbabwe, see AS Mlambo, "Postcolonial higher education in Zimbabwe: The University of Zimbabwe as a case study 1980-2004", *Kleio* 37, 2005, pp. 107-130.

So bad was the staffing situation at the University of Zimbabwe in February 2008 that the university advertised for no fewer than 120 vacant lecturer posts,²⁷ while the university's Vice Chancellor, Levi Nyagura, announced that, because of the brain drain, some departments would not be able to admit students when the university opened. At the same time, the University World Service reported: "Universities countrywide were suffering a severe shortage of academic and non-academic staff as a result of the brain drain", with the University of Zimbabwe reportedly requiring 1 200 lecturers, but having to contend with only 500.²⁸ Meanwhile, the second largest university in the country, the National University of Science and Technology in Bulawayo, was reported to have a staff complement of only 232 against the 493 required. The other state universities of Lupane, Bindura, Great Zimbabwe and Midlands State University, as well as the Harare Institute of Technology, reportedly, had a combined shortfall of 615 lecturers.²⁹

The brain drain that was depleting teaching staff at tertiary institutions was happening precisely at the time that the government was rapidly increasing the number of such institutions in the country; thus, in fact, worsening the crisis. The rapidity of the growth in the number of universities in the country can be shown by the fact that, at independence in 1980, Zimbabwe had only one university, the University of Zimbabwe. A second university, the University of Science and Technology (NUST), was established at the end of the first independence decade. Thereafter, there was an avalanche of new state and private universities, resulting in the country having seven public, four private universities and one Open University by 2010. Many of the state universities proved to be little more than glorified high schools with inadequate teaching staff, libraries without books, and very low academic standards. One, Lupane State University, did not even have a campus but was hosted by NUST, another state university scores of kilometres away in Bulawayo. Zimbabwe's universities in 2010 are documented in Table 2.

27 ZINASU, "120 posts vacant as brain drain decimates University of Zimbabwe", <www.Kubatana.Net>, accessed 16 May 2011.

28 "UZ funds looted, intakes frozen", 28 February 2010: *Zimbabwe Metro*, <www.zimbabwemetro.com/news>, accessed 16 May 2011.

29 Muzulu, "Student activism slowly dying".

Table 2: Zimbabwe's universities and founding dates

STATE	PRIVATE
Bindura University of Science Education (2000)	Africa University (1992)
Chinhoyi University of Technology (2001)	Catholic University in Zimbabwe (1999)
Great Zimbabwe University (1999)	Solusi University (1994)
Harare Institute of Technology (2005)	Women's University in Africa (2002)
Lupane State University (2005)	
Midlands State University (1999)	

If one adds to the above list approximately 30 teacher-training, technical and vocational colleges in the country, it becomes clear that the country's lecturing manpower needs are considerable and yet lecturers were voting with their feet and leaving the country in droves.

As might be expected, the result was a severe decline in educational standards, as less qualified and inexperienced teaching staff was employed at the country's universities and colleges. According to the country's main student body, ZINASU, tertiary institutions in the country were being forced to "employ under qualified teachers, including recent graduates".³⁰ Similarly, one student complained about the shortage of lecturers at the University of Zimbabwe which "has reached crisis levels", resulting in the university "producing half-baked graduates as we miss so many lessons owing to the non-availability of lecturers".³¹ Increasingly, students were condemned to study at progressively dysfunctional institutions with rapidly dwindling resources. Not surprisingly, the decline of national academic standards fuelled growing student discontent and contributed to student protests.

Meanwhile, students were facing severe and deepening economic hardships, with some "reduced to near destitution because of the prevailing economic situation".³² To make matters worse, government financial support, which had been available to university students in the past, was no longer available. Not surprisingly, 28% of students reportedly dropped out of the University of Zimbabwe in 2010 alone, as they struggled "to raise fees of between US\$300 and US\$1 500 in a country where civil servants earn less than US\$300 per month and unemployment is pegged at 90%".³³ For many of those who struggled on, life meant having to make some difficult moral compromises, such as female students having to resort

30 "UZ funds looted, intakes frozen".

31 Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU), "120 posts vacant as brain drain decimates University of Zimbabwe", 29 February 2008, <www.kubatana.net>, accessed 5 October 2011.

32 *Human Rights Bulletin* 40, July 2006, <www.hrforumzim.com>, accessed 2 March 2012.

33 Muzulu, "Student activism slowly dying".

to prostitution to make ends meet and male students becoming pimps procuring female university students for rich males, for a fee.

According to the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Zimbabwe Crisis, there were mainly two reasons why students were succumbing to prostitution at institutions of higher learning. The first was the fact that students “were going hungry on campuses”, as grant payments, where they were provided, were increasingly meagre and late in coming “because the government is cash-strapped and inefficient”. The second reason was that:

“Students felt that they had to pass at all costs so that they could leave the university at the earliest possible date and often felt that they had to sleep with their lecturers to obtain good marks. As many of the lecturers were, themselves, young people who had just gone through similar hardships, were poorly remunerated and had low self esteem [sic], they had no scruples about sleeping with their students and passing them in return.”³⁴

By 2010, the situation had become even worse following the shutting down of student hostels on the University of Zimbabwe campus by the City of Harare’s Health Department due to the authorities’ failure to maintain them in a hygienic condition, throwing 4 500 students, mostly from outside Harare, onto the streets in July 2007. Many such students were forced to enter into relationships of convenience with anyone who could offer them accommodation.³⁵ Some female students accepted accommodation offered by gardeners in the neighbouring suburbs in return for sex.³⁶ As if this was not enough, the University of Zimbabwe’s Department of Accommodation and Catering Services (DACs), which had provided meals in the university hostels and other outlets on campus, was closed down without warning, forcing students to resort to unhygienic roadside caterers,³⁷ with the result that students sometimes suffered from food poisoning.³⁸ In the light of these real economic hardships it is not surprising that for the students, bread and butter issues assumed much more prominence than ever before.

However, while the struggle for economic survival loomed large in the students’ protests, it was not the exclusive focus of their activities. They consistently linked the fight over bread and butter issues with the need to address wider concerns such as issues of good governance and human rights. This is

34 Benedict Unendoro, “Zimbabwean students driven to prostitution”, *Zimbabwe Independent*, 11 April 2008; “Desperate students turn to prostitution”, Zimbabwe Crisis Reports, ZIM Issue 45, <<http://iwpr.net/report-news>>, accessed 16 May 2011.

35 *The Independent* (Zimbabwe), 16 May 2003.

36 R Gaidzanwa, and C Manyeruke (n.d.) *Livelihoods: Situational analysis of the University of Zimbabwe female students*, Harare: Students Solidarity Trust (Harare: n.d.); “Female students forced into prostitution report”, 30 October 2010, <www.thestandard.co.zw>, accessed 16 May 2011.

37 Muzulu, “Student activism slowly dying”.

38 Students Solidarity Trust, “How low the once-mighty University of Zimbabwe has fallen”, 14 June 2010, <www.changezimbabwe.com>, accessed 17 May 2011.

consistent with the findings of a recent study of student activism on the African continent which suggested that student activism was a response to a multiplicity of issues, including government appointments of senior university officials, issues of academic freedom,³⁹ neglect of student welfare, misgovernment and the failure of “some governments’ political and economic policies (that) have led to a rise in frustration and militancy amongst students who are increasingly beginning to feel the pinch”.⁴⁰ Indeed, according to one student leader, “many students have come to realise that Zimbabwe’s problems will not be solved within the confines of student issues such as funding. We have to become involved in the big problems that spawn the smaller ones.”⁴¹

5. STUDENT ACTIVISM AND GOVERNMENT RESPONSE, 2000-2010

Contrary to the view that student activism was slowly dying in Zimbabwe, a cursory examination of the number of incidences in which students were actively involved in protests of one type or another reveals that there were no less than two dozen incidences between 2001 and 2010. While such student protests were not as well coordinated as in the past and were not based on any widely-shared political ideology or even tactical strategy, the frequency of protests indicates, however, that student activism was far from being dead or from dying. Also significant is that, while bread and butter issues featured in many of these student protests, wider political issues of democratic governance and human rights also accounted for a significant number of student protests. As the select incidences discussed below show, student protests across the country tended to be rather episodic and lacking in overall national coordination, despite ZINASU’s periodic attempts to mobilise students nationally. Also evident is the heavy handed manner in which the police and other agencies cracked down on such protests. The following are some student protests that made local and international headlines at the time.

In April 2001, over a thousand University of Zimbabwe students demonstrated in downtown Harare in protest at the death of a fellow student who had been killed on campus on 9 April during a student demonstration over inadequate living allowances and against “sugar daddies” coming on campus and, allegedly, “giving female students HIV” and “also taking the male university students’ girlfriends”.

39 Masaraure, Obert, “Students demand academic freedom”, *The Financial Gazette*, 13 August 2010.

40 B Chimanihire (ed.), *Youth and higher education in Africa: The cases of Cameroon, South Africa, Eritrea and Zimbabwe* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2009), pp. 1-4.

41 T Kapuya, “Students battle on for basic rights”, *Times Higher Education Supplement* (THES), 1 March 2002.

Outrage against sugar daddies had mounted ever since a female student committed suicide in one of the residences over her relationship with an outside boyfriend.⁴²

Then in November of that year, University students stoned the police during a demonstration in protest at the death of yet another student, 23-year old Lameck Chemvura, who had been thrown to his death from a moving train by government soldiers, ostensibly, for being a supporter of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party. Riot police quelled the protest only by firing teargas and arresting 19 students, including Tapera Kapuya, Secretary General of the University of Zimbabwe Students Union, and Lovemore Madhuku, the chairman of the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), the civic group that had called for the demonstration.⁴³ Meanwhile, students at the University of Zimbabwe increasingly complained that the government and university administrators routinely “reacted savagely by bringing in riot police” even during peaceful demonstrations and that, regardless of gender, students were “tear-gassed, knocked down and bludgeoned with button [sic] sticks”. They condemned this “violent suppression of peaceful demonstrations using state security personnel” as a violation of human rights.⁴⁴

Evident in the above incidences is the ruthlessness of state agencies in their determination to crush student protests. Indeed, as a student leader at NUST, Paul Sixpence, reported, student demonstrations at his university were routinely “violently crushed by the repressive state apparatus”, while students were summarily suspended, expelled and abducted by state agents. He added:

“The government and the university have reacted savagely to peaceful demonstrations by students. Anti-riot police are summoned to campus to beat students ... university administrators are suspending and expelling students who take part in demonstrations and protest activities ... student leaders who have led demonstrations against the unfair system have been victimized, with some being suspended, expelled or jailed.”⁴⁵

There was, thus, clearly a heavy-handed approach by the authorities to student activism that was calculated to crush any protests or signs of dissent. Thus, in January 2003, the police disrupted ZINASU’s 3rd Bi-annual Congress and arrested several student leaders on allegations that their meeting was likely to cause a breach of peace and order.⁴⁶

42 “Zimbabwe-students: Police seal off University of Zimbabwe after student’s death”, Agence France-Press, 9 April 2001, <www.afp.com>, accessed 17 May 2011; T Kapuya, “Students battle on for basic rights”; Zimunya, *Claiming our future*, p. 40.

43 CNN World, “Students riot in Zimbabwe”, 27 November 2001.

44 R Gaidzanwa and C Manyeruke (n.d.) *Livelihoods*; Network for Education & Academic Rights (NEAR), “Alert”, 6 June 2003, <www.nearinternational.org/>, accessed 5 October 2011.

45 Paul Sixpence, “The State of tertiary education in Zimbabwe: A case of student suppression and repression at NUST”, *Tikkun*, 2009, <www.tikkun.org/article.php/sept_oct_09_sixpence>, accessed 2 March 2012.

46 NEAR, “ASU congress disrupted”, January 2003, <www.nearinternational.org/>, accessed 2 March 2012. Among those arrested were the following: Nkululeko Sibanda, Itai Zimunya, Phillip

Refusing to be cowed by the police and their relentless campaign against student activism and increasingly frustrated by continued government harassment, declining educational conditions, and abuse of human rights, in March 2003 ZINASU sent a petition to the United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan, copied it to the SADC Secretary General, the International Union of Students and the Parliament of Zimbabwe, requesting the UN to intervene to stop the Zimbabwean government's continued ill-treatment of students which, they argued, was evidence of the government of Zimbabwe's general "lack of respect towards the rights of the majority of Zimbabwean people".⁴⁷

Meanwhile, as evidence of the students' awareness of the inter-connectedness of the struggle for economic and political justice, in March 2003, hundreds of students at UZ demonstrated in support of better salaries for their lecturers.⁴⁸ This was followed soon afterwards by a countrywide peaceful student march in response to the call by the opposition MDC party to protest growing national ills, including unemployment, declining rural production and speculation over land, unaffordable essential goods, the collapse of education, and the victimisation and denial of reasonable pay increases to teachers. Demonstrators demanded the resignation of President Robert Mugabe over these conditions.⁴⁹ These and other demonstrations were brutally suppressed, either by campus security, or by the police and the army. Lastly, in October 2003, students and the riot police clashed on campus as students demanded an increase in their payouts and protested recent fees hikes.⁵⁰

In October 2004 some students were arrested for organising street demonstrations in protest of an impending judgement in the high treason trial of MDC President Morgan Tsvangirai and for "pamphleteering, pasting posters and writing graffiti on the walls denouncing Tsvangirai's trial". Meanwhile, ZINASU President Zamchiya was abducted by plain clothes policemen and badly beaten up. He only saved himself from further assault by jumping out of a moving car and sustaining further serious injuries.⁵¹ In July 2005 riot police beat up students who were part of a 2000-strong student demonstration against delayed payouts of student loans at the Bulawayo Polytechnic. Five students reportedly needed hospitalisation as a result of the assaults.⁵² Then, in September 2006, armed riot police arrested

Pasirayi, Danford Damba, Colin Mapfumo, Victor Chimhutu, Mathias Tapera Kapuya, Madock Chivasa, and Brighton Makunike.

47 NEAR, "Alert", 6 June 2003.

48 "Zimbabwe: University student leaders arrested", <www.trocaire.org/news/2004/03/18>, accessed 22 June 2011.

49 Zimunya, *Claiming our future*, p. 43.

50 "Students allege security agents bombed UZ", <www.zimbabwejournalists.com>, accessed 22 June 2011.

51 NEAR, "Alert", 20 October 2004; Zimunya, *Claiming our future*, p. 48.

52 "Dissenting voices: students protest in Zimbabwe", *Sokwanele*, 29 July 2005, <http://www.sokwanele.com/articles/sokwanele/dissentingvoices_29july2005.html>, accessed 2 March 2012.

eight members of the ZINASU Executive at a Harare Lodge, including the Secretary General of ZINASU, Beloved Chiweshe, and the organisation's Vice President, as they were preparing for the General Council Meeting in the eastern Zimbabwe city of Mutare the following day, allegedly for violating the draconian Public Order and Security Act (POSA), which forbade meetings without police clearance. Apparently, the police suspected them of holding "a strategic workshop ahead of mass protests scheduled by the ZCTU and ZNASU for the following days".⁵³ There was, thus, no let up by state law-enforcement agencies in their determination not to stifle anti-government protest and they were more than willing to use force and the full might of the law to silence students, even when this was clearly not called for.

In one particular case, for instance, armed police placed 70 people, including 53 ZINASU General Council members, representing 42 tertiary educational institutions, support staff and observers, under "house arrest" for attending a meeting at the Wise Owl Motel in Mutare in September 2006. The meeting was discussing, among other issues, a petition by students and parents on the "exorbitant tuition fees that students are being coerced to pay" which they hoped to submit to "government and university and college authorities" later in the month. They were charged with "holding an illegal gathering" because they had not sought police permission, "even though the students union is not required under law to seek for police permission for an internal meeting".⁵⁴

Meanwhile in September 2006, ZINASU had openly declared its solidarity with the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) whose leaders had been detained by the government for protesting against poor working conditions. It denounced what it called the "rampant human rights abuses" perpetrated by the government.⁵⁵ 2006 ended with students, joining others, in November, including members of political organisations, "trade unionists, women's rights activists and ordinary citizens" in Harare and Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city, in a five-minute street demonstration organised by the Save Zimbabwe Convention, an alliance of Non-Governmental Organisations and Churches, in which people made noise by "hooting car horns, shouting, whistling, clapping hands and beating any object" to draw attention to "the decline of education, the increasing cost of living, collapsing health sector, food shortages, falling life expectancy, dwindling democratic space and the violation of women's rights by the state". Predictably,

53 Lewanika Macdonald, "Zinasu General Council Members under 'house arrest'", SAIH-Studentenes Akademikernes Internasjonale Hjelpfond, 9 September 2006, <www.studentsolidarity.org>, accessed 17 May 2011.

54 *Ibid.*

55 Promise Mkwanzani, "ZINASU stands principled", 13 September 2006, <www.kubatana.net>, accessed 5 October 2010.

police arrested 15 students for “beating drums and pots and singing revolutionary songs”.⁵⁶

2007 brought its fair share of clashes between student activists and the state, including the arrest of 20 students in Bulawayo for taking to the streets to protest repeated failed attempts to meet the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Higher Education over their grievances, including the requirement for them to pay fees in United States currency rather than the Zimbabwe dollars that they had used earlier. Students argued that they could not afford such exorbitant fees and wanted the government to reinstate the grant system of the past. In a now increasingly familiar pattern, bread and butter issues relating specifically to student life were combined with broad national political and economic demands, with students also demanding “no life presidency disguised as harmonisation of elections, an end to water cuts, an end to electricity cuts, and living wages for teachers and all civil servants”.⁵⁷ Further blurring the divide between student-specific and wider national concerns, on 13 March, ZINASU leaders were arrested while rallying students to march in support of demands for the release of “opposition, civic society and student leaders in detention in Zimbabwe”, including opposition leaders Morgan Tsvangirai and Arthur Mutambara who had been recently addressed for participating in an anti-government demonstration.⁵⁸

Government clamp down on students continued throughout the subsequent years, with several reports of the on-going abuse of educators and students across the country in the run-up to the controversial 2008 parliamentary and presidential elections. In February 2009, 75 students were arrested as they demonstrated against escalating university fees, while in November 2009, three students were expelled and six others suspended at the National University of Science and Technology for activism. By 2010, the ZINASU President, Obert Masaraure was reporting how, “over 440 students have been issued with suspensions and 53 with expulsions since 2000 for demonstrating against prohibitive costs of education in the post-independent Zimbabwe”.⁵⁹

Because of repeated suspensions and expulsions from universities, it became necessary for students to establish a mechanism that would allow such rusticated students to continue with their degrees somehow. Consequently, as early as March 2002, ZINASU had created the Students Solidarity Trust (SST) with a mandate

56 NEAR, “Alert”, 23 November 2006.

57 Studentenes Akademikernes Internasjonale Hjelpesfond (SAIH), “Students continue Bulawayo demonstrations”, Information Alert No. 3.07, 1 February 2007, <www.studentsolidarity.org>, accessed 17 May 2011.

58 NEAR, “Alert”, 13 March 2007.

59 Obert Masaraure, “Students demand academic freedom”, *The Financial Gazette*, 13 August 2010; Karen MacGregor, “Mugabe clamps down on student protesters”, *Times Higher Education Supplement* (THES), 7 February 2011.

to help expelled or suspended students to pursue their studies through distance education, as well as to provide legal fees for arrested students and helping those students facing persecution by the state security to relocate.⁶⁰ By 2010 SST had “assisted over 95 student activists with continuing their education after being expelled, and at least 1 248 students who have found themselves in situations where they were being persecuted for participating in the struggle for the right to education and respect for student and academic rights”. The first 15 student activists to receive such support were reported to have graduated in 2006.⁶¹

Clearly, student activism remained very much alive throughout the Zimbabwean crisis decade, the economic hardship and state repressive measures, notwithstanding. However, what is equally true is that student protests were not coordinated nationally and tended to be mostly institutionally based. This was partly due to the relentless, ruthless suppression of student protest by state agents who used a variety of tactics, including the arrest and imprisonment of student leaders, harassment of student activists, and violence to prevent any concerted actions on the part of the student protestors. It can also be explained partly by the fact that there was no consensus among the students in the country on political and governance issues generally. Divisions within the student movement may also account for the failure by ZINASU, the national student body, to play a more effective role in mobilising and leading students mainly because there were tensions also within the organisation’s leadership itself. Thus, while most of the vocal and active students represented in the above protests appear to have had a shared view with regard to some national issues, such as governance, human rights and bread-and-butter issues, it has to be acknowledged that the Zimbabwean student movement was by no means united or in agreement on what the problems were and how they should be addressed. Moreover, unfolding political developments in the country added to the tensions and divisions within the student body. To this, the research now turns.

6. NATIONAL POLITICS AND STUDENT ACTIVISM

Although the student voice critical of the ruling government’s policies was very strong and appeared to command the majority of the country’s students, not all students either subscribed to ZINASU’s positions on national and student issues or even shared the same critical views. There was disagreement, for instance, on whether it was wise or proper for student bodies to ally themselves with political parties, such as the MDC, as ZINASU seemed to be. Some students felt that this was a mistake as it entailed the risk of students losing their independent identity. For instance, a former student leader who later became the Information Director

60 Zimunya, *Claiming our future*, p. 46.

61 Students Solidarity Trust, “Background information”, 10 February 2011.

of MDC99, one of the MDC splinter groups, Gibson Nyambayo, blamed the emergence and success of the MDC for the weakened state of student activism. He argued that, while, before the advent of the MDC, “student activism used to be a signal agitation for democracy and justice ... a fight against (President Robert) Mugabe”, the birth and success of the MDC, effectively “killed student activism as student leaders were seen as MDC apologists”, resulting in neutral students abstaining from participation in student protests. To make matters worse, ZINASU “has been blighted by power struggles in the recent past over political affiliation. The students have been split along political lines especially between the two biggest parties MDC-T and Zanu PF”.⁶²

Similarly, ZINASU National Spokesperson, Zack Zachariah Mushawatu, emphasised the importance of the student movement remaining independent of political parties because the “effectiveness of the student movement as the watchdog of democracy and good governance in Zimbabwe will be attenuated if its leadership ... is assumed by individuals in the structure of any political party”.⁶³ Equally lamenting the divisive tendencies within the student movement, ZINASU founder member, Daniel Molokele, expressed sadness at the fact that students seemed to have “lost their voice and have simply become pawns of the rival factions in civil society”. The rot had set in, according to Molokele, the moment that a ZINASU congress was “elected to support the MDC”, as this was a departure from the organisation’s founding principles as an apolitical structure. Affiliation to a political party posed serious dangers for the student movement because, as eventually happened, “the MDC split into two halves ... (forcing) ZINASU ... to choose one of the MDCs”.⁶⁴

Clearly, the student movement suffered from divisions emanating from the political splits in the opposition movement, with the main opposition party, MDC, breaking up into three rival formations, namely, MDC-Tsvangirai, MDC-Mutambara (later the MDC-Ncube), in 2005 and the merge, later, of MDC99 led by Job Sakala. In addition, growing tensions between MDC-Tsvangirai and a leading civic organisation, the National Constituent Assembly (NCA), one of the founder organisations of the MDC, over the planned constitution-making process under the auspices of the compromise Government of National Unity and student leadership disagreement on how to “manage funds received from the union’s benefactors” split the student movement further in 2009. One group was aligned with the NCA, while the other was associated with the MDC. The two groups only came together in June 2011 when the two ZINASU factions reunited.

62 Muzulu, “Student activism slowly dying”.

63 *The Standard* (Zimbabwe), 24 December 2011.

64 Lance Guma, “Daniel Makokele joins ZINASU debate on BTH”, <<http://Nehandaradio.com/2010/12/17/Daniel-molokele-joins-zinasu-debate-on-bth>>, accessed 20 January 2012.

Further weakening the student movement was the hostility between ZINASU and the pro-government Zimbabwe Congress of Students Unions (ZICOSU), which consistently took positions in support of the Mugabe government. In the run-up to the disputed and violent 2008 presidential elections, for instance, ZICOSU declared itself fully behind Mugabe's presidential bid, prompting ZINASU to dismiss it as nothing more than a ZANU-PF front which was at odds with the majority of the country's students who were backing "Morgan Tsvangirai's MDC, because the MDC is the only party with a clear sound policy on education".⁶⁵

On another occasion ZICOSU staged an anti-sanctions demonstration during a SADC troika meeting in Livingstone, Zambia, in solidarity with Mugabe's denunciation of European and American travel and other restrictions imposed on him and those close to him. The organisation's president, one Gift Wezana, claimed that this demonstration was clear evidence that "the Zimbabwean youths are disgruntled by MDC-T silence on illegal sanctions".⁶⁶ Lastly, during the ruling ZANU-PF Congress in Bulawayo in 2011, ZICOSU publicly declared its full support for Mugabe's leadership and Zanu-PF's land distribution and economic indigenisation policies.⁶⁷

7. CONCLUSION

As has been shown, the lot of the student in Zimbabwe between 2000 and 2010 was not an easy one in a national atmosphere of constant tension and confrontation between the students and government and authorities of the country's tertiary institutions. The prevailing conditions were such that some students felt compelled to protest in whatever way they could, even if this meant risking police violence and imprisonment. In the words of Brilliant Dube, a one-time vice president of ZINASU:

"At times the only way to carry on with our activism was to be brave and defy the laws made by Zanu-PF . . . students were prohibited from gathering in groups to discuss things – we weren't even allowed to discuss general, non-political issues . . . Zanu-PF intelligence members have managed to infiltrate all the educational institutions in Zimbabwe . . . On the rare occasions that we managed to mobilise students to demonstrate, we wouldn't be on the streets for more than 30 minutes before Zanu-PF agents came and pounced on us, armed with batons and guns . . . I know that these demonstrations were dangerous and chaotic,

65 "ZINASU resolves to rally behind Morgan in presidential run-off", <<http://www.thezimbabwean.co.uk/news/12839/zinasu-resolves-to-rally-behind-morgan-in-presidential-run-off.html>>, accessed 20 January 2012.

66 "Zim students in anti-sanctions campaign", <www.zbc.co.zw/news-categories/top-stories/7795>, accessed 20 January 2012.

67 "ZANU-PF youths blast Biti", <<http://bulawayo24.com/index-id-news-sc-local-byo-10034>>, accessed 20 March 2012.

but we had to do them. In the absence of any proper dialogue with the government it was all we had.”⁶⁸

Government’s relentless repression of student activism and the harsh economic situation did have an impact on student protests across the nation’s campuses. There is no doubt that the combination of the fear factor arising from state repression and the “poverty effect” induced by economic hardships which focused the energies of most students on the “constant struggle to survive materially”, impacted negatively on student demonstrations and protests and resulted in some students being discouraged from activism.⁶⁹ As has also been shown, divisions within the student body along party political lines meant that the student movement could not speak with one voice on the key issues confronting them and the country at large. Nevertheless, as has been demonstrated, students continued to protest throughout Zimbabwe’s crisis decade.

In their protests, students had a very broad agenda, which sought to address grievances relating to escalating student fees, declining grants, accommodation, economic hardships on campus, academic freedom, national governance issues, and state victimisation and repression. Other concerns related to the arrest of opposition and workers’ leaders, support for MDC-inspired mass action initiatives, unemployment, and the escalating national cost of living. What emerges from all this is that, while students sometimes demonstrated for better conditions on their campuses, they also saw themselves as part of the national struggle for good governance, respect for human rights and the advancement of democracy.

Meanwhile, the prevailing socio-economic and political climate precluded normal peaceful methods of political engagement such as petition writing, public debates, protest voting, lobbying and other mechanisms employed in democratic countries, as the state did not provide any democratic space for such peaceful interaction. Student activism was, therefore, expressed predominantly through protest demonstrations and engaging in constant running battles with the repressive agents of the state, such as the riot police and campus security. Thus, the manner of engagement was determined by the prevailing conditions of economic and political crisis which affected both the material and human rights conditions and status of students as students and as citizens and led them to marry student grievances with the fight for good governance and democracy, seeing both as one and the same struggle.

68 *Guardian Weekly* (UK), 9 October 2008.

69 “Dissenting voices: Student protest in Zimbabwe”, *Sokwanele*, 29 July 2005, <http://www.sokwanele.com/articles/sokwanele/dissentingvoices_29july2005.html>, accessed 2 March 2012.