

Devolution – The ‘Ticklish’ Subject: The ‘Northern Problem’ and the National Question in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This article argues that there is no post-colonial African state without its own ‘northern problem’, which like a bad birth-mark remains a threat to the national project. The ‘northern problem’ as a metaphor refers to the existence of a disgruntled group claiming a particular history and a particular identity that is different from that of the dominant ‘ethnie’ in a state. It does not necessarily refer to the geographic location of those forms of disenchantment with a nation-state. Rather, it indicates the attendant challenges to the national question that give impetus to calls for a revision of systems of governance or secession. The article will therefore engage the genesis of the calls for a change of system of governance in Zimbabwe; from a centralised project (unitary system) to devolution of power. It will argue that the ‘northern problem’ is linked to contemporary politics crystallising around feelings of being dominated, suppressed, excluded and marginalised from various national development projects, resource distribution, policy formulation and implementation. While in Zimbabwe this has not caused violent conflict in terms of war, the attendant discontent has continued to undermine the national project by dividing the state along ethnic and regional lines between Matebeleland and Mashonaland; with the latter perceived as the region of the ‘rulers’, while the region of Matebeleland is presented as the abode of the ‘ruled.’ The concept of devolution as a form of decentralisation will be engaged as part of a federal agenda. Further, in advocating for a people driven system of governance in Zimbabwe the ‘northern problem’ will be presented within the prism of seeking to avoid possible future conflict scenarios in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: Devolution, Decentralisation, Ethnicity, Matebeleland, Mashonaland, Northern Problem

Is the colonial order being washed away with buckets of blood? Or are we witnessing the agonizing birth pangs of a genuinely postcolonial

order? Is the blood in fact spilling in the maternity ward of history as a new Africa is trying to breathe? Until we know whether this is the birth of a truly decolonized Africa, we cannot celebrate. In any case, who can celebrate in the midst of all this blood and carnage? (Ali Mazrui 1995: 28)

Introduction

Any discussion about a change of system of governance in Zimbabwe from a centrist perspective to a devolved project is often considered divisive given the state’s tribalised politics which like a bad birthmark continues to haunt the national project. Further, opponents of devolution of power have criminalised it as ‘disguised tribalism.’ While this discussion remains necessary and pertinent for Zimbabwe, given the crisis spurred by the lack of equitable distribution of resources, as will be shown below, it has also tended to follow ethnic fault lines between Matebeleland¹ and Mashonaland. The latter is perceived as the region of the ‘rulers’ (the Shona) while the region of Matebeleland is presented as the abode of the ‘ruled’². The narrowing of the situation to an ethnic issue that exists between the Ndebele and the Shona is not hinged on the fact that devolution is a creature of ethnicity. Rather, it is because those at the forefront of purveying this discourse are people from Matebeleland region who also double as Ndebele. However, such an accusations tend to conceal other regional cleavages that exist even among the Shona dialects, for example, between the people of Manicaland, Masvingo and Mashonaland West and Central, and in particular, that devolution of power remains the only viable option for them in terms of resource distribution. It is clear that, while the discourse of change of system of governance has the potential to ride on the shoulders of ethnicity, it also remains clearly not an ethnic issue, but a matter of resource distribution and policy formulation and implementation. It is natural that a discourse on devolution would take a marked ethnic twist, given the history of suppressed rivalries that exist between the Shona and Ndebele in Zimbabwe³. However, the discourse remains extremely pertinent, especially in the constitutional discourse. In addition, the fact that it has gained conventional interpretation as a pro-Matebeleland project makes for an unfortunate delusional engagement among pundits and scholars alike. Further, the argument that it is a project that can enhance inclusivity for the future of Zimbabwe seems remotely accepted by its critics who have not offered a viable option in the face of waning nationalism. This failure to embrace the positive effects of a change of system of governance in Zimbabwe has its roots in the nationalist liberation ethos, which also caricatured any discussion on cultural

pluralism and ethnic-diversity as retrogressive. This has led to the failure to acknowledge ethnicity as a positive national resource that can be harnessed like any other resource in Zimbabwe's two main regions; Matebeleland and Mashonaland.

The attempt to caricature the discourse of decentralised system of governance as tribally laced and inimical to progress favoured a centralised system of governance which most African nationalist leaders believed promoted patriotism and oneness. Distrust of pluralism and ethnic diversity became a widespread tendency of post-colonial African ideologies in favour of centrist perspectives that conjured one party statism. As Ali Mazrui (1994) observes:

One beneficiary of this restoration of pluralism has been the democratic process, however fragile. The other has been ethnicity and politicised tribal identity. A question persists as to whether re-democratisation and re-tribalisation cancel each [other] out (1994: 61).

This article contends, that while it may be argued that democratisation, a change of system of governance and ethnicity are strange bedfellows, they can also be good bedfellows if properly harnessed. Democratisation as an ideology can help in facilitating a revised system of governance within state structures to ensure the delivery of services, the maintenance of law and order in a state and ensure a fully functioning state, whereas ethnicity remains a natural resource that if harnessed will help to anchor the national question and ultimately the national project. Further, continuous criminalisation of ethnicity has proven to be Africa's bane. Pluralism, if properly harnessed can conjure identity, with people celebrating their identities first and openly professing patriotic feelings to a nation-state without coercion. It is here that the African national project can achieve victory and its finality. There is need for postcolonial Africa to take a fresh look at what was earlier considered taboo; the open celebration of ethnic identity, calls for the right to self-determination and secessionist bids⁴. For Mazrui, all the latter had been blocked mainly due to Pan-Africanism whose underlying hymn was nationalism. While this has preserved inherited borders, it has failed to answer the following question: How many state boundaries of present day Africa will remain intact in 100 years? Unless African leaders proactively take charge of these calls for change of systems of governance, the fate of Africa's colonial boundaries will once again be sealed by forces external to Africa. Mazrui (1994) adds that; "...the most fundamental of all changes in the next century and half will be the boundaries of what constitutes Africa itself. Where does Africa

end?” One might add: Where do colonially conjured and inherited nation-state boundaries in Africa stand, given secessionist bids and calls for ethnic self-determination? On that note the discourse of change of system of governance remains pertinent.

In Zimbabwe’s public spaces, ethnicity is commonly criminalised and labelled as a *sine-qua-non* of tribalism. Ethnicity according to the post-colonial nationalist mindset belongs to the “darker” or “backward” relics of the human past that must be quickly discarded and forgotten if common citizenship has to be forged and national unity achieved (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2008b; Ake, 2000; Young, 1997; Vail, 1997, Mazrui, 1994, Mhlanga, 2010). As a result, devolution of power has often been bundled together with issues of ethnicity without any attempt to unpack its positive policy value.

It is also necessary to also engage ethnicity, not as a criminalised factor in politics but as political currency which should be understood and explained. John Comaroff (1997: 70) notes that, in our attempt to grapple with ethnicity, we may want to acknowledge that it is a product of particular historical circumstances and not a mere ontological feature of human organisation. In a situation like Zimbabwe where ethnicity and the discourse of devolution of power continue to be conflated, ethnicity requires understanding; especially its explanatory principle and its currency in influencing everyday social relations. The imperative here is to first engage ethnicity as the conceptual fault line along which calls for a change of system of governance are perceived to emerge. The engagement of ethnicity in this article will be followed by a discussion of the concept of devolution of power as part of the latter day currency in Zimbabwe.

In order to understand the ethnic imperative and its link with the discourse of change of system of governance, it is worth acknowledging that resource distribution tends to mirror ethnic contour lines. This is not a peculiarly Zimbabwean problem; rather, it is an African challenge. Ken Wiwa (2000: 34) sums it up in the case of Nigeria by suggesting that ethnicity matters more than qualifications when it comes to distributing the best jobs and scholarships. Similarly calls for a change of system of governance in Zimbabwe are often against government policies that tend to favour Mashonaland at the expense of other regions of the country (Mhlanga, 2006, Mhlanga, 2010). In line with the issue of resource distribution, in particular, the problem of inequitable distribution of resources and devolution of power as a continuum in administrative decentralisation will be discussed. This article also provides brief discussions of the historical and theoretical background to ethnicity and

its colonial antecedents. These discussions attempt to provide a point of synapse between theory and the Zimbabwean context.

Locating the ‘Northern Problem’ and the need for a Change of System of Governance⁵

There is no African nation-state without a ‘northern problem’. As Gerald Caplan (1968: 343) observes, “few of the...nations of Africa lack, as part of their colonial heritage, their potential Biafras...” A need therefore arises for a more critical assessment of the ‘northern problem’. The ‘northern problem’ as a metaphor in line with Caplan’s analogy of ‘...potential Biafras’, refers to the existence of a disgruntled group claiming a particular history and a particular identity that is different from the dominant ethnic groups that have tended to benefit from the state. However, the concept does not necessarily imply that these disenfranchised groups and their fissures are found in the northern parts of any nation-state in Africa. Rather, as a metaphor, the implication is that most nation-states in Africa face challenges that have led to calls for a revision of systems of governance, secession or separation. The ‘northern problem’ can be located in the residual political models inherited from departing colonial administrators, and the attendant incrementalist perspectives pursued by successive nationalist leaders seeking to ensure sustainability of the African national project. Nationalism as an ideological process⁶ had a coercive, wrapping effect in which all voices yearning for a different arrangement out of colonialism were drowned in the blood of the ordinary, following the violent processes of state formation; thus leading to the silencing of voices that otherwise would have been audible in challenging the configurations of the nation-state, in particular, the systems of governance. The suppressed voices as part of the ‘northern problem’ also form the subaltern. Focusing on Zimbabwe, instead of vigorously dismissing the existence of subaltern voices, it may be necessary for all political actors, social actors, intellectuals and policy makers to openly engage them. Otherwise, their continued suppression might create fissures that like in a boiling pot, will lead to an uncontrolled pro-secessionist eruption in the future.

The rising challenges as evidence of the ‘northern problem’ in Zimbabwe have been illuminated by calls for a revision of the system of governance along irredentist lines. Recent calls for a separate state by organisations from Matebeleland, such as, *Mthwakazi People’s Convention* (MPC), *Umhlahlo weSizwe sikaMthwakazi* and *Mthwakazi Liberation Front* (MLF), together with different online social networks that include *iNkundla.net* and *the Forum* present an entrenched pre-colonial fault line.

Other organisations from Matebeleland like, *Imbokodo*, *Imbovane Yamahlabezulu* and *iBhetshu likaZulu* have strongly advocated for a federal project while also toying with irredentist imaginations. It should be emphasised that all these organisations continue to enjoy marked support among the youth and within the greater population of Matebeleland. Further, the radical core seems to be located in diaspora; in particular regions like South Africa, Europe and America.

Similar scenarios of the ‘northern problem’ in other parts of Africa, since the 1960s, manifested themselves through calls for federal systems of governance with some calling for outright secession. An example is the case of Katanga in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo). Lumumbist nationalists⁷ perceived it as a direct indictment of the unitary state following Moise Tshombe’s argument for an equitable distribution of resources.⁸ Ever since many postcolonial African countries have experienced violent political upheavals as seen in cases such as the 1967 Biafran war in Nigeria (Odumegwu-Ojukwu, 1989), Eritrea’s secession from Ethiopia in 1993, the Caprivi crisis of 1999, calls for recognition of Somaliland as an independent state, the crisis in the Oromo region in Ethiopia, the case of Southern Sudan which culminated in a separate state of Southern Sudan in July 2011 following a referendum, calls by the Kalanga and Basarwa of Botswana for cultural recognition, the Lozi in Zambia and their call for the revival of their Barotse Kingdom (Caplan, 1968) and recent calls for a separate state by the people of Southern Cameroon, the Ngoni of Malawi as witnessed in the recent government sponsored policy of a quota system limiting the Ngoni from occupying certain positions, even in tertiary institutions and recent calls by the Pemba of Zanzibar for an independent state. In South Africa, the Zulu people have continued to manifest characteristics of ‘a nation within a nation’.

In view of these African scenarios, Zimbabwe’s ‘northern problem’, I suggest, calls for a fully fledged federal project if the current configurations of the state are to be maintained. In addition, the continued grumblings by various ethnic minorities, about the current processes governing resource distribution in Zimbabwe are a cause for concern and must not be considered as mere false alarms in a situation that is pregnant with possible violent scenarios.

Demarcating Theoretical Underpinnings and Political Topographies

Ethnicity and its political usage as collective consciousness has continued to pepper the discourse of change of systems of governance in most African countries. However, a marked shortage of critical theoretical

lenses to understand ethnicity's continued influence on the nationalist project *vis-à-vis* democratic ideation and the attendant challenges of routinisation of policies along ethnic lines continues to exist. This scarcity of a theoretical locus on ethnicity in Africa is worsened by its monumental failure to embrace studies of ethnic relations within the African context (Mhlanga, 2010, Vail, 1989; Mafeje, 1971). A critical assessment of the instrumentalisation of ethnicity in most African states shows that it has often been the handmaid of nationalism. Ethnic group boundaries, even though immutable, have a way of finding currency in conditions that would not have sparked their existence; thus impeding any attempt aimed at understanding ethnicity as both a natural resource and an object of premordality with a strong nativist clause. Archie Mafeje (1971) sees this as giving impetus to the criminalisation of ethnicity as the 'ideology of tribalism', thereby failing to harness it for the good of the African national project. This failure to understand ethnicity and to harness it as a positive natural resource has been characterised by continued attempts to employ Marxist interpretations to reject various forms of ethnic motivated conflicts in Africa, thereby seeking to deny the instrumentalists' position of ethnicity on conflict (Sithole, 1984: 117). Masipula Sithole (1984: 117ff) warns against the uncritical engagement of the 'Fanonesque' adage such as 'internalized or displaced aggression', used in most Marxist interpretations of ethnic motivated conflict scenarios. He further notes that the salience of ethnicity in most conflict scenarios deserves particular attention. And ethnicity itself deserves to be explained instead of being criminalised.

The question that follows therefore is: How do we define ethnicity, in particular its bearing on inter-regional resource distribution in Zimbabwe and elsewhere in Africa? Ethnicity generally follows putative commonalities that according to Clifford Geertz (1963: 109) include congruities of blood, speech and custom. Similarly, Smith (1986: 15) emphasises "myths, memories, values and symbols". Horowitz (1985: 139) further describes its characteristics as ranging from "birth and blood, beliefs in a common ancestry, a common history with common heroes and enemies" to a particularised historical attachment to a territory. In essence ethnicity's nativist adage can be closely linked with territory and indigeneity in a given space and time. Claude Ake (2000) adds that ethnicity and ethnic consciousness have to be treated as a living presence, and that they have the element of being produced and driven by material and innate historical forces. Ethnicity, therefore, can be and is positively functional. To John Comaroff (1997) the way in which ethnicity is experienced and expressed may vary among social groupings. However, the failure to accept the reality of its existence, positive value and uneven

distribution of resources has tended to aggravate its conflictual potential in Africa, hence the recriminations whenever it makes an appearance, as seen in Zimbabwe where subaltern ethnic groups are motivating for an equitable distribution of resources. Those championing the cause for a change of system of governance tend to earn the label ‘tribalists’. But ethnic relations rest on how differences are understood, interpreted, represented and sometimes decided by the cultural exigencies of history in any given context (Comaroff, 1997: 73).

Furthermore, ethnicity as part of the interpellation of social differences depends on how actors are socially situated, and how they are perceived and perceive of themselves and their interests in competition for economic resources, status and power. Ethnicity works as an emblem of a common interest, with a shared commitment to the order of symbols and meaning defined. The ordering of symbols creates a reciprocal negation of the humanity of those perceived to be part of the oppressors or those who benefit (Comaroff, 1997); thus conjuring feelings of hate and laying the foundation for conflict scenarios. Power and ethnicity as political topography of resource distribution, given the latter’s ubiquity and complexity, is a potential cause for conflict as a human resource derived from its sociological relational ‘cause and effect’ usage, in particular the ambit of leadership as a major resource in a state like Zimbabwe. Power or being in proximity to it is a major natural resource that continues to exhibit its marked features through its inequitable distribution as a resource in Zimbabwe. By implication the ethnic group and region that holds power at any given time tends to also control the locus of resource distribution and ordering of things, thus giving impetus to the need for a constitutionally defined policy of devolution of power, which will translate into equitable distribution of resources.

In Zimbabwe, power has often been concentrated and centralised in Mashonaland, as inherited from the departing colonial administrators. Resource distribution tends to be skewed in favour of the regions with a high concentration of power. In order to maintain the *status quo*, the Shona tribalised nationalist leaders embarked on a crusade of criminalising ethnicity as retrogressive and divisive. The criminalisation of ethnicity as an ideological impetus is often grounded on the nationalist’s use of ideological symbols and events as pantheons of spectacle and forms of hyperreality meant to buttress the notion of ethnicity’s ‘conflictual potential’ and the tendency to regard ethnic differences as being particularly exclusive, partly because they lack the flexibility to be negotiated. However what has not been acknowledged in Zimbabwe is that the nationalists have always continued to align on ethnic lines, even tribalising access to power. In essence Zimbabwe is

ruled by a Shona tribal clique. Power brokers and those in power have also been at the forefront of coining such a mindset, causing a skewed retention and distribution of power as a resource in one part of the state. Imperatively we also note that while people prefer their own way of life and use their own standards to judge others and mark their differences from strangers; this invariably involves no denigration but implies parity even for groups regarded as hostile. Similarly, Ake (2000) adds that it then becomes improbable for ethnic consciousness to be seen as conflictual. Leroy Vail further observes the following about ethnicity:

African political leaders, experiencing it as destructive to their ideals of national unity, denounced it passionately. Commentators on the Left, recognising it as a block to the growth of appropriate class consciousness, inveigh against it as a case of 'false consciousness.' [...] Development theorists, perceiving it as a check on economic growth, then deplored it. Journalists, judging it an adequate explanation for a myriad of otherwise puzzling events, deploy it mercilessly. Political scientists, intrigued by its continuing power, probe at it endlessly. If one disapproves of the phenomenon, 'it' is 'tribalism;' if one is less judgemental 'it' is 'ethnicity' (1997: 52; 1989: 01).

Having discussed ethnicity and its impact on resource distribution we turn to the major discussion of devolution of power as a system of administrative decentralisation.

Matebeleland: the calls Devolution of Power and its Vicissitudes

The subject of change of system of governance in Zimbabwe from a centralised system to devolution of power is one that both the proponent and the critic are not at ease when engaging. It remains 'ticklish' and is often fraught with emotions⁹. As a cogito its actualisation rests on 'dialectics at standstill' in which both the movers and the critics continue to envisage a change in their fortunes in the event Robert Mugabe dies, with the hope that his party ZANU PF will become weak and lose to the opposition. More importantly, the prime movers of this motion tend to passionately lobby for devolution. On the other hand, the subject tends to elicit responses of equal vigour from its critics as they fear that the prime movers are people from Matebeleland with a pre-colonial history of having their own formidable state; the Ndebele state¹⁰. It is therefore assumed that, acceptance of devolution might sow seeds for the total separation of the region from Zimbabwe. This fear remains unfounded as long as certain conditions, which I shall enunciate on below, are met.

These conditions constitute the ‘northern problem’. And there is need to find a way to correct the imbalances in regional resource distribution patterns and to find closure on issues relating to gross violations of human rights; such as the Gukurahundi genocide.

The following examples demonstrate Zimbabwe’s ‘northern problem’ and have continued to weaken the national project. In 1987, at the end of the Gukurahundi genocide, which had targeted Ndebele people, the central government decided to electrify the railway line only from Harare to Gweru, despite the fact that the National Railways of Zimbabwe was and, still is, headquartered in Bulawayo. This move by the government was perceived as likely to retard development of the transport network and heavy industries in the region of Matebeleland considering that the region shares borders with countries that have viable economies; namely, Botswana, Namibia and South Africa.

The irony in the light of the electrification of the national railway line between Harare and Gweru was that the major electricity grid was generated in Matebeleland. Hwange Thermal Power Station, which is located in Matebeleland accounts for 920 megawatts of Zimbabwe’s electricity, with Kariba’s Hydro-Electricity Power station only producing 750 megawatts. Small electricity generating stations such as Munyati, Bulawayo and Harare act as back-ups to the national grid in case of a local blackout, but only account for 300 megawatts. The sum total of expected electricity consumption is 2 750 megawatts, thus implying that there is a deficit of 780 megawatts (cf. Mhlanga, 2006)¹¹. Zimbabwe, therefore, becomes a net importer of electricity with the largest amount coming from South Africa through Insukamini which is located in Matebeleland. The above shows that Matebeleland provides electricity for the entire country but remains in darkness, and in dire need, with poor road infrastructure and poor communication networks.

Furthermore, the region of Matebeleland shares borders with countries that have viable economies. Various border posts in Matebeleland (especially, Beitbridge, Plumtree and Kazungula border posts) remit high amounts of foreign currency to the state. However, due to centralisation the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA), a government body that collects revenue for the state, has its headquarters in Harare. All data links with border posts and computer systems are first routed to Harare for processing before transactions are completed at the border posts. Given that border posts like Beitbridge, Kazungula and Plumtree are the busiest this creates bottlenecks. Recent reports observed how ZIMRA failed to process customs and excise related duties in time and efficiently from Beitbridge due to extremely poor data links between the border post town and the computer systems in Harare. This

bottleneck is further compounded by both bureaucratic constipation and the centralisation of power in Harare.

An appreciation of the distance between various border posts and Harare presents another interesting scenario. For example, the distance between Beitbridge border post and Harare is 580 kilometres, with 288 kilometres separating Beitbridge and Masvingo and only 230 kilometres separating Beitbridge and Bulawayo. It is more expensive to set up and maintain communication links between the border town and the capital, than it is to set up and maintain them between Bulawayo or Masvingo. In the case of Plumtree border post, the distance between the border post and Bulawayo is 100 kilometres, but it is 539 kilometres away from Harare. It follows that if there is any need to enhance communication systems and to create data links, transactions could be done in Bulawayo.

Further, the past 15 years have seen a gradual relocation of most heavy industries from Bulawayo¹² to Harare, a development that continues to cause economic suffocation and limited employment opportunities. The relocation of heavy industries has been linked to the failure of central government to commit itself to the finalisation of different development projects like the Matebeleland Zambezi Water Project (MZWP). Due to lack of water, a critical resource for most manufacturing and heavy industries the region of Matebeleland has often failed to lure potential investors. In terms of job opportunities, locals continue to be sidelined in favour of people from other regions, in particular Mashonaland. One old man noted that those in privileged positions (employers, Managers and Directors of companies) are Shona and they tend to employ along ethnic lines. This position corroborates the report produced by the Industrial Psychology Consultants (2011) on the employment patterns of graduates per province in Zimbabwe. Matebeleland produces a total of 4.2%, against the total of 37.2% of all the regions of Mashonaland combined, excluding Midlands with a total of 14.2%.

In terms of teacher training it has been noted that most of students at teacher training colleges in Matebeleland, like the United College of Education (UCE), Hillside Teachers' College, Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo College, etc, are from Mashonaland. Impliedly most of the teachers produced are Shona speakers. This tends to affect Ndebele as a language, especially for primary school-children where teachers are expected to be conversant with all subjects, including Ndebele as a language. In that regard, children are taught by teachers who cannot speak the local language. As Frantz Fanon (1967: 18) trenchantly puts it, "a man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language...Mastery of language affords remarkable power".

Language as a resource is destroyed through the failure on the part of most Shona teachers to teach primary school pupils basic Ndebele grammar.

Institutions like the National University of Science and Technology (NUST) and Bulawayo Polytechnic, all located in Bulawayo also have a high student population of Shona speakers prompting most social commentators to label them as, “...provinces of Mashonaland in Matebeleland”. One political activist described NUST as a “...lost development project, which was created through an act of Parliament to hoodwink the people of Matebeleland into believing that they own something”. It is argued that NUST has failed to serve the development of Matebeleland as a region. This is perceived to be performing a huge role in the gradual relocation of heavy industries from Bulawayo to Harare; that is, following its unique practice based curriculum of internships at 3rd year. Through these internships students from Mashonaland attached to different companies in Bulawayo tend to produce attachment reports which are then used to replicate the same industries in Harare. Also the Prison Services in Matabeleland is dominated by Shona prison wardens whose duty is to manage Ndebele prisoners. One human rights activist commented that; “...it is as if socially the role of a Ndebele is to be a criminal and to be managed by the Shona warden while you are in prison”. Research has confirmed that this is the state of affairs at Khami Maximum prison in Bulawayo. Various other government institutions show similar traits.

As for natural resource mobilisation and the revenue generated thereof, the centre tends to benefit from remittances. Tourist resort centres in Matebeleland like Victoria Falls, Hwange National Park, Matopos, etc, are dominated by the Shona who hold both managerial and menial jobs. The dominant language is Shona. Local youths and activists from Victoria Falls mourned that the Shona are taking all the jobs that could have been for the locals, including menial jobs. This was further confirmed by Uluthu Chisi Trust a local human rights organisation whose members are being charged for ‘hate speech.’ Esau Ncube one of the leaders of the Trust said, “...I looked for a job at Elephant Hills Hotel during the time it opened in 1990, but I was told that I was over-qualified and they were going to call me but up to now they have not called me. Elephant Hills Hotel has a majority of Shona [...] employees, therefore it should be called Mashonaland Hotel because us the local people of Victoria Falls are failing to get jobs”¹³. It follows therefore, that there is a need for a clear policy shift that would deal with employment patterns for each region in Zimbabwe. Further, these tourist resort centres as foreign currency mobilising points have not injected most of the revenue

generated to the development of local districts and the entire region of Matebeleland.

High value mineral resources continue to be prospected in the region. These include; diamonds in Tsholotsho, methane gas and coal deposits in Lupane and parts of Binga, gold in Insiza and uranium in the Nyamandlovu area and parts of the Zambezi river basin. Most of these have not yet been tapped. But locals expressed fear that if these resources were to be exploited within the current system of governance, their region would not benefit. Some social actors have blamed the central government for failing to do a detailed cost benefit prospective analysis of these mineral deposits for fear of arousing more voices of dissent in Matebeleland. They argue that this omission further incapacitates Matebeleland and denies the region the opportunity to attract prospective investors.

The agriculture sector has also been suffocated as the government tends to concentrate most activities and farming inputs in Mashonaland. The *Chronicle* newspaper of January 11 2010 reported that the villagers of Hwange East were complaining about marginalisation¹⁴. Matebeleland is generally a dry region and thus thrives on animal husbandry. But there are prospects for irrigation schemes if water is harnessed through the construction of dams and the drilling of boreholes. But no development has been forthcoming; this is also evident in the current land redistribution process. As newspapers have reported, people from Matebeleland continue to be marginalised while Shona people are being resettled in some parts of Matebeleland¹⁵; prompting one member of the War Veterans Association to observe; "Does that really mean people from Matebeleland do not need land? This is one major weakness of the so called 'Land re-distribution' and the government of Harare is commissioning all this by omission."

There is need for detailed research assessing the effects of targeted sanctions in Matebeleland region and the scourge of HIV/AIDS given that Matebeleland remains sidelined¹⁶. All these and many other problems continue to haunt Zimbabwe's flagging national-project. They may even destroy Zimbabwe in the future¹⁷.

Moving the Centre and Unpacking the Tricky Subject of Devolution of Power

This section attempts to critically engage possible ways of avoiding future conflict scenarios in Zimbabwe following the examples presented above as part of the 'northern problem'. Devolution of power as a both a system of governance and a policy model will be discussed. As suggested

above the challenge of equitable distribution of resources also doubles as a major task of managing fictitious colonial boundaries. Basil Davidson (1992: 10) adds that Africa’s crisis is deeply embedded in the institutions that were inherited at independence. He further explains that while we may acknowledge that nationalism that produced nation-statism began as a genuine enterprise which looked like liberation, it changed its course. To him the liberation ethos punctuated by a state of euphoria was:

In practice [...] not a restoration of Africa to Africa’s own history, but the onset of a new period of indirect subjection to the history of Europe. The fifty or so states of the colonial partition, each formed and governed as though their peoples possessed no history of their own, became fifty or so nation-states formed and governed on European models, chiefly the models of Britain and France. Liberation thus produced its own denial. Liberation led to alienation (1992: 10).

The failure to grapple with the differences between liberation and independence has posed challenges for Zimbabwe. It has led to the failure to conceive a feasible emancipatory system of governance as part of the African national-project. At independence Zimbabwe’s driving nationalist ethos was tribalised by a tribal Shona clique masquerading as nationalists. The new state became a successor state, partly following colonial administrative lines and also following the Mutapa state since the new rulers were Shona who had the lenses of the pre-colonial Mutapa state¹⁸. The governance system for the new state became centralised in Harare. Shona symbols such as *‘Nehanda’*, *‘Kaguvi’* and the *‘hungwe’* (Zimbabwe bird) were conjured as major symbols of the state. These tribalised symbols continue to grace most state institutions such as parliament, the national Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe and others.

While the challenges outlined above point to the viability of devolution as a solution, Michael Hill (2000: 61) in his discussion of devolution of Scotland in the United Kingdom warns that such a situation involves fundamental constitutional changes. Limited devolution tends to open up wider matters. There is a need to reconfigure Zimbabwe’s regions to a manageable number in order to allow for the creation of separate parliaments. Thereafter, regional structures, such as parliaments can be established with powers to formulate and implement policies in areas like: housing, employment and social welfare, health, education, having separate taxation powers and a clear system for the election of representatives at various levels of the federal project.

Devolution as part of decentralisation entails the transfer of authority from central government to local-level governmental units holding

corporate status granted under state legislation (Fiske, 1996). Federal states are by definition devolved, although the extent of legally defined and shared powers devolved by the federal government to lower level governmental units deserves further clarification. ZESN (2009) notes that in a federal project, for example, “sovereignty is constitutionally divided between a central governing authority and constituent political units like states or provinces. There is self-rule and shared rule. The State resembles a miniature version of the whole in congruent federalism.” In addition ZESN says the advantages would:

include ensuring that there is devolution of power, that government remains close to the people in tune with the daily needs and aspirations, that decentralized forms of development are encouraged, that it allows unique and innovative methods for attacking social, economic and political problems, that it provides effective ways of linking together diverse people who happen to end up in a single political entity and that it is a way of resolving tensions between centre and periphery¹⁹.

Devolution as part of a federal project usually faces problems in most developing and revolutionary states like Zimbabwe, largely because most states are characterised by weak central governments. In such cases central governments are often wary of losing political control. Of major concern in most weak states is the notion of power and control which it is assumed devolution might erode. In Zimbabwe, for example, the state functions through appointed officials, provincial Governors, as representatives of the central government. Devolution has often been resisted mainly because of the fear that a region like Matebeleland might want to secede. Managing Zimbabwe’s weak central government requires institutionalised devolution of power within the state structures by creating a federal system of governance or a lesser version of it (Hill, 2000, Makumbe, 1998). There is also a need to fully grasp that devolution is part of decentralisation and may not culminate in a federal project unless the object is to cause regional semi-autonomy. But devolution does not translate into a federal system.

Understanding decentralisation as a concept remains problematic for academics and has caused serious conceptual muddling (Bardhan, 2002). In addition to the existing scholarly commotion it has been imbued with positive normative value and conflated with other concepts ignoring the fact that it is multi-dimensional. Decentralisation evolves from a variety of intellectual traditions and disciplines and is quite complex (Bardhan, 2002). Decentralisation’s antonym, centralisation, has a much more

precise and accepted usage, which means concentration of power, resources and authority (power) at the centre.

As part of public administration, decentralisation is a political process aimed at transferring authority from one level of government and one set of actors to others. Edward Fiske (1996) observes that in this shift, officials and bureaucrats at the centre often become short-term political losers, while their counterparts at regional, district and local levels, including the masses, tend to be perceived as the winners. The failure to communicate its benefits to the centre tends to cause conflict and, sometimes, lack of political will for it to be fully implemented. The advantage of decentralising is that outward transfer of power improves service delivery, management of resources and policies in a given state. Further, it increases people’s confidence in state structures. It also reduces unnecessary burdens on the state by allowing regions to formulate, manage and implement their own policies.

Different types of decentralisation exist: ‘administrative decentralisation’, ‘political decentralisation’, ‘spatial decentralisation’ and ‘market’ (fiscal) decentralisation. Administrative decentralisation forms part of our pre-occupation as social scientists and public administrators. The other types are not the subject of my discussion. However, in brief, political decentralisation, which usually links with administrative decentralisation, is sometimes referred to as ‘democratic decentralisation’ and it involves assigning power to citizens and lower levels of government in political decision-making²⁰.

Administrative decentralisation, sometimes known as ‘bureaucratic decentralisation’, is essentially a management strategy. However, due to its versatility, administrative decentralisation allows political power that usually resides in state officials to trickle down to all regional structures and levels, thereby allowing it to emerge as a political form of decentralisation. John Makumbe (1998: 11) suggests that in such cases revolutionary regimes tend to limit political powers of a decentralised body, by limiting the allocation of local resources or simply functioning by way of appointive rather than elective government officials. This has been observed in Zimbabwe, in particular, the case of Governors. In administrative and political decentralisation, authority, both political (power) and administrative, is shifted to include regions that were previously outside the system.

If properly managed, decentralisation as a complex undertaking which requires careful attention, can allow for the emergence of redistributive trends to previously disenfranchised groups. This may improve the potential for productive investment and innovation and human resource development of marginalised communities. This applies

in the case of untapped resources like the methane gas and coal deposits in Lupane and some parts of Binga and the diamond deposits discovered in Tsholotsho. Decentralisation allows income to be geographically concentrated and managed; both because of agglomeration of economies and in tandem with endowments of natural resources. If properly implemented, certain regions will find it much easier to raise significant tax revenue, thus limiting interregional tax competition (Bardhan, 2002).

Devolution of power is therefore one of the tiers in a continuum composed of: deconcentration, delegation and devolution (Tordoff, 1994). In brief, deconcentration refers to the dispersing of responsibilities by a central government, for example, a policy directed to field officers. It usually leads to spatial changes and geographical distribution of authority, but does not significantly change the autonomy of the entity receiving the authority, nor that of the central body dispensing it (cf. Hyden, 1983; Rondinelli *et al*, 1983). Delegation entails the transfer of policy responsibility to local governments or semi-autonomous organisations that are not controlled by the central government, but remain accountable to it. There is a transfer of government decision-making and administrative authority and responsibilities for carefully spelt out tasks; examples in Zimbabwe's public institutions, public corporations and parastatals include institutions such as, State Universities, Mining Boards, the Post Office and Telecommunications (PTC), and the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA), etc. John Makumbe (1998) and Rondinelli *et al* (1983) have proposed privatisation as another tier. This tier is closely linked to fiscal (market) decentralisation or fiscal federalism as Bardhan (2002) would put it, and will not be discussed in this article.

Administrative decentralisation transcends epochs in academic circles; the most common one emerged in the early 1990s and was purveyed by most social activists, politicians from the Left who had a soft spot for the subalternised and civil society. Its main concern has been derivation of authority with regards to resources and revenue generated from these resources. However, it should be noted that power, its usage, and distance, in terms of proximity to the centre and ultimately decision-making has always influenced calls for devolution as a form of decentralisation. Of interest in this case has always been whether administrative decentralisation of any form or type can stimulate the emergence of good governance, constrain national ethnic cleavages, promote democratic practices, facilitate the growth of civil society and increase the privatisation of public sector tasks. Such concepts with their varied meanings do not necessarily present problems; rather they require that great care be taken to avoid generating too many meanings

(over-simplifications) or too few (under-specification) (cf. Smith, 1985; Conyers, 1983; Collins, 1989). It is also very necessary for people to seek to understand causal relational factors that give impetus to this kind of discourse and to understand which groups are at the forefront.

Regional differences in Zimbabwe in terms of development and the failure of central government to ascertain indices in resource allocation have given impetus to calls for devolution. Moreover, derivation as an index has failed. Any attempt to conceptualise devolution must be informed by an understanding of how related state institutions receive power and resources in terms of the degree to which power and resources are taken away from central government (Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN), 2009)²¹.

An assortment of preconditions for a successful devolution and an efficient federal system must be stated. Devolution as a policy initiative must not be a product of elite reasoning (Bardhan, 2002). If it grows out of the elite and their allies in the regions without taking into cognisance broader assessments of the likely benefits and risks contained in such a policy, then doom and policy failure can be witnessed. Devolution requires diligence, commitment and, above all, political will on the part of political elites and the ordinary masses. Furthermore, sudden shifts to the regions of income, and welfare maintenance functions can lead to massive social and economic dislocation, which is likely to leave sub-regional governments with the task of maintaining social safety nets and dealing with the plight of a population hit by a severe policy backlash. Regional administrators are, therefore, expected to work with all political actors and not act like shock absorbers protecting local populations against tough indiscriminate measures of the central government.

If the attempt is to devolve powers of central government into a federal system then emphasis should be made that a weak federal government in such a situation remains with little choice but to spend its increasingly limited fiscal and political resources to buy the loyalty of regional administrators. In Zimbabwe there is a need to guard against such situations. If this fails, a federal government will fail to perform its duties as the provider of national public goods, including such fundamentals as overall law and order, social safety nets, protection of property rights and the sound regulation of markets. Furthermore, there is a need to avoid pushing this devolution envelope as a way of conjuring political party loyalty. Political loyalty tends to be scouted when the central government wants to maintain control over decentralised regions through appointive powers of political players at the centre (Makumbe, 1998).

Conclusion

In conclusion the following set of factors must also be considered for devolution to succeed: first, ensuring that the central government is responsible for national public goods, guaranteeing property rights and contract enforcements. Second, the centre has to ensure unhampered inter-regional mobility of capital and resources to enable the required flow in response to the incentives created by the fiscal policies, regulatory regimes and social and economic infrastructure set in the regions. Third, there needs to be strong political will and commitment on the part of political leaders at central government level. Fourth, those calling for devolution of power must not be taken for granted, and they must be capable of fighting for their cause. Ethnic issues must not be criminalised as tribalism and left unattended to, as seen in Zimbabwe.

Further, this policy must be a bottom-up approach that can work in concert with all the other forms of decentralisation. Power should reside with the people in the devolved regions and not with the central government. Reducing the remittance of resources produced from the regions to the centre using the derivation as an index gives people and their regions an existentialist advantage of having to manage and answer for their actions without pointing fingers at the central government.

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Notes

- ¹ The official government website spells this name as 'Matabeleland' and was inherited from the colonial administration. However, given my phenomenological engagement of this discourse, as a researcher and an insider; with the advantage of 'subjective' insider knowledge, I have chosen

to consistently spell it as; Matebeleland. While I present the post-colonial leadership’s inability to correct these as signifiers of cultural ‘phanerons’ and ‘innuendos’, I also note the post-colonial government’s official Shona tribal policy of misrepresenting and obfuscating anything associated with Ndebele culture and language, as seen in the *Zimbabwean official Passport*, page. 48 (please refer to the Ndebele translation in the second paragraph). These serve to explain the ‘northern-problem’, within the nation-state’s celebrated apotheosis. These observed omissions, and official commissions contribute to the ‘silences of disenchantment’ giving impetus to the calls for a change of system of governance.

- 2 Methuseli Moyo aptly captures this notion of trivialisation of the region of Matebeleland in his article which can be accessed through the following link: <http://www.southernstaronline.net/?p=236>
- 3 For a detailed engagement on this aspect and on Ndebele historiography refer to Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009). *The Ndebele Nation: Reflections on Hegemony, Memory and Historiography*. Amsterdam – Pretoria: Rozenberg – UNISA Press. For further reading, refer to Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008a). ‘For the Nation to Live, the Tribe Must Die’: The Politics of Ndebele Identity and Belonging in Zimbabwe.’ In B. Zewde, (Ed.). *Society, State and African History*. Association of African Historians: Addis Ababa. Pp 167 – 200.
- 4 Here I argue that secessionist calls are not in themselves wrong or inimical to the national project. Rather they should be understood as safety valves and warning devices whose thrust is to offer a critique of the often contrived engagements of the national question *viz-a-viz* the Pan-African ideology. And so calls for secession should be valued as discourses that seek to inform the quest for an inclusive African national project instead of muzzling them with threats of treason.
- 5 This section is influenced by the major theme; *Territorial Origins of African Conflicts*. My argument is that conflict must not be measured by the absence of violence alone. Rather, the indices must be further expanded to encompass even continued grumblings as a result of lack of equitable distribution of resources, general acrimony and hatred that exists between various ethnic groups in Zimbabwe. These acrimonious arrangements often escalate into violent upheavals as seen in most African states. I further contend that if systems of governance are to be revisited and redrafted we might witness a reduction in these conflicts. However, without such a radical move to remove

centralised systems of governance in favour of decentralisation or a federal project, it can be further argued that the era of gunpowder remains a reality in most of Africa.

- 6 This conception of ideology as a process follows Göran Therborn's (1980: 02) position that ideology forms part of that aspect of the human condition under which human beings live their lives as conscious actors in a world that makes sense, or is made to make sense to them in varying degrees. Ideology therefore becomes the medium through which this consciousness and meaningfulness operates; also as part of the unconscious psychodynamic processes. Nationalism has benefited from this psychodynamic effect through the various ways by which memory is continuously reshaped, and stories are narrated and continue to be retold in the endless process of state-formation. This consciousness of everyday life and general experiences informs my conception of ideology.
- 7 Those loyal to the ideology of nationalism as propagated by Patrice Lumumba the first Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1960.
- 8 It is on this note that I contest, as unfortunate, the label of 'betrayal' given to Moise Tshombe by most nationalists across Africa in the early 1960s, leading to the coinage of a 'Tshombe mentality' as a criminalising phrase (meaning everyone who is perceived to be a betrayer or sell-out to the nationalist cause). Further, I argue that had nationalists, in particular Patrice Lumumba, deeply engaged Moise Tshombe, Congo would have most probably avoided the path of blood that it took.
- 9 For more information on this visit my Op-eds on devolution of power that appeared concurrently in the *kubatana.net* and *newzimbabwe.com*, under the heading: 'The True Face of Devolution' (05/06/2009); <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/opinion-386The%20true%20face%20of%20devolution/opinion.aspx>

As stated above this paper also appeared on Kubatana.net on 29/05/2009 under the heading: 'Moving the Centre and Unpacking Devolution: A Ticklish Subject.' http://www.kubatana.net/html/archive/opin/090529bm.asp?sector=OPIN&year=2009&range_start=121

The paper was further reproduced by the *Standard* Newspaper of Zimbabwe June 6 2009; under the heading: ‘Moving the Centre: Unpacking Devolution’, and can be accessed on: <http://www.thestandard.co.zw/opinion/20521-moving-the-centre-unpacking-devolution.html>

- ¹⁰ For a detailed engagement of Ndebele pre-colonial history refer to Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009). *The Ndebele Nation: Reflections on Hegemony, Memory and Historiography*. Amsterdam – Pretoria: Rozenberg –UNISA Press; and Peter Becker (1979). *Path of Blood: The Rise and Conquests of Mzilikazi Founder of the Matebele*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd.
- ¹¹ For more information refer to the *Zimbabwe ICTs e-readiness survey 2005*, produced by NUST in collaboration with the Ministry of Technology and funded by UNDP
- ¹² Bulawayo the second largest city in Zimbabwe has often been described in the local Ndebele language as ‘*Kontuthu Ziyathunqa*’ which means a place that produces a lot of smoke. The name is derived from the city’s old status as the hub of heavy industry.
- ¹³ This was confirmed in an email (last communication received on 28/10/2011) in which Esau Ncube was narrating to me the circumstances surrounding his arrest.
- ¹⁴ Refer to the following story: <http://www.chronicle.co.zw/inside.aspx?sectid=5019&cat=1>
- ¹⁵ For more information refer to the case of people from Bubi district. Few people from Matebeleland were given land in Mashonaland. Those from Matebeleland who got land in Mashonaland ended up in conflict with most local politicians. Another story on the inequitable distribution of land in Matebeleland was published by the [newzimbabwe.com](http://www.newzimbabwe.com). Refer to the following link: <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/news-2801-War%20vets%20held%20over%20Mat.%20land%20wars/news.aspx>
- ¹⁶ Matebeleland continues to be politically subjected to the whims of the central government. An example includes the awarding of national hero status for burial. The process remains a preserve of central government, with even the National Heroes Acre located in Harare. Social commentators describe the situation as a form of capture; they argue that Ndebele heroes are captured

while still alive as leaders and later their bones when dead. The history of the Ndebele as a people and celebration of their heroes and memory is downplayed. The fact that they, too, have their sacred places and national shrines like Entumbane in Matopo where their heroes ought to be buried remains ignored.

- ¹⁷ It is natural for ordinary citizens from Matebeleland to hate the beneficiaries of those development projects in Mashonaland when they continuously see development and resources being taken away from their areas to other regions of the country.
- ¹⁸ For more information on the concept of Zimbabwe being a successor of the Mutapa state refer to S. I. G. Mudenge (1990). *A Political History of Munhumutapa, c.1400 – 1902*. London: James Currey.
- ¹⁹ Refer to ZESN: 'systems of governance: what options for Zimbabwe', The Standard, 5 December 2009, <http://www.thestandard.co.zw/opinion/22491-systems-of-governance-what-options-for-zimbabwe.html>
- ²⁰ Political decentralisation also entails a situation where groups at different levels of government; central, sub-national and local are empowered to make decisions related to what affects them. Political forms of decentralisation are usually engaged by political scientists interested in democratisation and civil society seeking to identify transfer of decision-making power to lower levels of governmental units or their elected representatives. 'Spatial decentralisation' is a term used mainly by planners and geographers seeking to formulate policies and programmes aimed at reducing excessive urban concentration in large cities by promoting regional growth poles that have the potential to become centres of manufacturing etc. 'Market decentralisation' is generally used by economists to analyse and promote action that facilitates the creation of conditions allowing goods and services to be produced and provided by market mechanisms sensitive to the revealed preferences of individuals. It gained momentum during the era of economic liberalisation (the 1980s-1990s), privatisation and the demise of command economies. Under this type of decentralisation public goods are usually provided by small and large firms, community groups, cooperatives, voluntary associations and NGOs.

- ²¹ Refer to an Op-ed written by the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) titled: ‘Systems of Governance: What Options for Zimbabwe.’ Published by the *Standard* Newspaper of December 5 2009, the article can be accessed at: <http://www.thestandard.co.zw/opinion/22491-systems-of-governance-what-options-for-zimbabwe.html>