

HOW
intellectuals
made history
in
ZIMBABWE

Africa Research Institute

COUNTERPOINTS



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Text prepared by Aoiffe O’Brien, based on original Phd thesis by Blessing-Miles Tendi. Image supplied by Blessing-Miles Tendi. Africa Research Institute would like to acknowledge the generous assistance of Richard Smith

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The history of Zimbabwe has been revised in the service of the governing ZANU-PF party. A ‘patriotic’ version of history, disseminated by public intellectuals and state media, has distorted legitimate grievances. Critics of patriotic history, including opposition politicians, underestimated or misunderstood its appeal. Corruption of the intelligentsia will prolong an ongoing crisis in political and intellectual values.

By Blessing-Miles Tendi

In 2000, a year of parliamentary elections and constitutional review in Zimbabwe, President Robert Mugabe and the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) began to repackage history. Faced with waning electoral support, brought on by economic decline and popular disenchantment with the party’s authoritarian politics, ZANU-PF turned to Zimbabwe’s liberation story. The party conscripted elements of history which it believed would generate support and undermine opposition. Themes and events which did not serve ZANU-PF’s agenda were downplayed or misrepresented.

A wide spectrum of intellectuals was involved in the formulation and elaboration of a ‘patriotic history’ to counter political opposition. It is a narrative which depicts ZANU-PF as sole champion, past and present, of the independence and sovereignty of a country under constant attack from ‘imperialist forces’. Mugabe was the chief definer of the contours of this history, but professional academics gave it substance and credibility.

Patriotic history is a potent narrative that draws on real, not imagined, grievances. It taps into strong sentiments about colonialism and perceived western hypocrisy on human rights. Its proponents provide persuasive evidence for their assertions, which adds to the plausibility and strength of the narrative. The primary theme – inequality in land ownership – has

an authentic history. The incorporation of powerful moral discourses makes patriotic history compelling, and difficult to challenge. Nationalist public intellectuals cite the land grievance as the main reason for their alignment with ZANU-PF.

Zimbabwe's nationalist intellectuals have deployed their talents and standing recklessly. Highly educated individuals helped to legitimise violence, persecution and a calculated assault on human rights. Among the intelligentsia, some were critical of ZANU-PF. But they failed to articulate for the Zimbabwean public an alternative to patriotic history, and they misjudged the extent to which the public was swayed by the nationalist narrative. Protesting voices were drowned out by those of nationalist colleagues with preferential access to state-owned media.

Patriotic history has radically altered the nature of political debate. It is difficult to agree to disagree in Zimbabwe. Differences of opinion, over principles or details, are smothered by accusations of 'selling out'. All political activity outside the realm of ZANU-PF orthodoxy is 'illegitimate'. Opposition of any sort entailed a risk of violent attack. As party stalwart Nathan Shamuyarira boasted, 'the area of violence is an area where ZANU-PF has a very strong, long and successful history'.¹

True and false

The primary theme of patriotic history is land dispossession – a grievance which dates back to the end of the nineteenth century when British South Africa Company rule was established in 'Rhodesia'. A hundred years later, a minority white population still controlled most of Zimbabwe's productive land. In the nationalist discourse, land is more important than any other liberation ideal. By championing equitable land redistribution, patriotic history emphasised economic rights. By legitimising authoritarian politics, it subjugated civil and political rights to Zimbabwean nationalism.

According to ZANU-PF, the concept of human rights is a threat to national sovereignty. Patriotic history depicts human rights as a form of 'moral

imperialism' similar to historical justifications for the colonisation of Africa. It presents sovereignty, hard won in the liberation struggle, as the reverse of colonialism – a means to defend against external criticisms or threat. Harmful legacies of the years of white rule are deployed to counter any form of interference.

Race is another central theme of patriotic history. Racial inequality, like land distribution, was a longstanding grievance in Zimbabwe. In 1980, at independence, the ZANU-PF government embraced a policy of national racial reconciliation. Two decades later, as the propaganda of patriotic history was deployed, this was replaced by racially exclusive rhetoric.

ZANU-PF history categorised Zimbabweans as 'patriots' or 'sell-outs'. From the late 1950s this distinction was a continuous theme of liberation movement politics. But after 2000, a 'sell-out' was a 'saboteur' of liberation principles – someone who opposed land seizures and sought the extension of human rights in Zimbabwe. ZANU-PF supporters are by definition 'patriots' while the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and civil society institutions were 'sell-outs' – and therefore 'legitimate' targets for political violence.²

Zimbabwe's new history overlooks, or ignores, many important events in the country's recent past. No mention is made of the purge of members of the Zimbabwe Peoples' Army (ZIPA) from the liberation movement in 1977. There is silence on the arbitrary violence used against alleged 'sell-outs' during the liberation war, and on the *Gukurahundi*, a programme of political repression in the 1980s in which an estimated 20,000 civilians were killed by the military. Contributions to the liberation struggle by critics of ZANU-PF are minimised or denied.

A circumstantial narrative

Patriotic history is not wholly rigid – proponents sometimes disagree, and often adapt the narrative to new circumstances. The 'patriots' versus 'sell-outs' distinction has been manipulated to great effect at different

2 Mugabe, *Inside the Third Chimurenga*, The Department of Information and Publicity, Zimbabwe, 2001, p. 88.

times. An individual branded a 'sell-out' can subsequently be re-cast as a 'patriot', and vice versa. The type of violence or sanctions used to deal with 'sell-outs' also changes. Since 2004, ZANU-PF defectors who were labeled 'sell-outs' have mostly experienced material or financial misfortune rather than physical assault.

Disagreements on land policy have emerged. Hardliners such as Didymus Mutasa, who has occupied key posts in the party and the cabinet, have continued to press for the eviction of the few remaining white farmers. But technocrats within the party have disagreed. In 2007, then vice-president Joseph Msika maintained that it was never a ZANU-PF 'policy' that 'all white farmers should be chased out' – and added: 'I am not a racist and I refuse to be racist'.³ Msika also admitted that 'there was chaos in implementing the land reform programme', which destroyed Zimbabwe's agricultural sector.⁴

As patriotic history evolves, it embraces new themes and discards others. No matter how genuine and well-founded the grievance over land inequality, whites were cast by ZANU-PF as a scapegoat for Zimbabwe's multiplying political, social and economic problems. Conspiracy theories targeting whites grew more complex as the country's difficulties grew more severe. But the eviction, and subsequent emigration, of most white farmers by 2003 meant the discourse of race could no longer be employed as effectively.

After 2003, western sanctions replaced whites as the leading cause of Zimbabwe's problems in patriotic history. ZANU-PF intellectuals declared that the West was punishing the country for having forcibly taken farms from their 'kith and kin', and redistributed them to landless blacks. In reality, sanctions were directed at leading members of ZANU-PF through the imposition of travel bans and freezing of their overseas financial assets. International events – the NATO-led Kosovo intervention in 1999, the Iraq invasion in 2003, the abuse of prisoner abuses at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay in 2004 – were routinely cited as further evidence of western malfeasance and hypocrisy.

Nationalist ‘public’ intellectuals

Zimbabwean ‘public’ intellectuals – academics who choose to write for a broad audience – were polarised in the late 1990s by a constitutional review. In 1999, the ZANU-PF government set up a Constitutional Commission (CC) to conduct a national consultation and produce a draft constitution. The National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), an umbrella organisation for civil society groups, campaigned against the government’s draft, arguing that it did not devolve enough powers from the presidency. Zimbabwean academics aligned themselves with either the CC or NCA. Those who supported the latter were branded western ‘puppets’.

“They justified the land seizures, eulogised Mugabe, and generated a steady flow of conspiracy theories to create a state of panic and war-time vigilance.”

After the state-sponsored draft constitution was rejected by referendum in 2000, a group of six nationalist intellectuals – Tafataona Mahoso, Ibbo Mandaza, Claude Mararike, Vimbai Chivaura, Sheunesu Mpeperekwi, and Godfrey Chikowore – entered the public arena to defend ZANU-PF. They promulgated the patriotic history narrative on TV discussion shows, prime time news and in the press. As the independent media shrank in the face of pressure from the government, the state-owned media provided these revisionists with easy and unfettered access to the Zimbabwean public.

Nationalist intellectuals attacked western hypocrisy in order to undermine calls for the government to respect human rights. They justified the land seizures, eulogised Mugabe, and generated a steady flow of conspiracy theories involving the West and ‘sell-outs’ in an effort to create a state of panic and war-time vigilance. Tafataona Mahoso, an American-educated academic in Harare Polytechnic’s media department, blamed Zimbabwe’s economic woes on a western plot to ‘force the people to abandon the party of their choice’.⁵ He accused George W. Bush and Tony Blair of being part of a white racist plot against African liberation movements.⁶

5 Tafataona Mahoso, ‘Same Economic Tactics Used In Chile Applied Here’, *The Sunday Mail*, 20th February 2000.

6 Tafataona Mahoso, ‘Elitist Forces Gang Up To Sabotage Agrarian Reform’, *The Sunday Mail*, 9th October 2004.

A difference type of conspiracy – a conspiracy of silence – was integral to the output of nationalist intellectuals. Historical events that could potentially damage ZANU-PF were never referred to in the public sphere. Allegations from overseas were dealt with dismissively. According to Godfrey Chikowore, a fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Zimbabwe, “we have more claims against them as colonial powers than they do against us”. Of the *Gukurahundi*, he says: “Such things happen”.⁷

Media strategy

Intellectual-turned-politician, Jonathan Moyo, was one of the most creative and energetic contributors to the narrative of patriotic history. As information minister, he made expert use of state-owned media to manipulate history and to provide a platform to nationalist academics. Moyo’s use – or abuse – of history was second only to that of Mugabe himself. His departure in 2005, following a dispute within ZANU-PF, deprived patriotic history of much of its initial intensity.

The state-sponsored media was instrumental in disseminating patriotic history. From 2000 onwards, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) repeatedly broadcast liberation war documentaries that presented ZANU-PF as being solely responsible for securing independence, justified land seizures, highlighted colonial atrocities, and erased personalities and events from the historical record. State-run radio aired catchy jingles – many composed by Jonathan Moyo – which reworked liberation war songs and celebrated ZANU-PF’s achievements.⁸

It was a strategy that paid dividends. A 2004 national survey conducted by Afrobarometer, a research project measuring long term public attitudes on politics and economics in Africa, found that public trust in Mugabe’s leadership rose from 20% in 1999 to 46% in 2004 while approval for his ‘job performance’ rose from 21% to 58% over the same period.⁹ In contrast, 18% of Zimbabweans expressed ‘a lot’ or ‘a great deal’ of trust in opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai and only 14% accorded trust to opposition parties.¹⁰ Given the rapid economic decline

7 Interview, Godfrey Chikowore, 26th July 2005.

8 In an interview with the author on 20th September 2005, Jonathan Moyo confirmed that he composed the majority of these music jingles.

9 Afrobarometer, *The Power of Propaganda: Public Opinion in Zimbabwe*, 42, 2004.

10 *Ibid.*

and authoritarian politics that were engulfing Zimbabwe, these results – though imperfect – were remarkable evidence of the increasing efficacy of ZANU-PF’s propaganda.

Brave but unconvincing

Public intellectuals critical of the nationalist narrative failed to convey an alternative, more objective interpretation of their recent history to Zimbabweans. Masipula Sithole, Brian Raftopoulos, John Makumbe, Elphas Mukonoweshuro and Lovemore Madhuku published articles in independent daily and weekly newspapers in which they deconstructed the ‘patriots’ and ‘sell-outs’ distinction, and argued credibly that land was only one of many grievances behind the liberation struggle. In doing so, they showed immense courage. But their challenge to ZANU-PF’s version of history was ineffectual.

“Intellectuals who opposed patriotic history were also accused of profiting financially from their stance – not without justification in some cases.”

Masipula Sithole, an academic in the University of Zimbabwe’s politics and administration department, was the most prolific of the critical intellectuals. He was acutely concerned by the primacy attributed to the land grievance in patriotic history. The majority view of the liberation struggle, Sithole suggested, probably held that it was waged for the ‘good life whether on the land, in factories, in classrooms, shuffling papers in the office, or, indeed, in the State House’.¹¹

The failure of Sithole and others to ensure popular rejection of patriotic history was not the work of the state-owned media or intimidation alone. Political naïvety was equally important. Critical public intellectuals regularly made use of terms like ‘international community’ without appreciating the negative connotations with which these had become loaded by patriotic history. References to ‘good’ governance in foreign countries, implying ‘bad’ governance in Zimbabwe, added weight to allegations that they were western stooges.

11 Masipula Sithole, ‘20 Years Into Uhuru: Is Zimbabwe Ready For Change?’, *The Financial Gazette*, 20th-26th April 2000.

Sithole seemed not to grasp that the importance attached to 'sovereignty' in nationalist polemic was politically effective because the term is considered an 'inversion of colonialism' by African states.¹² Sovereignty is not, as he thought, a 'receding' concept in Africa. John Makumbe, also at the University of Zimbabwe's politics and administration department, had 'Regime Change Now!' set as the screensaver on his office computer – apparently unaware that the use of the foreign term 'regime change' exposed him to accusations from ZANU-PF of having 'imperialist' objectives.¹³

Intellectuals who opposed patriotic history were accused of profiting financially from their stance – not without justification in some cases. One academic from the University of Zimbabwe admitted: 'I do consultancy work for NGOs and I bend my analysis to please them ... I tell them Mugabe is bad and there is a serious crisis and I say it loudly so they are satisfied. That way they will come again next time for my analysis and even bring me new clients. That is how I survive'.¹⁴

Public intellectuals who rejected patriotic history were complacent, as well as naïve. They did not envisage that any 'rational' individual could be taken in by ZANU-PF propaganda. They were convinced that patriotic history would be discredited. Brian Raftopoulos, from the University of Zimbabwe's Institute for Development Studies, concludes that a 'battle of ideas' was waged between 2000 and 2004, which ZANU-PF took 'seriously', while the opposition did not.¹⁵ Being 'right' was not enough – the case for objective history required effective, and voluble, dissemination.

No alternative

The opposition MDC succeeded in highlighting some of the historical events which were ignored by patriotic history. But its version of those events was often equally distorted in an attempt to gain political leverage. Patriotic history's silence on the *Gukurahundi* was countered

12 Richard Falk in Steiner and Alston, *International Human Rights in Context: Law, Politics and Morals*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000.

13 Interview, John Makumbe, 26th July 2005.

14 Interview, University of Zimbabwe academic, 23rd July 2005.

15 Raftopoulos quoted in 'Mugabe Approval Ratings Soar', *The Financial Gazette*, 26th August-1st September 2004.

with self-defeating overstatement from the MDC. Tsvangirai called upon the international community to ‘stop Africa’s Milosevic’ – Mugabe – because he had ‘committed genocide’.¹⁶

The MDC attempted to propose an alternative process of land reform. One of its earliest slogans was ‘land to the people not politicians’. The party’s founding manifesto of 1999 stated that it would ‘redistribute over five years at least five million hectares of agricultural land to 100 000 families’.¹⁷ But the MDC message on land reform was inconsistent, confused and sometimes inflammatory. In 2000, MDC member Fidelis Mhashu declared that his party would return confiscated farms to white farmers because they were ‘the ones who know how to farm’.¹⁸

“The MDC’s failure to address economic inequalities, combined with its courtship of Britain and the USA, damaged its standing.”

For the MDC, land reform is a technocratic process. For ZANU-PF it was a populist event. The MDC considered production to be more important than hectares.¹⁹ It wanted methodical land reform, administered by an independent land commission. Joseph Made, twice ZANU-PF’s agriculture minister, argued that “the land issue is more serious than institutions, what is needed now is land, not a [land] commission”.²⁰ MDC MP Priscilla Misihairabwi-Mushonga believes the party should have simplified its position: “ZANU-PF never talked about land in technical language. Its message was simple. We made a mistake by always talking process.”²¹

The MDC’s failure to address economic inequalities between the country’s white minority and black majority, combined with its courtship of Britain and the USA, damaged its standing among some sectors of

16 Morgan Tsvangirai quoted in *Financial Gazette*, 12th-18th October 2000; Tendai Biti also referred to the *Gukurahundi* as ‘genocide’ in an interview with the author on 13th September 2005; See also a transcript of David Coltart’s Interview with Tony Jones, *Lateline*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2005, (Retrieved 7/11/05) in which Coltart described the *Gukurahundi* as ‘genocide’.

17 *Movement for Democratic Change Manifesto*, Harare, MDC, 1999, p. 23.

18 See Fidelis Mhashu’s interview on *Hardtalk*, British Broadcasting Corporation, London, 11th January 2000.

19 Interview, Morgan Tsvangirai, 30th August 2006.

20 Joseph Made quoted in the *Zimbabwe Mirror*, 15th-21th April 2001.

21 Interview, Priscilla Misihairabwi-Mushonga, 2st September 2005.

Zimbabwe's population. Coverage by international media was seized upon by ZANU-PF as 'evidence' that the MDC was a front for white farmers. In 2000, CNN showed footage of white farmers signing cheques and pledging cash to Tsvangirai at an MDC rally. In the 2002 election, Jonathan Moyo's ministry of information chose this footage to spearhead Mugabe's campaign, adding the slogan: 'You have seen who his masters are. Vote wisely. Zimbabwe will never be a colony again.'

A crisis of values

Patriotic history has exhibited some notable contradictions since 2004, following the flight of white farmers and the dismissal of Jonathan Moyo as information minister. For instance, the labelling of General Solomon Mujuru as a 'sell-out' and 'counter revolutionary' stretched credibility. As the most senior general from the liberation war, Mujuru is widely acknowledged as a facilitator of the recognition and acceptance of Mugabe's authority by former guerrillas. This and other tensions within the narrative of patriotic history have exposed its primary purpose as a device to disallow alternative viewpoints.

In the wake of earlier defeats, the opposition MDC has begun to take history more seriously. The main MDC faction attempted to re-brand its image prior to the general election of March 2008. Its rival MDC faction, led by Arthur Mutambara, appealed more directly to the liberation struggle by casting itself as pan-African. Its representatives have been guarded in their associations with whites, and critical of double standards among western advocates of human rights. Since the formation of a new government, premised at least nominally on the principle of power-sharing between parties, ZANU-PF is less able to portray the MDC as a 'white party' and a 'sell out'.

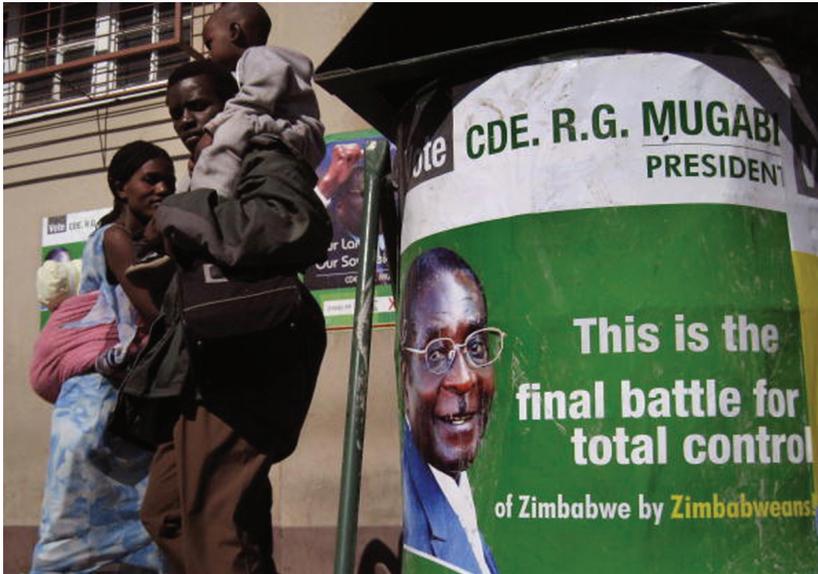
The primary fault line in Zimbabwean politics remains an irreconcilable gulf in political values. As the coherence of patriotic history has begun to unravel, so its utility as a means to identify political loyalties has been undermined. In coming years, proponents of patriotic history will require

greater ingenuity to sustain their narrative. Yet the coalition government in Harare, even if it can succeed in mending the economy, is building on a fragile foundation. Should the economy recover without any attempt to revisit the crisis of values, then the recovery will have been built on quicksand. Technocratic intercession which fails to tackle this crisis of values may result in history repeating itself.

The crisis of values mitigates the effectiveness of genuinely democratic institutions. In politics and civil society alike, patriotic history has been deployed to advantage by both its advocates and its critics. To dismantle that history is an onerous task, and – necessarily – a protracted process. *Bona fide* social education in national curricula would be a useful starting point. Instead, national curricula are devoid of human rights education. Exemplary leadership, which would nurture a new political culture, is absent in opposition circles and ZANU-PF.

Political values have stronger resonance and sanctity if they are generated locally. Mediation by the Southern African Development Community, under the leadership of South African presidents Thabo Mbeki and his successor Jacob Zuma, has emphasised the role of inclusive institutions to develop common values. However, avenues for national dialogue on questions of Zimbabwean history and political values have been stymied. In any popular sense, the debate remains non-existent. To address this crisis is likely to take generations. Many years and much energy will be expended before a new political value system can be deliberated and – ultimately – agreed by the people of Zimbabwe.





"It is difficult to agree to disagree"

The Author

Blessing-Miles Tendi is a researcher in African politics and a contributor to the Guardian newspaper. He has studied in Zimbabwe and the United Kingdom, and holds a PhD from St Antony's College, Oxford.

His book, *Making History in Mugabe's Zimbabwe: Politics, Intellectuals and the Media* will be published in 2010.

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