

Leadership, Civil Society and Democratisation in Zimbabwe

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Policy Brief

1. Introduction

The purpose of this study was to assess the pivotal role that is played by civil society in the democratisation processes in Zimbabwe. Its focus was on the contribution of the leadership of CSOs in formulating agendas and creating platforms around which broad alliances committed to democratisation were formed and sustained. The overview of the character and activities of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) and the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) illustrated the growing centrality of civil society in democratisation. In particular, the strategic role of leadership in these two CSOs showed a skilful capacity to mobilise for the extension of democratic frontiers in Zimbabwean society in the current context of obdurate state authoritarianism. Several policy-related issues emerge from the case studies presented in this report. These relate to the significance and challenge of the following aspects:

- democratic practice including transparency and accountability,
- the creation and sustainability of broad alliances for democratisation,
- the imperative of a national consensus on constitutional reform, and
- the challenge of creating propitious conditions for a sustainable working partnership between the state and CSOs.

2. Democratic Practice

There was plentiful evidence presented in the report to illustrate the participation of CSOs in campaigns for the observance of human rights and gender equity, for the extension and consolidation of civic education and democratic values, and for the inculcation of a political culture of tolerance and wider participation in the governance process. The leadership of the CSOs was expected to lead by example in the realm of democratic practice. In particular, the leadership of CSOs should meet the test and expectations of accountability and transparency, a test which they demand that governments should pass. The adoption of democratic practices is, therefore, a litmus test for a CSO that seeks to pride itself as an advocate of democratisation. It is incumbent upon CSOs to adhere to democratic principles and practices in their structures and activities. In the Zimbabwean context, the adoption of internal democracy in CSOs such as the ZCTU was neither a smooth nor painless process. Shortfalls were experienced in the early years of the organisation; lessons were drawn from those mistakes. Just as democratisation has been a long process in many countries, so it is protracted also in CSOs such as those in Zimbabwe. What is vital is that there be a code or standard against which the adherence of CSOs to democratic practices may be measured. In particular, CSOs should be exemplary in their accountability and transparency in the utilisation of funds and other resources sourced from their members as well as from donors, both domestic and foreign. In addition, the mechanisms of leadership selection and succession in CSOs should be clearly spelt out in the constitution to pre-empt a self-serving and self-perpetuating leadership. The case studies showed that the respect displayed towards the governing

constitutions of the ZCTU and NCA respectively ensured smooth leadership succession and continuity. This ensures stability and cohesion in CSOs.

3. Creating and Sustaining Broad Alliances

A second policy-related issue concerns the challenge of creating and sustaining a broad alliance in specific democratisation campaigns. This is a Herculean task, which requires a leadership endowed with effective organisational skills as well as vision. The leadership needs to intuitively seek a common ground or objective acceptable and relevant to the various organisations in such an alliance. This report showed that the NCA was able to construct or mould such an alliance (of over 100 organisations) to spearhead the constitutional reform campaign. There were sufficient common ground and shared objectives of reforming an apparently outdated constitution by a variety of organisations ranging from those involved in human rights, media freedom, academic autonomy to gender equity and labour rights. There are other possible issues around which such broad alliances can be woven: they include -: environmental and debt issues, and the rehabilitation of social services such as health and education. In a wider sense, such alliances have a role to play in hegemonic contests over policies and ideas (in both national and international contexts). Governments would be more inclined to listen and respond to such broad alliances engaged in advocacy campaigns on specific issues such as democratisation and development.

4. Consensus on Constitutional Reform

Perhaps it is the issue of how constitutional reform may be approached and managed which throws into sharp relief the question of how the state and CSOs should interact in such a process. This report provided illustrative detail on how the NCA initially instigated the constitutional reform process, how it successfully pressured the Mugabe government to begin the process, and the consequences of the disagreement between the two sides over the content of the process that resulted in acrimony, polarisation and twin processes of constitution-making. The overall outcome of the process was a rejection of the government-sponsored draft constitution for various reasons, including its content. If any lesson could be drawn from the Zimbabwean process, it is the need for a national consensus on the modalities, process and content of constitution-making. Both CSOs and the incumbent government should have sought a common meeting ground; this would have, of course, entailed negotiation and compromise. Important national assets such as a good constitution and effective economic reform require a national consensus which takes into account the interests of stakeholders, and ensures their ownership of the constitution and, where applicable, the relevant reform programmes. Where such consensus and ownership are lacking, the legitimacy of the reform processes is put into doubt. Currently, the leadership in the state and CSOs does not appear self-confident and far-sighted enough to engage in such dialogue which could result in building bridges between themselves. The political and economic context, in the Zimbabwean context, has so far not

been propitious, but this is a challenge that must be taken by the leadership of both sides.

5. Creating a Sustainable Working Partnership

The matter of bridge building also relates to the broader policy issue of partnership between the state and CSOs in democratisation and development. This report illustrated how various CSOs have been instrumental in contributing to I democratisation. Their campaigns against state authoritarianism have tended to cast them in an anti- government mould. Indeed, some governments have become apprehensive about the role of various NGOs: they claim to see a political agenda informing their programmes. In some instances, government apprehensions are not necessarily misplaced as the 'Zimbabwean campaigns of the ZCTU and NCA illustrated. Yet, this is only one side of the coin. The imperative for co-operation does exist between the two sides on constitutional, economic and social issues. Given the prevailing objective conditions, none of them can afford to go it alone.

It is in light of these realities that a case can still be made for a social contract between the state and society (through the CSOs). This is a major policy issue which has featured highly in the exchanges between the state and the ZCTU in the first half of 2001. While there have remained important differences over issues of governance between them, these have not prevented negotiations on a possible social contract. Such a contract would include an agreement on democratic governance, on key economic and social policies, and on labour-related issues. In addition, it would spell out the rights

and obligations of both parties, and ensure that there would be a mechanism to monitor implementation of the contract. It would not be the first time that a social contract was negotiated between the state and key organisations in civil society. In the mid-1990s, South Africa was able to institute such a contract, which has worked reasonably successfully through a National Economic and Labour Advisory Council (NEDLAC).

It is a positive sign that the leadership in the state and labour movement has not abandoned negotiations for a social contract. The negotiations will be an arduous process. But then the process of democratisation is no less arduous. Clearly, the partnership between the state and CSOs requires, in both state and CSOs, a leadership with a vision and commitment to democratisation. There should be conscious efforts to encourage the building of bridges between state and Civil Society Organisations. Without such bridges, democratisation would not be sustainable.