

Surviving Zimbabwe

An anarchist critique

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Contents

Political context	3
Economic context	4
What anarchism/ syndicalism help explain	4
The “predatory” state	5
From state power to counter-power	5

This article positions itself not only outside of the state, but against the state, under the guidance of anarchism as a theory. In it, I hope to give a critical analysis of Zimbabwe and its current state, arguing against simple analysis and going beyond individual politics. Rather, with the use of an anarchist lens, this article will carefully articulate the real underlying problem in Zimbabwe: it is a society governed by a class system, under the control of a predatory state that cannot survive a day without the endless exploitation of its people.

A comprehensive analysis of this nature hopes to make a valid contribution to help organize and educate the masses for a revolution they can claim as their own. A revolution that is specifically against all forms of oppression, and that builds on everyday struggles to improve the deplorable conditions of Zimbabwe. Equally importantly, this article is written in solidarity with the actions of the masses who stood against the violent regime on the 1st of August 2018, and again on the 14th of January 2019, and who fight for a better society. It encourages self-activity and the continuous development revolutionary awareness of the popular classes: the workers and working class, the poor, and the small peasant farmers.

Political context

Most media analyses of the problems in Zimbabwe, including its highly repressive state, have seen the causes as basically due to a few bad individuals, such as President Emmerson Mnangagwa (and his predecessor, President Robert Mugabe), trigger-happy generals and police chiefs, and the leadership of the ruling ZANU-PF party, which has been in office since 1980. This leads to the view that the problem can be fixed by a change in leading personnel in the state.

This is why the immediate response of many to the 15th of November 2017 military coup that installed former Vice-President Mnangagwa as President, and ousted Mugabe, was excitement and hope. Although this was really a coup by one ZANU-PF faction against another, it seemed a new person in the Presidency would solve the problems. This did not happen, leading many to then see the problem in terms of the unconstitutional way in which Mnangagwa had secured the office, followed by the way in which he consolidated and kept power. Again, the problem was seen in terms of individual behaviour.

Following the 2018 elections, where Mnangagwa headed the ZANU-PF campaign, there were widespread protests. On the 1st of August 2018, after a highly contested election process marred by numerous abuses, people took to the streets. They questioned the validity of the elections, and rejected ZANU-PF, which had, as usual, made sure it “won” the elections by fair means and foul. The government, as if acting on instinct, immediately dispatched the military and police against unarmed civilians, and killed at least six people. As during his coup, Mnangagwa used the means of coercion — that is, military and police forces, and jails, a pillar of the state that ordinary citizens do not own or control — to maintain what is effectively a ZANU-PF-headed military dictatorship.

In order to keep face with the international community, from which ZANU-PF seeks investment, loans and trade deals, a Commission of Inquiry was quickly launched. This presented its findings on the 11th of December. It found that “live ammunition, whips and gun butts” had been used on protesters, that this “was unjustifiable,” and that there was completely disproportionate use of force by the state.¹

¹ Report Of the Commission of Inquiry Into The 1st of August 2018 Post-Election Violence. kubatana.net

President Mnangagwa himself had to report the findings at a press conference, and even noted the Commission's recommendation that such repression should never happen again.

Economic context

The situation created a legitimacy crisis for a ruling class, which was also faced with a crippled economy, suffering a serious liquidity crisis, a soaring unemployment rate estimated at 90%, a complete collapse of manufacturing industry, infrastructural crises, huge black markets, and serious agricultural problems.

In order to bolster the regime's incomes, the President then doubled the fuel price on the 13th of January 2019, demanding that ordinary citizens pay for what became the most expensive fuel in the world. The fuel increase was fundamentally a government strategy to raise funds, given that 68% of the increment was going to taxes.

The announcement triggered a chain of events, which led to a call for peaceful protests and a National Shutdown or general strike, by respected activist Pastor Evans Mawarire and the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU). And so, less than a month since the Commission of Inquiry's shocking report on the post-election repression, and the promise "never again," more than 600 Zimbabweans were arrested without due process. At least 15 people were killed, according to the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum. The courts were reported to be unresponsive, hiding in the great dark shadows of the state, shattering the myth of separation of powers and democratic reform under Mnangagwa.

In another offensive, Zimbabwe was turned into a black site through the state's total shutdown of the Internet, an attempt to hide the vicious nature of the state and allow the ruling class to regain control. This in turn had a brutal impact on the livelihoods of millions, since more than 85% of all financial transactions in Zimbabwe, including simple things like buying bread, require the use of the Internet.

What anarchism/ syndicalism help explain

The problem with explaining Zimbabwe in terms of a few bad leaders at the head of the state, is that it reduces the problem to the behaviour of a few. It does not examine the system that generates brutal leaders like Mugabe and Mnangagwa, and it cannot explain why the basic system does not change, even when some of the personnel does. It fails to explain why the Zimbabwean state did not change significantly, when the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) won local elections, or with the entry of the MDC into a government of national unity with ZANU-PF in 2009. As the especificist *Federación Anarquista Uruguaya* (Uruguayan Anarchist Federation, FAU) has stressed, without a robust and coherent theory, one will always run the risk "of examining every problem individually, in isolation, starting from point of views that can be different in each case or examining them based on subjectivity."²

Therefore, it is essential to develop a systematic theory of the Zimbabwean state, and, in doing so, carefully unpack the political implications. Currently, there is not so much an in-depth critical analysis of the situation in Zimbabwe by the protest movements, but instead, simply a set of

² Theory, Ideology and Political Practice: The FAU's *Huerta Grande* text blackrosefed.org

updates of what is happening. On the other side, there is a large section of the Left internationally that is taken in by the language of the Zimbabwean regime and thinks it is somehow progressive – even that Mugabe was better than Mnangagwa. This Left is trapped by the subjective claims of that state, rather than basing itself on an analysis of that state’s objective features, and it is trapped by a focus on personalities.

Anarchism provides an essential corrective to both these approaches. It rejects the notion that the state is an empty place of power, which can be redirected to good or bad ends simply by changing who occupies the top seats. It argues, instead, that the state is an inherent part of the social problem we face. Control of the state apparatus is always vested in a small political elite, whose power rests on control of means of administration and means of coercion. These can be leveraged to accumulate wealth for that elite, including taking over means of production. These essential features are not changed by its rhetoric and its propaganda: as Mikhail Bakunin argued, “the people will feel no better if the stick with which they are being beaten is labelled the people’s stick.”

The “predatory” state

What developed in Zimbabwe from the 2000s is an extreme example of the state structure, where the state elite has mutated into the main economic elite as well, operating a huge system to extract wealth from the society. The local ruling class is now centred on the state, and it uses the state directly to accumulate wealth and maintain the class system. It either directly controls large parts of the economy, or is involved in the private sector through dense networks of corruption, patronage and rent-seeking. Much of this involves the military and most of it goes through ZANU-PF. The state preys on society, extracting wealth in the most destructive ways – it is “predatory” – and its key figures simply cannot afford to lose control over key state positions through open elections. This is what underlies the repression that is meted out to challengers, and the violence that takes between ruling class factions as well.

As anarchism also points out, no solution for the popular classes can come from involvement in the state, whether through running an alternate party, like the MDC, or through a revolution via the state apparatus, or a military coup. The state always serves the interests of a small ruling class – the predatory form, as seen in Zimbabwe, is just an extreme example. The problem is not about who is in charge, or which political party: the state as a form of organisation is core part of the class system. Its core features are not changed by changing faces, any more than a car becomes an aeroplane if you paint it.

When, slightly over a year ago, Zimbabwe bid a glad farewell to the old dictator, Mugabe, no systemic change took place. The removal of Mugabe was masked when the military coup dressed up as a democratic change, but it was simply a change of power between factions and figures in the ruling class; it was not a movement of wealth and power away from the ruling class.

From state power to counter-power

Anarchism, noting this, argues that what is needed is not building a new party, or running in elections, but mass mobilisation and organisation and education, as the basis for a direct transfer

of power to the people, and to bottom-up assemblies, councils and committees — away, that is, from the state and the corporations.

Anarchists, as Bakunin argued, obviously prefer free and fair elections a “thousand times” to regimes based on using “live ammunition, whips and gun butts” on protesters, just as they fight also for better wages and more jobs, and for cheaper fuel. But they see these everyday struggles as unable to change the fundamental nature of the system.

Therefore, it is important to fight to improve the deplorable conditions of Zimbabwe, but to do this as part of a process of building a popular counter-power; and to see fights for reforms as valuable in themselves, but also as spaces to organize and educate the masses for a revolution they can claim as their own, a complete take-over of society through mass democratic movements.

The National Shutdown in early 2019 shows the potential power of the popular classes, and it was especially interesting to see the ZCTU unions joining the call and mobilising. Anarchists believe that the trade union is an institution that can help workers to organize for reforms, but more importantly, that unions can be regenerated to be part of the process of building new social relations, that is, a site of counter-power, such as can contribute to building a new people’s Zimbabwe.

A new Zimbabwe is possible but we must struggle for it, bearing in mind that the immediate goal has to be to build popular counter-power, involving mass organisation and widespread political education, hopefully growing to a wide-scale libertarian movement that can create a rupture with the state. A new Zimbabwe will not be handed down by a political party; it will certainly not come from the military under state control; it will require more than just ousting ZANU-PF. Rather it can only be created by ordinary people.

To do so, there is now a need to go beyond protests and move to building a revolutionary, specific anarchist organisation in suffering Zimbabwe. An organisation that will develop a clear program that pulls from all corners of the country, that partners with unions and the poor, the street traders and the small peasants, to build counter-power institutions, that stand as a counter to the state, defend the people and point to a new dawn.

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