

Where to now, Zimbabwe?

Beyond the “good” charismatic pastor.

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Contents

Recent events	3
Where to now?	3
A call!	5

Recent events

36 years into independence and the people of Zimbabwe have again started chanting freedom songs and calling for true and real emancipation. The working class of Zimbabwe is paying for an economic crisis that is none of their making, but rather a structural crisis of the global (largely state-based) capitalist system in an unholy marriage with the Mugabe Dictatorship. In the last 4 months, the country has seen protest after protest as ordinary citizens have taken to the streets in their thousands, despite being met by the repressive hand of the state (in the form of a militarized police). At the heart of the protest movement is a massive economic crisis that dates back to 2008, the climax of a severe drought and crises in the supply of water, electricity and basic necessities. This year, the country found itself paralysed in the face of a liquidity crisis, as severe shortages of US Dollars spread across the country.

The last 4 months in Zimbabwe can surely be characterized as an awakening of the Zimbabwean working class, as thousands of these citizens have taken to the streets, responding to Pastor Evan Mawarire's call: "hatichatya" – we are not afraid. The #Thisflag movement followed soon after. This is certainly a historic time for Zimbabwe; a time of growing labour pains as the country (hopefully) enters a process of rebirth towards a better and new Zimbabwe.

Pastor Evan Mawarire, a Baptist pastor, is indeed the architect of the movement and has chosen throughout the process to remain "apolitical". Many have described him as Zimbabwe's Martin Luther King Jr., who also eschewed party politics and focussed on grassroots activism. He unwittingly began the movement in May 2016 by posting a video online in which he expressed his frustration with the socio-economic and political crisis in the country. The video expressed a strong poetic message that reflected the frustrations of the country's 16 million Zimbabweans – and which in some ways resembled the French *cahiers* [the list of grievances reflecting the thoughts of the French population on the eve of the French Revolution]. Since then, the movement has grown and broken the silence that once surrounded the status quo. Not surprisingly, the state has taken Pastor Evan to court, initially for "inciting public violence". Just before the hearing, however, the prosecution added more a serious charge: that he was "attempting to overthrow a constitutionally elected government". It is reported that well over two thousand citizens stood outside the courts waiting for the results of the hearing, praying, singing and chanting for his release. He was found not guilty, but openly expressed fears that his life was in danger, and that he was under continuous threats, with unidentified people showing up at his home and offices. Not long afterwards, he left for South Africa to do a few talks in different universities while preparing to get political asylum for himself and his family in the United States.

Where to now?

Before we can even begin to talk about a free Zimbabwe and how we would go about getting that, we need to first have a clear and coherent class analysis of the Zimbabwean social and political climate. And this would paint the most vivid of pictures – of a class system closely integrated with a predatory state. It is no secret that from the first day of Independence the state has preoccupied itself with extracting wealth from its working class citizens. Through violent exploitation, through corruption that knows no limits, the country, and its people have been turned into unprotected prey for a power- and wealth-hungry government.

The once-Marxist- turned-nationalist Zanu-PF government implemented Zimbabwe's 1991-1995 structural adjustment programs soon after achieving independence. Armed with neoliberalism, it has fast-tracked the decay of the country, bringing it to its knees during the 2008 crisis. Since then, our people have been reduced to denizens – resident aliens in our own homes. And, as social norms and values have eroded, as the lack of purpose has set in, the whole country now finds itself in a state of *anomie*, a normless country paralysed by instability, having to fend for itself against an alliance between the predatory state and its cohort of capitalist owners.

This ruling elite – an alliance of state managers and capitalists – has been sending the working class to the slaughterhouse in droves. The most recent blow to the working class that passed as legislation was the Supreme Court ruling of 16 July 2015 that gave employers the right to terminate worker's contracts without having to offer severance packages. In less than three weeks since that hearing, a staggering number of 20–25000 workers have been fired, and this number has grown by thousands since then.

It is then our most prudent task to arm ourselves with a holistic conceptualisation of the state and class. The anarchist approach explains how the state itself is a fertilizer of the class system, creating and giving space to a minority rulership.

Appreciating this is half the fight. Understanding who we are fighting is essential. Zimbabwe without a doubt needs to rid ourselves of the 92-year- old man who thinks the state house is his graveyard. But in the same breath, we must rid itself of the oppressive state system altogether. Swapping a vicious state capitalist manager with another is nowhere close to constituting progress.

The state ruling class needs to accumulate capital to be able to keep arming its military and growing its coercive power (which has been an interesting and heated area of contestation recently, as the state found itself unable to pay the military.) Our current system – of capitalism and the state – allows for this unholy marriage of money and power, by allowing for both to be concentrated in the hands of the few. As anarchism shows us, the state is a highly centralised apparatus of power, monopolising the forces of coercion and administration. Attempting to use this machine of power for our own ends, by handing it over to another small elite to operate, would ultimately mean re-creating another vicious, capitalist Zimbabwe. In other words, the critique goes beyond Mugabe or Zanu-PF. The critique exposes the inherently oppressive structures that exist in society, fuelled as they are, by the very nature of the state itself.

The emergence and blossoming of the #Thisflag movement, and its source of inspiration – Pastor Evan Mawarire – is the beginning of a new chapter of hope in this library of struggle; an important and sacrosanct step as we slowly begin to carve ourselves a way forward. The #Thisflag movement has become the uniting factor within the working class of Zimbabwe, combining the interests of the long-term unemployed, the unemployed graduates and the rest of the broader population. The movement has done more than just inspire; it has ignited a significant amount of hope as fuel for the struggle. This is the essential step towards reconfiguring Zimbabwe's tomorrow today: building pillars like the #ThisFlag movement that stand as structures of counter-power that can be used to oppose and replace the state and capitalism.

A call!

For me, the movement could certainly represent the untainted seeds of a new society; a society founded on solidarity, equality, grassroots democracy, free of all forms of oppression. The movement unconsciously represents the anarchist understanding that the only way to overthrow a bloodlust regime like the one that exists in the country today is through struggle from below. I, therefore, urge for a more conscious critique, developing this already existing understanding of how to struggle which does not build the movement around one person.

Fellow citizens of Zimbabwe, I urge you to avoid the “Moses syndrome”: it is a trap. No truly successful movement of the working class can ever be built around an individual. Moses himself did not enter the Promised Land in the end. Zimbabweans, we must become our own overseers, by watching that the current predatory state is not simply replaced by another opportunistic regime, bringing with it the same forms of oppression that we are currently fighting. Secondly, we have to have a clear understanding that, moving forward, the direction the movement takes is up to us as a collective, and that only as collective can we dismantle this system. The #Thisflag movement must quickly outgrow its dependence on one man’s word, and collectively start to rebuild a credible left, with a mass-based left politics, discourse, movement and alternative for the people.

Having briefly met the ‘good pastor’ during the talk he gave at Rhodes University recently, it became clear that he saw his role as simply creating the spark, but that moving forward it would be up to the ordinary citizen to go beyond rhetoric and develop a deeper political awareness. This kind of awareness should include an appreciation of the fact that the state of Zimbabwe, like all states, has – and always will – usurp the legitimate means of coercion. Nowhere has this been more apparent than in Zimbabwe, where militarized police go about beating anything that moves or breathes (or, especially, fights against injustice). It has also been brutally obvious by the thousands of protestors that are detained in prisons without due process. Combined with this coercive power, the state usurps the means of administration (which we have also blatantly witnessed in the most recent Supreme Court ruling). At the front lines, we must arm ourselves not only with the flag (or better, the black flag of anarchism!) but with a clear understanding of the class system at work in Zimbabwe, and a clear understanding that it is only through bottom-up, mass movements that we will even have a chance of creating effective change.

This is a call for the #Thisflag movement: to disrupt the system continuously, relentlessly and completely, and to lead itself, for itself, and by itself as a movement of all oppressed people in Zimbabwe.

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