

What Makes a Failed State? Examining the Case of Zimbabwe

Written by Roxanne Juliane Kovacs

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This essay will examine the political causes of failed states in Sub Saharan Africa by analysing the case of Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe was once one of Africa's most promising economies and has *unexpectedly* drifted into deprivation and decay (Bratton and Masunungure, 2011); this makes Zimbabwe the most interesting case of state failure. This essay will analyse Zimbabwe's state failure with reference to neighbouring Botswana. This comparison is meaningful because the two countries are extremely similar in terms of their *non political* properties. By comparing failing Zimbabwe to prosperous Botswana we can identify the political causes that have lead the countries to move in such adverse directions. This essay rejects Maundeni's (2002) thesis that the political causes for Zimbabwe's state failure lie in its inherited political culture and shows why the country's failure is connected to its current political regime; the most important political cause of state failure is the fact that Zimbabwe has turned into a predatory state. This work will offer an account for *how* the predatory state has come about in Zimbabwe and *why* this was not the case in Botswana.

Di John's (2008, 1) definition of a failed state entails "not only poor economic performance but the breakdown of the viability and legitimacy of states". Even though it might be difficult in most cases to establish if a state is weak, fragile or failed (Di John, 2008), this is not the case in Zimbabwe. It performs poorly across the board in all of Rotberg's (2002) indicators of state failure (which comprise security, ability to adjudicate conflict, political participation and social service provision) and is currently a clear case of state failure (Brooks 2005). The Foreign Policy Failed State Index ranked Zimbabwe as the 6th most failed state in 2010 and as the 2nd most failed state in 2009, only after Somalia (Foreign Policy 2010).

A comparison between Zimbabwe and Botswana is meaningful because of their similarities. They are landlocked, equally sized, resource rich, neighbouring countries with comparable ethnic diversity, reaching independence at approximately the same time (World Factbook, 2011). Although the countries differ significantly in terms of population density, this should not retract from the argument of this essay. The difference between life in Botswana and Zimbabwe is immense. Botswana is one of Africa's fastest growing economies. It is in the top 10 of highest HDIs in Africa and has a living standard comparable to Turkey (World Bank, 2011). Zimbabwe is with a 54% GDP decline since internationally recognised independence, one of the fastest contracting economies (Makina 2010). Life expectancy is one of the lowest in the world (34 years for women), unemployment is estimated to be over 90% and the IMF's last estimate of hyperinflation lies at 500 billion per cent (ibid.). The fact that there are numerous similarities between Botswana and Zimbabwe suggests that the causes for their respective success and failure *need to be political*.

Zibani Maundeni (2002) argued that the most decisive difference between the two countries is their political culture. He points to the general academic consensus that the Shona state (pre colonial Zimbabwe) was composed of "loose, fragmented and undisciplined small states" (p. 113). While the Tswana culture (pre colonial Botswana) promoted the centrality and coherence of the state (p. 110). He also underlines their diverse colonial histories. In Botswana colonial powers left the state apparatus in place and interfered only minimally in state affairs. A protectorate state was maintained in South Africa rather than in the territory of modern Botswana (p.120). The Shona tribal states, however, tried to violently resist the Rhodesians and after their defeat they became the victims of "excessive colonial

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exploitation" (p.122). Maundeni argues that their inherited political culture is the decisive reason for the difference between the two countries. He argues that Zimbabwe inherited a very "loose and undisciplined" (p.123) state culture and was therefore never able to give rise to a centralised and coherent state.

Maundeni's thesis can, however, only be partially true. It does not take into account the enormous decline in living standards in Zimbabwe since independence; the country's economy fell apart while there was a cumulative gain of over 40 per cent elsewhere in Africa (Zimbabwe Institute, 2007 p.37). After a decline of favourable external conditions during the early years of independence, the real onset of the economic crisis can be traced back to the crash of the Zimbabwean dollar on Friday the 14th of November 1997 (Makina 2010). There is a strong correlation between Robert Mugabe's election in 1980, the establishment of the one party state by the unification of the ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union) and the ZAPU (Zimbabwe African Peoples Union) in 1987 (Jenkins 2011, p.591) and the economic decline of the country. This suggests that the reason for the country's failure is crucially connected to its *current* political regime. To suggest that the complete dominance of one party has been detrimental to the country is oversimplifying matters, because Botswana has also had the same party in power since independence (World Factbook, 2011). Why has one regime tolerated the decline of their country, while the other has worked for prosperity?

One reason for this could be that Zimbabwe turned into a predatory state. Evans (1995) defines predatory states as those that have elites who take large amounts of otherwise investable surplus for their own gain in a way that impedes upon economic transformation (from Leftwich 2007, p.100). Those who are in control of predatory states plunder without regards to the welfare of the citizenry. Zimbabwe is a case of political predation (Moselle and Polak 2001). The reason why Zimbabwe turned into a predatory state is that *wealth comes from political power*, which contrasts with the Marxist assumption that *political power comes from wealth*. (Bayart 1993, as cited in Leftwich 2007, in the context of Zaire). To explain this in more detail, we need to consider a crucial historical event. There was a pact reached between elites at Lancaster House in London in 1979, which involved an implicit bargain that *blacks would ascend to positions of political leadership while whites would continue to enjoy ownership of the means of economic production*." (Bratton and Masunungure, 2011, p.8). The result of this agreement was that for the majority of the population (as in black Zimbabweans), the state turned into the best way to acquire wealth due to the effective exclusion from the private sector. Additionally, the existing political elite was also dependant on the state for wealth generation and clinging on to state power turned into the regime's main objective (ibid.). The ZANU-PF systematically used and abused state resources and power for private gain and the achievement of political goals for their clientele (Bratton and Van de Walle 1997, pp. 61-80). Zimbabwe is also one of the most corrupt countries in the world, which allowed state officials to secure enormous personal profits without repercussions (Bratton and Masunungure, 2011). This is the reason why in Zimbabwe, wealth stems from political power.

Zimbabwe had turned into a predatory state, where the best means for wealth generation was the state itself. In many ways, the ZANU-PF behaved similarly to Mobutu in Zaire. Mobutu sought to smash any alternative resource of political and economic power in order to increase the bargaining power of his rule (Callaghy, as cited in Leftwich 2007). Applying this to Zimbabwe we can make sense of the apparent indifference of the political elite to the economic downfall of the country. The regime was so obsessed with staying in power that economic elites, growth and prosperity only represented obstacles that would decrease their relative power.

The policies implemented by the ZANU-PF in order to cement their rule internally, lead to the downfall of the country. The example of "fast track land reform" is one of many misguided policies aimed at restoring political hegemony out of fear of opposition or economic elites (Selby 2006, p.282). Other misguided political initiatives include, the Second Congo War (Maclean 2002) and the resulting hyperinflation and operation Murambatsvina (Bratton and Masunungure, 2007): these policies strongly contributed to the country's falling apart.

Angus Selby (2006) has done an impressively detailed study on the fast track land reform, a policy that was implemented in 2000, a time of unprecedented vulnerability of the ZANU-PF due to a recently lost referendum on a new constitution (p.286). The referendum was interpreted as a strong defeat for Mugabe and a victory for the main opposition party, the MDC (Movement of Democratic Change). When looking at campaign material and practices, Selby notes that the fast track land reform seemed to have been more about the MDC than about land redistribution

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(p.292, p.302). The government was aware of who had voted “no” in the referendum and those to show explicit support for the MDC were the first to be evicted from their property, mostly with unnecessary violence (p. 286). The land reform was also a way to dismantle the white farming sector, which was viewed as a threat by the government (p.291). By 2005, only 500 of the 5000 white farms were still able to operate (p.300). The effects of land reform on the economy were devastating. As a result of the “land reform”, agricultural production had dropped by 30% by 2004 and by 2003 the whole economy had shrunk by 15% (Richardson, 2004). This led to a severe increase in malnutrition, since 70% of the labour force is employed in the agricultural sector (Chitiga and Mabugu, 2008). Even though it is difficult to assess which developments were exactly caused by the land reform, there is general academic consensus that the consequences for Zimbabweans were almost solely negative (Makina, 2010; Richardson, 2004).

The reason why Botswana did not turn into a predatory state is because political and economic elites were never separated along these clear racial lines. The elites in control of the state and those who owned most of the land and means of production were largely the same. This gave the government a strong incentive to promote private sector development (Hillbom, 2011). The existence of an influential black economic elite (Acemoglu 2002) demonstrates that there were channels other than the state for people to become wealthy. Furthermore, Botswana is the least corrupt country in Africa (Transparency International, 2010). Politicians and bureaucrats have significantly lower incomes than their Zimbabwean counterparts and not much can be earned through corruption (Robinson 2009). This created a further incentive for people to work in the private sector where much higher rewards can be earned.

In conclusion, the reason for Zimbabwe’s state failure cannot simply be its inherited political culture, because the situation in the country has worsened significantly since the current political regime rose to power in 1980. The main reason for Zimbabwe’s failure was the exclusion of black Zimbabweans, which form the vast majority of the population, from the private sector. This turned the state into the best vehicle for people to generate wealth and led to the emergence of a predatory state in Zimbabwe. As a result of this, clinging on to state power became the main objective of the political elite and turned not only opposition movements but also the wealth generating economic elites into enemies of the state. The fact that the state was battling economic progress by implementing policies such as the “fast track land reform” led to the downfall of the country. In Botswana, political and economic elites were never separated along these clear lines. If this would have been the case in Zimbabwe it would be prosperous today and much tragedy could have been avoided.

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