

A fart in the corridors of power: A socio-theological analysis of Evan Mawarire and Raymond Mpandasekwa's activism

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#ThisFlag movement was started by Pastor Evan Mawarire in April 2016 bemoaning the collapse of the Zimbabwean economy at the hands of the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) government under President Robert Mugabe. Although it started off as accidental, it, however, galvanised disparate groups and enabled them to transform anger against the state from online media to the streets. #ThisFlag movement officially started on the 20th of April 2016, when Pastor Mawarire wearing the Zimbabwean flag posted a video to his Facebook page decrying the state of the economy and what he felt was government's neglect of its duties to serve the citizens of Zimbabwe. Although one government minister described Mawarire's actions as a 'pastor's fart in the corridors of power', the reaction by the state security agents points to the contrary. Street protests have been banned. This article interrogates the transformation of #ThisFlag movement from an online struggle to street protests that have turned violent. It also looks at other movements that are complementing #ThisFlag and how the state is responding to these protests both on the social media and on the ground. Evan Mawarire may be considered as an unusual voice from the ever mushrooming new church establishments. As such, it becomes a point of interest to find out what voice there is, which represents what is commonly viewed as mainline churches. Such a voice is identified as coming from Bishop Raymond Mpandasekwa of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Chinhoyi who in one of his sermons delivered an acerbic attack on Mnangagwa's government as a 'blood thirsty' government. The study explored the messages of Mawarire and Mpandasekwa using the socio-theological lenses as guided by Rawls' theory of civil disobedience.

Contribution: This study locates #ThisFlag activism in the context of toxic transformative politics in Zimbabwe. In addition, it contributes to our understanding of the relationship between religion and politics in an unstable political and economic setting. It calls for a re-thinking of the role of the church in Zimbabwean society and discusses the state's response to those deemed to be not towing the line. It shows that while some religious organisations and groups are too keen to be co-opted by the regime, some have effectively resisted this and have become combative as they fight for people's rights. Another important contribution is located in how these pastor-cum-activists have harnessed social media to amplify their voices and to reach huge audiences beyond the pulpit. The study is important because it contextualises the role of religion in the country's contemporary politics, and this fits into the scope of the journal in that it is a multidisciplinary study of both religion and politics.

Keywords: civil disobedience; #ThisFlag; Tajamuka; passive resistance; social media; Evan Mawarire; Raymond Mpandasekwa.

Introduction

It is getting close to a decade since Evan Mawarire, a pastor from one of the Pentecostal churches, stole the limelight on social media platforms. What started off as a personal rant on Facebook suddenly became a normal way for citizens to vent anger against the then president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe. Evan Mawarire was transformed from being an unknown to an overnight activist. Approximately 5 years after the social media frenzy, a voice from a mainline church also emerged challenging the status quo. This was the voice of Raymond Mpandasekwa: a bishop of the Roman Catholic diocese of Chinhoyi. The voices of these two are viewed in this theological discourse as a reincarnation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who fearlessly faced head-on

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Hitler's Nazi rule. Furthermore, this theological dialogue is informed by Henry David Thoreau (1947), a philosopher who argued that citizens must disobey the rule of law if those laws prove to be unjust. Thoreau believed that it was the duty of the citizens to disobey the authority of those who had become corrupt, and that such resistance could be done through non-violent means. The study also gleans on the social philosophy of John Rawls (2009) whose articulation of the theory of civil disobedience still continue to draw attention in the world in general and to Africa in particular, which is largely marred by mis-governance, corruption, harsh silencing of voices of dissent, as well as a general feeling of non-belonging by citizens in their motherland. Thus, informed by the theory of civil disobedience, the authors focus on the Zimbabwean context with the view of proposing a culture of embracing tolerance of diverse political views and accepting of criticism. It is within this context that the claim by Jonathan Moyo¹ of 'a pastor's fart in the corridors of power' is socio-theologically interrogated.

Research methodology, theoretical framework and ethical considerations

This research utilised the qualitative method. As asserted by Yazan (2015) and Creswell (2009), the qualitative methods gather and analyse non-statistical data to interpret meanings and understand social life through the targeted populations. The qualitative method was viewed as appropriate because of its ability to explore complexities of behaviour and processes from the viewpoint of participants regarding the conduct and reactions of government to critical views and general disdain of its implementation of policy and application of rule of law. By nature, the qualitative research makes discoveries, confirms or refutes ideas, controls events and develops theories about the events of the lives of the people (Gentles 2016). It includes empirical, inductive and interpretative situations within a specific context. The choice of the qualitative method was also because of its advantage, namely that researchers use small sample sizes, which can reduce the cost of conducting the research.

The research also relied on social media as a source of data. Zimmerman (2010) asserts that social media as a research tool and data source presents new opportunities for researchers but also new challenges, which require careful consideration and paying regard to ethical standards throughout the lifetime of the project. This study used social media messages that provided a window into people's perceptions, experiences and interpretation of the socio-economic and political happenings in Zimbabwe. This was done by searching for Facebook messages and online articles about the messages of Evan Mawarire and Raymond Mpandasekwa.

1. Professor Jonathan Moyo served as a minister in Mugabe's cabinet. His tenure was abruptly stopped during the November 2017 soft coup d'etat, which was dubbed 'Operation Restore Legacy'. He was regarded as one of the 'criminals surrounding the president'. He self-exiled himself after being sought after by the Mnangagwa regime to answer to corruption charges.

As for the theoretical framework, this dialogue in theology adopted John Rawls' (1971, 1999, 2009) theory of civil disobedience. It is observed that this theory has earlier versions through the works of a philosopher and environmentalist, Henry David Thoreau (1947) and a theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1933) (Bethge 2000). Rawls (1999:319) came up with the theory of 'civil disobedience' from the notion of duty and obligation as guided by, among others, the principles of fairness and whether citizens have an obligation to comply with an unjust law. According to Rawls (1999), this theory is:

[D]esigned only for the special case of a nearly just society, one that is well-ordered for the most part but in which some serious violations of justice nevertheless do occur. (p. 319)

It was noticed in this study that the issues raised, albeit almost 5 years apart, by Evan Mawarire and Raymond Mpandasekwa, respectively, were based on serious violations of justice. The two clerics can fit into Banana's (1991) understanding of the role of the church in society, which must be 'conscious of the struggle of the oppressed and the marginalised and be involved in the campaign for liberation and humanisation of our societies bringing about socio-economic and religio-political changes' (Banana 1991:1). The words of Banana in turn are a reminder of the Latin American Church during the late 1960s and 1970s when the Latin American Bishops uncompromisingly took 'pro-poor policies that emphasised full freedom, freedom from every form of bondage, personal growth and collective assimilation' (Medellin Conference). The messages of Mawarire and Mpandasekwa spoke to this, hence, the applicability of this theory.

Research for this study was conducted using Facebook, online newspaper articles and secondary literature. As the information is already in the public domain, there was no need to maintain anonymity. We therefore believe that the characters in the study will not be put in any kind of danger as a result of this study.

Defining, historicising and relevance of civil disobedience in theology

Rawls (1971:364; 1999:320) defines civil disobedience as 'a public, nonviolent, conscientious yet political act contrary to law usually done with the aim of bringing about a change in the law or policies of the government'. The idea of civil disobedience was to favourably change laws and policies. This change is paradoxical as it breaks law albeit without any form of physical violence.

An analysis of available literature shows that the history of civil disobedience is traceable to an ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates, who was accused of corrupting youth and using his abilities to pervert their loyalties to the rulers. Socrates was accused of making the weaker argument defeat the stronger and teaching others to follow his example. As recounted by Plato (1969:46–47), Socrates pleaded innocent and refused to stop his practice even if the court were to rule against him.

Adhering to his moral duty to resist what he perceived as unjust practices, Socrates proclaimed that:

I owe a greater obedience to God than to you; and so long as I draw breath and have my faculties, I shall never stop practising philosophy and exhorting you and elucidating the truth for everyone that I meet. (Plato 1969:61)

Socrates was sentenced to death by the court. Despite being urged to escape by Crito, Socrates refused to do so and explicitly submitted himself to the judgement reached by the duly established authority. Hence, Socrates provided the precedent for a tradition of dissent that aims at resisting a specific authority, law or policy considered unjust while recognising the rulemaking prerogative of the existing political system as legitimate and generally binding (Bleiker 2002:37; Van den Haag 1972:7–8). As such, Rawls follows the Socratic principle of accepting the existing system as the framework within which civil disobedience takes place. The target is a change in particular laws or policies, rather than an uprooting of the system as such. This same mentality is seen in the messages of Mawarire and Mpandasekwa who never talked of changing the regime. Rather, they pointed at the socio-political ills of the day.

Other peers of civil disobedience in practice are Mahatma Gandhi's principle of 'passive resistance', Henry David Thoreau's refusal to pay tax and Martin Luther King Jr.'s form of civil disobedience during the era of Civil Rights Movements in the United States of America (*cf.* Fern 1986). From a Christian perspective, the story of the biblical Peter resonates well with the theory of civil disobedience when he declared that 'we must obey God rather than men' (Ac 5:29). This scriptural text was taken up by German theologians who were against Hitler's Weimar Republic. Among them was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a young theologian who was part of the Barman Declaration of 1934 (*cf.* Richardson 1969; Bethge 1999). Thus, it can be argued that although it was Rawls who precisely and logically expressed the theory of civil disobedience, it is plausible to assert that this theory is also situated in the Bible and several social philosophical traditions including that of Henry David Thoreau (*cf.* Thoreau 1947).

The theory of civil disobedience is apt to this theological presentation as a way of having a theology informed by the social sciences. According to Berger as quoted by Gill (1987):

[A]n 'empirical theology' is, of course, methodologically impossible. But a theology that proceeds in a step-by-step correlation with what can be said about man empirically is well worth a serious try. (p. 100)

This is made possible by having a theology informed by a discourse such as philosophy, sociology or anthropology. This merger between theology and other discourses in the humanities family is not a new phenomenon. As for instance, theological traditions from St Augustine of Hippo, Anselm and Thomas Aquinas are very clear on the indispensability of philosophy to theology. That philosophy is the handmaid of theology builds onto the position that theology is faith

seeking understanding thereby cementing the point that faith and reason go hand in hand. A theology grounded in social philosophy or any of the disciplines in humanities is enriched by the methodological clarity and logicity of other disciplines in the field of human sciences. In this piece, theology is aided by the social philosophy of John Rawls (1971, 1999) to glean into the socio-political imports of the messages of Evan Mawarire and Raymond Mpandasekwa.

Means of communication

In regimes that are undemocratic, channels of communication are always controlled and monitored and Zimbabwean scholars have contributed greatly in this field (Chitando & Tarusarira 2019; Chitando, Togarasei & Tarusarira 2023; Muchemwa 2010; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009). These scholars show that dissenting voices are always silenced on the one hand while the state also dominates the spaces of communication both formal and informal. This has resulted in the deployment of alternative media to effectively circumvent and challenge state media controls (Mano & Mukhongo 2016). The collapse of the Zimbabwean economy, coupled with the rise of the Movement for Democratic Change led by Morgan Tsvangirai as a credible opposition forced the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) government to enact laws that tightened the flow of information in the country (Bond & Manyanya 2002). Freedom of speech, although enshrined in the country's constitution, was wantonly trampled as the state dominated both the airwaves and the print media. Since the year 2000, the space for public engagement in Zimbabwe increasingly shrank, because of legislation that allowed the government to watch and regulate public speech, proscribe public gatherings, arrest journalists and shut down privately owned newspapers and radio stations (Melber 2004; Moyo 2009).

The growth in the use of new media and internet usage provided various affordances for the publics as they no longer depended on state churned propaganda for information (Manganga 2012). In Zimbabwe, a number of alternative media rose in and around the year 2000 in response to the shrinking of the media space as well as by efforts by ZANU-PF to saturate the state-controlled media with its propaganda. One form of the alternative media was through what have been termed as pirate radios that have employed new media technologies to broadcast into Zimbabwe from such countries as the United States of America, Netherlands and other countries (Dombo 2017). Side by side to the online radios, there was a proliferation of Facebook pages, the most popular being Baba Jukwa and Mai Jukwa's pages. Karekwaivenane has shown in his study that the Facebook was used to convene an unruly public that situated itself in opposition to the state controlled public sphere (Bosch, Mare & Ncube 2020; Karekwaivenane 2019; Mavengano & Moyo 2023). These have had different impact on Zimbabwean politics. Facebook page increasingly began to serve as a discursive forum where Zimbabwe's history and politics were fiercely debated. It also represented the most significant effort to use social media as a political tool in Zimbabwe up to that point (Karekwaivenane 2019).

Side by side with the modern technologies, Bishop Mpandasekwa was using the pulpit to preach on issues of service delivery and freedoms. The messages were directly from his sermons on Sunday to his congregants. The choice of this mode to convey messages was possibly motivated by the fact that it could not be censored. It was a novel way of getting the message across.

Setting the Scene: Mawarire and Mpandasekwa on socio-economic and political situation in Zimbabwe

The church in Zimbabwe has always played a paradoxical role in society as it played on one hand liberative and on the other oppressive roles. This study tersely looked at liberative role by focusing on Mawarire and Mpandasekwa who had the guts to address state excesses. According to the *Guardian Africa network Zimbabwe*, Pastor Evan Mawarire was sitting at his desk in Harare, worrying about how he was going to pay his children's school fees, when something inside him snapped. As someone who is not paid a salary by the church, Pastor Mawarire decided to film himself venting his frustrations with the Zimbabwean flag around his neck, pointing out that the country's flag no longer gave him a sense of pride and inspiration.

Mawarire argued that he had been encouraged by the reaction from the Facebook users who began to forward his messages as well as creating their own messages accompanied by pictures of themselves wrapped in the flag. Others wrote to say that he had expressed the feelings that they were too scared to vocalise. He responded to the widespread enthusiasm by declaring 5 days of digital activism using #ThisFlag, which was then extended to 25 days by popular demand. The issues raised by Mawarire spoke to the many issues faced by Zimbabweans who have yearned for government accountability for years. The cries of the people centred on the need to build broken institutions responsible for governance. The 25 days of activism was therefore meant to nudge the government towards change.

Representing a Zimbabwean mainline church with a track record of bringing to the general populace civic education, Bishop Raymond Mpandasekwa had this to say:

'The governed are being insulted everyday by the same people, through their careless utterances and disregard for the Constitution'. He further highlighted the dire security threats to dissenting voices saying 'living for justice is dangerous, for we live in a country that refuses to deliver justice.' (New Zimbabwean 2022:1)

The *New Zimbabwean* further reported that the man-of-the-cloth had in previous years attracted the wrath of state security agents over his uncompromising stance towards corrupt, wicked and selfish leadership. In an audio recording of one of his Sunday sermon posted on Facebook, Mpandasekwa, among other ills, lamented indiscriminate killing of Mnangagwa's opponents and efforts to militarise

the medical profession following years of dissatisfaction by doctors and nurses as they clamoured for better working conditions. Furthermore, without mentioning Mnangagwa by name, the clergyman accused government on clamping down on dissent, thereby creating a 'fiefdom of a selected few'. He further vented his frustration on the shortcomings of the ZANU-PF government saying:

They bring bloodshed, they kill, instead of freedom they bring imprisonment to those who oppose them, those who think differently, to those who disagree with their policies. The only thing they know is violence. These people bring bloodshed, that lacking in integrity, they are dishonest. All they bring is nothing but distress ... what greater distress was brought upon us when the plight of our doctors was, a few days ago, responded to by a terrible proposition to turn our civilian doctors into soldiers, who will from then on go by instruction. (New Zimbabwean 2022:1)

In an apparent reference to ZANU PF that he dubbed the 'freedom party', the cleric said the outfit was now tormenting professionals and civilians alike.

The message by Mawarire has brought to the fore the key question of belonging to Zimbabwe and what it means to be a Zimbabwean. Mawarire effectively appropriated national symbols for political mileage. In reflecting on why he focuses his message on the flag, Pastor Mawarire focused on what he had learnt from elementary school:

In primary school we are taught that every colour means something. The green stands for the agricultural backbone of Zimbabwe's economy. The yellow stands for the richness of the minerals that are deposited in Zimbabwe, from gold to platinum to lithium to chrome to diamonds. The red stands for the blood that was shed during the liberation struggle. The black stands for the Black majority who are now controllers of their own destiny and rule their own country. (Journal of International Affairs 2020:1)

The same messages by Mawarire were echoed by Bishop Mpandasekwa who in one of his sermons decried the role played by the ruling party in the suffering of the people:

Indeed, the freedom party refuses to give freedom of choice by refusing to listen to the cries of the distressed doctors. Instead, they propose more distress. Our children are not going to school, except the few lucky ones. Our sick are not being treated in our hospitals. And yet our leadership see their policies as right and good. What blindness is this? I wish I could tell St Paul how dangerous it is in a country that is now miles away from where truth lives. I wish I could tell St Paul that living for justice is dangerous in a country that refuses to deliver justice. (New Zimbabwean 2022:1)

The #ThisFlag movement focused on the problems that bedevilled the country, namely corruption, injustice and poverty. Through the various messages broadcasted, there was an attempt to dissuade the government of Robert Mugabe from appointing people who were known to be corrupt as leaders. His message echoed what several people and organisations have identified as the root cause of what has been termed as the Zimbabwean crisis, a crisis of governance where the rulers are not answerable to the

people but to the appointing authority. Mawarire succinctly pointed out the desire to have accountable leadership when he said:

We need to have people that are put into government not because of their loyalty to a party, but because of how they understand the area that they are being appointed for. We have got to start appointing competent people into positions of leadership. That's number one. The second is to deal with corrupt ruthlessly, in terms of using the law. They must be prosecuted for it. They must be arrested. There must be prosecutions after investigations have been done. When a government doesn't take the issue of corruption seriously by prosecuting those who are known as corrupt, it sends a message to the rest of the nation that it is okay to be corrupt. That's how you end up with an entire corrupt nation. Corrupt children in schools. Corrupt officials at border posts, at police stations, at hospitals. (Journal of International Affairs 2020:1)

While Mawarire has been accused of dabbling into politics to affect an illegal regime change, he has disputed this. The idea of #ThisFlag protest did not aspire to remove Mugabe from office but was merely an eye opener to the prevailing central problems of corruption, injustice and poverty that had bedevilled the country for a long time. According to Mawarire, these issues were inseparable with his faith:

It is impossible to separate my faith from my protest action because that is what drives my stance of nonviolence, my stance of speaking truth to power without having to insult or purvey bloodshed. The values of justice, fairness, compassion, freedom are, for me, Christian values. In the past few years, I have faced difficult moments of physical abuse at the hands of state actors. The ability to weather those storms, comes from my faith. I think it has played a large role in keeping me focused, even, keeping me alive. (Journal of International Affairs 2020:1)

The impact of the fart

The # ThisFlag Movement although it began as an elitist movement, confined to Facebook, it slowly gained traction as people were hooked on Facebook to hear the messages by someone who was hitherto an unknown person. The messages were compressed and forwarded to many people. It was enough to ruffle the feathers of the government. Although the initial response was to label it as just a fart in the corridors of power, the movement could not be ignored. The then minister of Higher Education Professor Jonathan Moyo further mocked the movement as being used to 'make money and boost attendance at his church'. Moyo additionally attacked the movement and its supporters as nameless, faceless trolls who had to be quietened by an alternative movement he called #OurFlag. This, however, did not deter the people as Mawarire's movement gave birth to a number of users who had suddenly gained the confidence to express their feelings through Facebook. The popularity of #ThisFlag shows beyond debate that it was not just but a fart, it came across as a pain in the neck of the regime that had to be dealt with.

The chief target of the movement, the then President of Zimbabwe could not remain silent. As his norm, he took the

opportunity to respond to Mawarire while at the burial of a liberation hero. He had this to say:

You can't urge people to adopt violence, violent demonstrations as the way of life or a way of solving grievances, no. We will say no, forever no. So beware these men of cloth, not all of them are true preachers of the Bible. I don't know whether they are serving God. They spell God in reverse. The Mawarires, if they don't like to live with us, let them go to those who are sponsoring them, to the countries that are sponsoring them. (Yahoo Finance 2016:1)

Mugabe was saying this at a time he had crossed the breadth and length of the country visiting religious groups drumming up support for his party and presidency. Even the state media went on the overdrive in attacking Mawarire's religious beliefs.

The state media attacked Mawarire for not practicing Christianity, but what was termed as Churchianity, a brand of Christianity that was seen as grandstanding and attention seeking. The state media further gave veiled threats to Pastor Evan Mawarire:

You did not learn from Archbishop Pius Ncube of Bulawayo, famed for political grandstanding during church services, while bedding church congregants at his church house. Ask Pius today, what hit him? You swallowed a mango seed, deal with it. Your innards are not at peace. (Guvamombe 2016:1)

The #ThisFlag social movement also emboldened other social movements that arose almost parallel to it. One such movement was the #Tajamuka, which also deployed the social media to get its message across. They also appropriated the national flag as a symbol of their anti-ZANU-PF struggle. Resultantly, the government of Zimbabwe banned the manufacture and use of the flag without the written permission of the justice ministry (Withnall 2016). The government pointed out that the national flag was very important and must be respected by the public. The government said:

[F]ailure to respect the national flag can land one in prison or be forced to pay a fine of \$300 or both. There are certain things that people do that are tantamount to abuse and disrespect of the national flag. (Withnall 2016:1)

Conclusion

Politics and religion have been increasingly becoming intertwined in Zimbabwe. Ruling party politicians are seen at church shrines hoping to get supporters, even from those religious sects that have a bad record in human rights issues such as child marriages. The leader of the main opposition party campaigns under the theme #godisinit. Religious sects and organisations have become a battle ground for politicians in which they run for support. However, the same religious organisations and their leaders have also taken the initiative to either be used by politicians or to control the narrative by effectively challenging the establishment. This article has shown through the activism of one Pentecostal pastor and one Bishop from the mainline churches that authority can be

challenged to the core. Even though the movement was labelled as just but a pastor's fart, the response by the ZANU-PF government to the activism of the two pastors points to the contrary. Pastor Mawarire was arrested, followed by state security, threatened by the country's president, and arraigned before the courts with a charge of wanting to overthrow a constitutionally elected government. We thus conclude that the activities of the pastors were more than a fart, it was a nuisance that had a lingering experience that continued to bother the establishment. In the long run, it had a bearing on the removal of Robert Mugabe from office in 2017.

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Authors' contributions

P.M. contributed through the methodology and conceptual issues as well as the write up. S.D. contributed in focusing on the messages and the impact of the activism by Pastor Evan Mawarire and Bishop Mpandaware. Both authors contributed in editing of the final work.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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