

# **An Emergent Consciousness of the Role of Christianity on Zimbabwe's Political Field: A Case of Non-doctrinal Religio-political Actors**

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## **Abstract**

A distinct phenomenon of religio-political actors that emerged in Zimbabwe as a result of the socio-economic and political crises since 2000, alleged co-option and acquiescence of the mainline churches and the influence of globalisation, has received no more than fleeting attention in the academic discourse of religion in Zimbabwe's political domain. Much of the available literature and research on religion and politics in Zimbabwe concentrates on the mainline church bodies and denominational histories, such as the Roman Catholic Church, Zimbabwe Council of Churches, or Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa. Non-doctrinal religio-political individuals and groups have been treated either as a marginal phenomenon or lumped together with confessional or 'conversionist' churches under the rubric of religious actors. This consequently obscures the uniqueness of emergent religio-political organizations that have assumed a civil society character in pursuit of broader political objectives such as democratization, without seeking political office. Drawing from fieldwork on three religio-political organizations in Zimbabwe namely the Zimbabwe Christian Alliance, Churches in Manicaland and Grace to Heal, this article argues that Zimbabwe is witnessing a new consciousness of the role of Christianity on the political field. Thus we require a nuanced analysis of religious formations within prevailing discourses on democratization, civil society, and religious freedom.

**Keywords:** religio-political actors, co-option and acquiescence, mainline churches, non-doctrinal, democratization

## **Introduction**

A distinct phenomenon of religious actors that emerged as a result of socio-economic and political crises in Zimbabwe since 2000, alleged co-option and acquiescence of the mainline churches and the influence of globalisation, have not received much attention in the discourse of religion and the public domain. The role of religion in the public sphere has been dominated by a focus on mainline established church bodies and denominational histories, such as the Roman Catholic Church, Zimbabwe Council of Churches, or Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (McLaughlin 1996; Kurewa 1997; Bhebe 1999; Maxwell 2006; Chimhanda 2008). Non-doctrinal<sup>1</sup> religious civil society groups and individuals are treated as a marginal phenomenon or are lumped together with confessional or 'conversionist' churches under the rubric of religious actors (Kuperus 1999, Hallencreutz and Moyo 1988). This consequently obscures the uniqueness of new religio-political organizations that have emerged and assumed the character of civil society, to pursue political objectives, without seeking political office. Hence I concur with Hackett (2001: 122) that 'a contextual analysis is needed within prevailing discourses on democratization, civil society, and religious freedom and the role of these religious formations therein' at meso- and micro levels.

The emergent organisations do not merely resemble a new type of actors on the religious public domain, but is also evidence of the transformation of Christian religio-political practice, characterised by extra-institutional expressions of religion understood as how people of faith are keeping their faith alive outside or in addition to the institutional churches (Ganiel 2016). However two factors threaten to lead to the disappearance of these organisations: firstly their operations are contingent on competitive and scarce donor funding and secondly they operate a within politically hostile environment whose wish is to see them disappear. This article not only guards against their disappearance without trace, but also shows that in the face of unsatisfactory religio-political culture, dissatisfied coreligionists emerge, conglomerate and organise themselves in pursuit of broader political objectives without cutting ties with their mainline churches. This is a phenomenon and dynamic that has not been noted in scholarship, which results in an insider/outsider complex. The emergent actors operate outside the jurisdiction

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<sup>1</sup> Non-doctrinal refers to the state of not holding any particular doctrines or dogma driven or based upon a particular religious tradition or denomination.

of the mainline churches because they do not conform to their approach to political affairs, but still agree on doctrines that are not linked to politics hence remain inside. The article demonstrates that it is possible for religionists not to conform to established conventions on particular issues but still remain insiders. This goes contrary to the common perception that religious non-conformism always results in schism.

Since independence in 1980, mainline Christian denominations and organisations enjoyed a rather cosy relationship with the Zimbabwean state. But in the last decade, in light of the state's abuses of power and use of violence against its own citizens, new Christian organisations and individuals have emerged to question the propriety of this relationship. Wider processes of globalisation and secularisation have also affected how some religious actors in Zimbabwe view Christianity's relationship with the state and the role of religion in the public sphere. Drawing on original research with three religio-political organisations in Zimbabwe, the article explores how Christian groups are questioning old forms of spirituality and developing new ones. The article discusses the public discourses and socio-political projects developed by these groups, contrasting them to the relative silence and inactivity of many church institutions. It argues that structural features including a degree of separateness from mainline denominations, flexibility, and the ability to form networks with like-minded organisations play a key part in the effectiveness of religious actors in responding to political instability, conflict and violence. The article concludes that religious non-conformism is a potential resource for alternative ways of interpreting life and establishing social values. Religious non-conformists, while smaller in number than their mainline counterparts, may exert a greater than imagined influence on cultural dynamics and political culture in Zimbabwe; hence it is important to articulate the context that gave rise to a new religio-political consciousness in Zimbabwe.

## **The Contextual Framework of Political Economic and Social Crises**

The emergence of the religio-political organisations under study cannot be understood outside Zimbabwe's political economy. It is the milieu that prompted their emergence. Zimbabwe attained independence from Britain in 1980. However, the authoritarian political culture that had existed during the

colonial era did not vanish with the introduction of a new government. Zimbabwe has been marred by violence since 1980 to the time during which the religio-political movements emerged. The following conflict and violence flashpoints are cases in point: *Gukurahundi* which was an attack on the second major tribe in the Midlands and Matebeleland provinces in Zimbabwe which began when mistrust grew between ZANU PF and the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU). This dated from the time of integrating the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), the military wing of ZANU PF, Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), the military wing of ZAPU and the Rhodesian army into one national army. Political violence, not just from 2008, but stretching back to 1980 and beyond has dominated election periods. Political institutions such as the security sector, the judiciary system, economic corruption, land reform programme, have contributed to institutionalisation of direct and structural violence (see Harold-Barry 2004). Operation Restore Order, commonly known as *Murambatsvina* (a Shona language word which means get rid of the filth) where alleged illegal houses of ordinary people mostly in urban areas were demolished by the government was a crystal clear case of a state turning against its citizens (see Tibaijuka 2008). The populace, which seemingly appears as rather religious, looked up to the mainline churches but they did not appear to live up to expectations in this regard.

## **Whither Mainline Denominations and Churches**

Scholars such as Phiri (2001) advance the thesis that churches (ecumenically, denominationally or congregationally) intervene in national politics when a vacuum occurs in African political systems, when the state represses civil society organisations. I argue that developments in Zimbabwe show a different trajectory. Churches, in post-independence Zimbabwe, have not provided the required cognitive, emotional and moral guidance in dealing with the legacies of the political past as well as present political challenges to the government. In the mid-2000s, three of the historic mainline churches and their apex bodies, that is, the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC), Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) and Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ) – attempted to facilitate talks between the main political parties, Zimbabwe

African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). But ZANU-PF tried to co-opt these organisations and other prominent Christian leaders. For example, the government censored their discussion document '*The Zimbabwe We Want*' developed by these bodies, before it was published, and wooed leaders with invitations to State House (Mpofu n.d.). Bishop Nemepere the head of the team that went to state house to meet the President is quoted as saying 'we know we have a government that we must support, interact with and draw attention to concerns. Those of us who have different ideas about this country must know we have a government which listens (Mpofu n.d.:22)'. This meeting marked the end of the dialogue as sponsored by the churches and makes one conclude that the Church failed to rise above political patronage' (see Tarusarira 2016).

Mainline church bodies were courted by political elites with gifts. This resonates with Haynes' (1996) observation that mainstream religious organisations often have a mutually beneficial relationship with the state because of their strong desire to keep their religious influence, which can better be done in an environment of good rather than poor relations, and also because of a normative concern with stability as a good thing in itself. The institutional churches in Zimbabwe have therefore not challenged repression and oppression. This resulted in the emergence of new religio-political movements not focused on fixed and strict structure, authority and tradition, but flexible and fluid structures that can quickly and radically respond to issues of concern in society.

Some analysts (Chitando & Manyonganise 2011) have argued that the churches have been very critical of the regime's oppressive tendencies as evidenced by the critical and strong pastoral letters they have published. However, Lapsley (1988:115-116) to my concurrence, laments that for other church leaders verbal opposition is sufficient indication of a commitment to justice, while for others pursuit of justice involves actions rather than words. As Brewer et. al (2011) have argued based on Northern Ireland churches, mainline churches often involve themselves in ritualized expressions of the social desirability of peace and reconciliation, trenchant denunciations of violence and atrocity, sometimes against all sides, occasionally one-sidedly, and criticism of perpetrators of violence. But they often rely on the power of 'the statement', on 'the word', and the 'good news' explicit in Christian teaching, as if oratory were all that is important. This is instead of living out the commitment to social practices, involving commitment to behaviours,

values, beliefs, and discursive formations that make peace a reality. Peace-making and reconciliation should be made a habit, tradition, as well as an ideal, in which reconciliation affects the kinds of social relationships practitioners have and the social actions they perform in order to make a peaceful society. This will include speechifying but implementation of reconciliation by action is primary. Often they practice ‘elastic band leadership and leashed leadership’ (Brewer *et al.* 2011: 98). The former is understood as leadership that takes followers forwards but is cautious not to ‘break the elastic’, while the latter keeps a very tight leash on what it sees as the potentially damaging forms of mass populist action loitering just beneath the surface. Elsewhere, I have called these approaches theodicies of legitimization in contrast to theodicies of liberation (see Tarusarira 2014; see also Campbell 2010).

Pastoral letters regardless of how intellectually sharp and thorny they may be, appears to make the church distant from the people, and only provides interaction between the letter and the reader, or to be a little more fair, between the reader and the bishops, in an impersonal way, but do not provide a dialogical process. Issues of political instability, conflict and violence require direct interaction to resolve them and not a general approach. Hence I argue that if the pastoral letters are to be effective, they have to be deconstructed to be accessible to the grassroots. Thus Brewer *et al.* (2010: 1032), drawing from Galtung (1996) call the lack of more radical action, restriction to negative peace. The distinction between negative and positive peace is often traced to Galtung (1996:3). The former refers to the absence of violence, while the latter refers to achievement of fairness, justice and social redistribution. With respect to the mainline churches, negative peace refers to ‘the provision of pastoral care to the affected communities, criticisms of violence, calls for restraint, formulaic statements after each tragedy (Brewer *et al.* 2010: 1032). Thus despite numerous pastoral letters that were issued violence persisted on the political field (Zimudzi 2006: 201). In the end the approaches of mainline churches end up shoring up the political system. This prompted disgruntled Christians, who could not watch the prophetic voice and actions being compromised, to organize themselves outside the jurisdiction of the church structures to pursue broader political objectives.

## **Enter Religio-political Movements**

As Herbert (2003) argues, the world in the last two decades of the twentieth

century has witnessed religions ‘re-enter’ public space as influential discursive and symbolic systems, beyond the control of either traditional religious authoring institutions or states. In Africa, ‘re-entering’ should not be understood as in the case in societies where secularisation has made significant strides, but as increased politically engaged religious activity over time. As Ellis and ter Haar (1998:187) argue, there is no reason to suppose that religious belief ever declined in Africa. It would be most accurate to refer to the revival of public religion or revival of religion in the occupation of political space. Given the perceived ineffectiveness or low index of trust of groups like ZCBC, ZCC and EFZ it is not surprising that dissatisfied coreligionists have formed new extra-institutional groups and movements thereby demonstrating that Christianity in Zimbabwe has the potential to transform from being pietistic to challenge the political systems and engage with those at the margins of society and the oppressed. The emergence of these movements should also be viewed within the wider globalisation and now strained secularisation discourse.

As Robertson (1992:8) notes, globalisation refers to ‘both the compression of the world and the intensification of the world as a whole’ characterised by extensive connectivity and global consciousness (see Robertson 2003:6). It also substantially implies increased interdependence, involving both states and non-states in themes such as economic, developmental, social, political, technological, environmental, gender and human rights *inter alia* (Haynes 2007:65–95). What happens in one state affects others leading to an interconnected global context of action. For the purposes of this article transnational activity and globalisation are understood as religion expanding explosively, stimulated by secular global processes in contemporary times (Rudolph 1997:1). The *modus operandi* of globalisation involves neoliberal<sup>2</sup> approaches such as civil society and social movement approaches, network society, decentralisation and bottom-up politics as responsive strategies. In the vein of secularisation the aforementioned themes and strategies are mediated through the use of rationalisation and impersonal criteria to decide, allocate and adjudicate (Beyer 1994). To mention secularisation is not to assert that Zimbabwe has been secularised. Zimbabwe is a complex situation in which I prefer to talk of secularisation of the state and

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<sup>2</sup> Neoliberal approaches sometimes include cooperating with multinationals or funders who may want to implant their agendas, thereby making it difficult for local organisations to respond to local needs (see Bradley 2009:272)

not of the society. The politically engaged religious movements in question busy themselves with and employ the globally acclaimed issues and strategies respectively within the Zimbabwean context. This raises the question of whether the religious and the secular can be easily and hermetically separated. Hence developments on the global stage have also influenced the religio-political response to the body *politik* in Zimbabwe.

Globalisation is not only material or techno-economic but also cultural and political involving consciousness, cognitive schema, models of authority, and goals of progress (Thomas 2007: 36) transmitted through international linkages and through rational instrumental means (global rationalism). This implies responding to wider social processes that are rendering former understandings of territory, society and cultural identity problematic (Coleman 2000:4-5). Due to global communication networks (Haynes 2007) political, social and economical global developments reach various locales faster than before the advent of globalisation, and ‘people, cultures, societies and civilisations previously separated are now in regular unavoidable contact (Beyer 1994:2). Globalisation smacks of oneness of place and time (Beyer 1994) leading to a world culture comprised of things, identities and models of action that are pervasive throughout the world (Thomas 2007:37). One can therefore not underestimate the transnational influence of events such as the September 11 attacks, the role of religion in fighting apartheid in South Africa, the role of Roman Catholicism in formation of the Solidarity movement in Poland, the Iranian revolution in 1978, *inter alia*. Globalisation has therefore served to influence religious organisations to adopt new or renewed agendas. This process should not be viewed as mere adoption of global views but negotiation of global processes and construction of new agendas and processes.

Globalisation has drawn actors into extensive networks and layers of regional and international governance, thereby creating a collective weight in the form of global civil society capable of challenging hegemonic discourses (Bradley 2009:268). Some of these agendas include internationally acclaimed values such as social development and human rights *inter alia*. In addition to the use of information communication and technology to broadcast their messages, these movements have forged international links for resource mobilisation and in a search for solidarity, since ‘transnational movements magnify beliefs and grievances expressed at local level’ (Bradley 2009:269). While globalisation and modernisation puts religion into question, it is the watershed for the transformation of religion from the ‘traditional’ mainline

religion to politically engaged religious movements (see Thomas 2007:37-39). Due to the dialogical interaction of globalisation and religion, traditional religion across the world could not remain the same.

Between 2012 and 2014 I carried out qualitative research on three organisations namely Zimbabwe Christian Alliance (ZCA), Churches in Manicaland (province) (CiM), and Grace to Heal (GtH). I selected and analysed these religious movements as one dimension within the larger corpus of civil society. I focused on their culture, organisation and their operational environment. The coordinator of ZCA described the organisation as ‘a network of faith-based groups and individuals with a calling in peace and justice work’. In explaining what prompted the founding of the organisation he referred to a government sponsored exercise called Operation Restore Order/*Murambatsvina* (refuse dirt) which left more than 700,000 urban informal settlers homeless under the guise of restoring order and rooting out illegal activities through destroying illegal structures. Emerging from this was that the root cause of *Murambatsvina* or the destroying of people's homes could really be traced back to bad governance. But at that time there was a vacuum which the recognised churches were not speaking out about, nor did they move in to assist. ZCA realised that in order to deal with the deeper problem of Zimbabwe, which in their view is bad governance, numerous governance strands needed attention. These strands included a new constitution, processes of national healing and an election process. They decided they ‘would engage on issues of justice without conforming to the status quo that was there but in order to create a new wine skin that we would use to engage with our context’, according to the Coordinator. ZCA derives its mandate from the Bible, particularly Psalm 82:1-4 which says ‘God presides in the great assembly; he gives judgement among the gods. How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked? Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the weak and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; Deliver them from the hand of the wicked’ (Newsletter March 2008).

Towards its objectives, ZCA had to articulate certain strategic activities which included some of the following, similar to those associated with globalisation, especially neoliberal approaches: public prayer meetings, workshops to empower volunteer activists and create awareness on various political challenges and empower people with skills for post-conflict reconciliation and counselling, writing workshops aimed at responsible journalism in the face of state controlled journalism that breeds hatred and

tension. It has also issued out position papers, published a newsletter to share its reflections on topical issues in the country. For some of its activities it has been subjected to police brutality and arrests. Influenced by its adoption of the global human rights and civil society discourse in addition to the local initiatives, ZCA endeavoured to create extensive regional and international networks and layers to create a collective weight in the form of global civil society capable of challenging hegemonic discourses. To this end it has interacted with regional and global actors. Some of its workshops have been facilitated by founder of the Institute for Healing of Memories South Africa, Fr Michael Lapsley (April-May Newsletter 2009:5). In 2009 the Archbishop of Uppsala Church of Sweden and his delegation visited Zimbabwe and met with the leadership of ZCA with whom they reflected upon the crises in the country. On the regional front, a case in point is ZCA's engagement with church leaders and civil society groups from Tanzania, Botswana, South Africa and Swaziland. ZCA members say that they have been encouraged by the activities of people such as Bishop Paul Verry of the Methodist Church in Johannesburg who has offered Zimbabwean political and economic refugees shelter, and who it honoured with a Justice and Peace Award. ZCA has partnered with international actors such as Tear Fund UK and has participated at global platforms to articulate various political issues with respect to the Zimbabwean crises.

*Churches in Manicaland* (Manicaland is a Province in Eastern Zimbabwe) is an 'ecumenical' gathering of members from Christian denominations and organizations in the province of Manicaland. It was formed in 2000 at the time of great violence and uncertainty, intimidation and violence. The use of the word 'churches' does not here refer to the institutional church but to individual Christians, who would not be able to speak at high-ranking platforms unlike mainline bodies. In a demonstration of decentralisation, CiM refers to itself as a forum or a loose platform without a formal structure of leadership. This strategically makes it difficult for the state security to pick on anyone as the point person of the forum, prevents possible leadership wrangles and makes it accessible to everyone involved. In a depiction of the influence of globalisation, one founder member expressing her motivation to be part of CiM said:

At the time I was working with the All Africa Conference of Churches in this region on Churches and Ministry with uprooted people and

immediately I recognised what I had seen in other countries that we were in a crises which was going to be uprooting a large number of people if we were not going to be careful. That is where my motivation came from. I was also a member of Commission on the World Council of Churches on International Affairs so I had the international perspective as well (interview with a founding member)

Institutional churches tend to be conservative and rigid (Kull 2010: 124). Thus CiM prides itself on flexibility. One Catholic interviewee said:

That is the main reason why I am so passionate about CiM. In as much as I have done a lot with the Catholic Justice and Peace commission, the bureaucratic nature and the limitations within the Catholic Church are problematic, I would say for example if there is a crisis, I must go to the Bishop, and it takes about 2 to 3 weeks before a statement is passed and by the time it is passed, it is no longer relevant. These are limitations I don't find in CiM. We sit down and say this is what we want to do. It's done and it will be relevant. It will be up to time and relevant .... I find CiM more flexible and giving room for innovations for practical interventions.

To further explain the institutional inertia of mainline churches and bodies in favour of decentralisation and bottom-up politics as responsive strategies, a thinking derivable from the globalisation discourse, a CiM interviewee, a founding member, narrated that on behalf of CiM, she went to ZCC and spoke to its 'official' and the way the official responded, according to her, showed her where the problem was. She says the official was not a man of great decision, and she said to him, 'I think if we miss this moment in the history of Zimbabwe, we the churches are going to have a hard time relating to whatever develops from this'. When CiM attempted to make use of the national heads of churches to take concerns to the national political leaders, it received a very slow and muted response until it wrote a letter to ZCC outlining its dissatisfaction. She further asserted that the church leaders were not well organised:

In 1980 they worked together as a fantastic team on repatriation and reintegration of refugees after the liberation war, but after that it was

just a tip, they met here and there and swapped stories, so they were not really oriented towards picking up stories from the ground and running up like that. We decided to write them a letter to tell them where we stand from Manicaland province and how we see things. We signed our names as individual denominations. That particular letter had about 40 names.

In terms of strategy CiM deployed bottom up and grassroots approaches. It used newsletters which it started using during the election periods as a way to educate voters. It emphasized voting responsibly, abstaining from violence, voting for something they believed has a future for them and their children *inter alia*. It distributed flyers and newsletters at various places including bus terminuses where its members gave travellers the newsletters and pamphlets to take to the remotest of places in the rural areas. CiM members have visited some chiefs in Manicaland province, to express their concern about violence that was taking place in their chiefdoms. It reports that some chiefs were happy that CiM had visited them. Since the institution of the chiefs had been politicised by the ZANU PF government, others viewed CiM as a group of politicians advocating for the opposition party MDC. This perception is based on the fact that the language of CiM sounds similar to that of the MDC, especially the emphasis on respect for human rights, democracy and freedoms. This is a language that ZANU PF has not been entertaining since the late 1990s. CiM formed teams such as a rapid response team that responded immediately to acts of arson in the province. The team would respond by moving in to stop any violent situations and also publicise the acts to the world. It would make known the presence of groups wielding sticks and spears. Anybody who wanted to send messages about a problem could immediately do so and the team would respond immediately. Since the whites had become direct victims due to the land question in which the government expropriated land from them, another group looking into race relations was established, as was one looking into youth expectations. A research team was put up to substantiate and inform CiM activities. CiM organised workshops for interested pastors from all religious denominations in Manicaland because it felt violence was not discriminating anybody on grounds of religion. Because pastors were living in fear, the workshops became a source of solidarity and ideas. The preceding narrative demonstrates implementation of social movement and bottom-up politics.

CIM engaged political elites in an effort to rope them into the fight against all forms of political violence, especially between political parties. People who did not support one particular party were subjected to violence through beatings or having their houses burnt. CIM therefore engaged the governor of the province and asked her to make a statement for peace in the province. Likewise the chief of police and the Electoral Commission officials were engaged to facilitate peaceful elections and co-existence in the province. Speaking at the Joint Monitoring and Implementation Committee (JOMIC) provincial stakeholders' conference in Mutare. Reverend M<sup>3</sup> demanded that churches be incorporated in the activities of this body because CIM believed that religious actors have power and influence in pacifying the nation (Manayiti 2012).

The Director of GtH narrated that the organization was formed during the time of land upheavals and the consequent political, economic and political instability. In this development, of interest to GtH is not the land question per se, but the violence that was associated with it. The land question became a watershed of violence in Zimbabwe. Issues of concern to GtH, were not restricted to the late 1990s and early 2000s. They included 1980s massacres in Matabeleland province, known as '*Gukurahundi*'. However, it was also prompted by the violent farm invasions and seizures, the 2005 'Operation Restore Order/*Murambatsvina*', violence against opposing party activists and supporters during election times which saw many people being killed, severely maimed and properties vandalised. From the Baptist Church of Bulawayo members of GtH reflected on what they needed to do in the face of the political crisis. Coming from Matabeleland province, they decided upon *Gukurahundi* as the starting point. An interviewee said:

The motivation is basically that we are called to be peace makers. Jesus is the healer and he is the prince of peace and so as a Christian organisation, we were guided particularly by I Cor 5: 18 ff which says he has given unto us the message of reconciliation. There is a context of us reconciling to God but we do believe it can be applied broader than just that.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview partner made anonymous.

GtH aims to be part and parcel of the political transformation paying special attention to the challenges of the people of Matabeleland province. It does not believe in being silenced as they believe other church actors have been. One respondent said:

Critiquing the political processes is not foreign to religious actors. We believe it is actually in line with the duties and responsibilities of pastors if we look at people like Hosiah, Jeremiah, Amos and others. The way Amos in particular speaks, that could have been called meddling in political issues. The church must maintain a critical distance - not too far, not too near to politics as an organisation. Individuals within the church can do that. If you are a church pastor then don't get involved in partisan politics because you have all sorts of people from all political dimensions coming to your church on Sunday. If you take political sides that will destroy the unity and harmony within the church.

When I asked the mainline church leaders' perspective on religio-political organisations, they were very critical of them. Rev. Dr. P's<sup>4</sup> response is representative of the views:

These organizations [religio-political organizations] claim to be civic organizations and it appears as though the agenda that they pursue is clearly a political agenda which has taken a position, an ideological posturing which is more critical than supportive of pan-Africanist nationalist liberation agenda driven movements. Their agendas and programs of action are tied to certain foreign ideological interests, of the donor basis. Their type of understanding of politics is a largely liberal and neo-colonial version of democracy. They seem not to entertain in their definitions or in their visions of democracy, social democratic models of democracy that are socialist, that are home grown, African. They seem to be very pre-occupied with a slate or template democracy template that is simply transposed out of the Euro-American template which is liberal, very individualistic etc. in terms of democracy. They are more biased towards the liberal democratic

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<sup>4</sup> Interview partner made anonymous.

model and template, freedom of expression, freedom of speech etc. And they talk less about the freedom of our sovereignty, the freedom to retain our sovereignty as a people, the freedom to retain our identity as a people.

A variety of conceptions can be distilled from the above response. Mainline church leaders perceive the emergent religio-political organizations as political organizations under a sacred canopy. Like other civic society organizations, they are interested in getting money from donors and are an expression of neo-colonialism. This dovetails with the conception that civil society and globalization are part of the neo-colonial discourse. For others civil society is a concept suited to the political reality of Western society. It cannot sufficiently explain the power complexities of African associational life, because it fails to understand the domination of African societies by a predatory state, the informal character of many forms of organization and the fundamental roles played by class and ethnicity (Maina 1998:137). Ferguson (1998: 3-4) argues that the current use of the concept in the study of African politics serves to legitimate a profoundly anti-democratic form of transnational politics. NGOs do not challenge the state from below but are horizontal contemporaries of wider institutions of transnational governmentality. No wonder Rev. Dr. P asserts that the organizations are pre-occupied with the Euro-American template who the ruling regime accuses of wanting to recolonize Zimbabwe, a discourse the ruling regime has deployed to explain why the economy has failed. The resonance of Rev Dr. P's perception with that of the ruling regime confirms the alleged co-option by and alliance with the ruling party. His critique is not to be uncritically dismissed considering that the religio-political actors have for the most part been foreign funded from Europe and the US. Though, it could be argued that foreign funding is not equal to bringing in Euro-American values, Dr. P does have a point which religio-political actors have difficulties adequately responding to. Rev. Dr. P is suspicious of the neo-liberal values of people's freedoms and defends a pan-African nationalist liberation agenda advocated by the ruling regime. This makes him be accused of being in alliance with the ruling regime More striking is that he spoke more like a political party enthusiast rather than a religious leader. It is difficult to distinguish the two identities in him just as it is with other mainline church leaders in Zimbabwe.

A Catholic Church leader criticised these organisations saying:

They came on the stage being very confrontational, attacking not only the government but also attacking the churches, saying the churches are not doing anything, and putting themselves forward as the church...you cannot build a country through confrontation, because on the other hand the mainline churches always had their strategy of engagement, dialogue hopefully then that would lead to transformation.

It becomes worthy to invoke the three dimensions through which religion enters the public sphere. Casanova (1994: 218) posits that religion can be public firstly at the state level where established state churches exist or churches are in search of the state; secondly at the political society level, where religious movements resist disestablishment and differentiation, or the mobilisations and counter-mobilisations of religious groups and confessional parties against other religions or against secularist movements and parties, or religious groups mobilised in defence of religious freedom, or religious institutions demanding the rule of law and the legal protection of human rights, or protecting the mobilisation of civil society and defending the institutionalisations of democratic regimes; and thirdly at the civil society level inclusive of hegemonic civil religions and the public intervention of religious groups in the undifferentiated sphere of civil society. Regarding Zimbabwe's political sphere, religion, especially mainline churches has been public at the level of the state. The emergent religio-political organizations are public at the political and civil society. Assuming civil society identity might also be perceived as adopting Euro-American templates not suitable in an African associational contexts, not unless one perceives civil society not in its ethnocentricity, that is where it originated but focuses on the sociological features.

Mainline churches therefore are against the approaches of the religio-political organisations which as alluded to earlier are derivable from the globalization discourse. This analysis is not bent on belittling the systems and structures of mainline churches entirely. It must be noted that mainline churches possess structures, systems and personnel which can be deployed in the pursuit for political transformation, while religio-political organizations are issue focused and possess the sense of urgency and action. The mainline churches should observe that silent diplomacy in the face of violence may amount to complicit in violence. The churches need to engage political

stakeholders more critically, work closely with non-conformists, do more research and capacitate the clergy beyond philosophy and theology, to be able to read the times. Religio-political organizations should observe that activism must not blur reflection and dialogue. Action without reflection is said to be blind activism, while word and reflection without action is mere rhetoric. Some oversights have already been noted. Religio-political organizations end up much more results oriented and overlooking issues such as the role of women and non-Christian religions in confronting the Zimbabwean crisis. The harmonization between mainline churches and religio-political organizations is not yet in full swing. However initiatives such as the Church and Civil Society Forum in which some mainline churches and religio-political organizations meet, together with ‘secular’ civil society organizations, to discuss civic matters, show an acknowledgement by all actors that they need each other.

## **Conclusion**

Religio-political organisations operating outside the jurisdiction of the mainline churches challenge both the state and the churches. Firstly they do not conform to the political elites’ conception of how the religious should participate in politics. The movements tackle those issues which are politically sensitive in a manner that exposes the political elites especially those from the ruling ZANU PF party. The state does not allow open and public discussion of these issues or has even banned the discussion all together as it has done with the *Gukurahundi* issue referred to above. Legislation is put into place to control the flow of information. A case in point of such laws is the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act. Addressing these issues attracts the wrath and stick of the state. However the movements in question override these sanctions.

The strategies that these organisations employ signify an attempt to bring back the public sphere as a site of discussion of common public affairs and to organise against arbitrary and oppressive forms of social action and public power. The strategies have a dual effect of mobilising and gathering people, and enlightening people about their dues as citizens. Demonstrations, prayer rallies, workshops *inter alia* are opted for as ways to reach out to many people. For the state, gathering people in the public square is threatening as we

saw with the Arab spring. Violent disruption of the meetings and arrests become a sanctioning measure for the state. No wonder in 2007 the ZCA had a meeting violently disrupted under the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) resulting in arrests and many getting injured in 2007.

Secondly the emergent movements do not conform to the political approaches of the mainline churches, and vice-versa, the mainline churches are opposed to the strategies involved in the work of the non-conformist emergent organisations. They opt for back door silent diplomacy which only works in normal situations where the state respects the rule of law and respects the principles of participatory democracy and not in abnormal situations such as the one Zimbabwe had degenerated into. The reaction from the mainline church leaders shows a conflictive frame of values between them and the emergent movements.

The state seems to welcome the humanitarian and social contribution of religious actors but does not allow for a critical and active contribution to political issues by them. Instead of the secularisation of the state policy working to safeguard the freedom of choice and conscience, without the state privileging any belief or religion, the policy is used to justify the exclusion and repression of critical religious voices. It is used to delimit the realms within which religious actors can participate or cannot. The state sanctions adopt and co-opt other religious churches and organisations so that they provide it with the sacred canopy. This is selective application of the policy of secularisation of the state if not a direct affront to it.

Organisation structures and systems can be enabling or limiting in the pursuit for social change. It emerges from the case studies that hierarchically and bureaucratically structured institutions are less strategically positioned to quickly make decisions and mobilise for action, a requirement in an environment where there is constant and live jostling for power and resources, than loosely connected and led.

Despite being labelled agents of re-colonisation by the state, ZCA has claimed a seat at the constitution making process table in 2013. ZCA is also a pioneer of the Church and Civil Society Forum, an initiative meant to facilitate national healing and reconciliation through engaging the grassroots communities and the political elites. CiM has managed to engage both the grassroots and handing petitions to and engaging the political elites of its province.

The political culture in Zimbabwe has been dominated by neo-patri-

monial politics, a system through which power and resources lie in the hands of those with high political connections, at the expense of the common people. The strategies employed by the non-conformists have been an antidote to this culture. The organisations in question, while pressurizing the elites, have the grassroots as an important stakeholder in the endeavour for political transformation. They have put emphasis on the grassroots as the basis for an effective political transformation, who must be brought back into Zimbabwe's public sphere. The emergence of these religio-political organisations, opens up avenues for further research. More similar organisations and individuals are emerging. At the time of writing, one Pastor Evan Mawarire had mobilized Zimbabwean citizens, via social media to stand up and express their dissatisfaction with the government's failure to turn around the economy and curb corruption by political elites. The movement called #ThisFlag went viral and Pastor Mawarire was arrested and brought to court. Civil society organisations and citizens expressed unprecedented support by turning up at the court, singing and praying outside the court as proceedings went on. Mawarire was eventually released without charge. He fled to the United States. After six months he returned and was arrested on arrival at the Harare International airport. More research thus need to be undertaken regarding the role of religious actors in politics and their use of Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) including the social media. The involvement of religious actors in politics as exemplified by the organisations discussed in this article and religious leaders like Mawarire triggers the need to problematise and nuance the binary separation religion and politics as well as the religious and the secular.

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