


The moral authority and prophetic zeal of the Christian Church in Zimbabwe



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Dates:

Received: 11 July 2024

Accepted: 10 Sept. 2024

Published: 21 Nov. 2024

How to cite this article:

Masengwe, G., 2024, 'The moral authority and prophetic zeal of the Christian Church in Zimbabwe', *In die Skriflig* 58(1), a3114. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v58i1.3114>

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This article aims to illuminate moral authority and prophetic zeal dynamics by analysing the struggles encountered by congregations resisting state encroachments. Amidst Zimbabwe's political turbulence, the church operates at a critical juncture, grappling with the dual threats of state capture and the dilution of prophetic integrity. The ecclesiastical prophetic voice, traditionally positioned as society's moral compass, has suffered profound erosion, trapped within a nexus of mutually exploitative relationships among ruling elites, legal frameworks, and acquiescent ecclesiastical leaders. Those dissenting from the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) face systemic repression within the church, revealing a deep moral crisis. Referencing Martin Luther King Jr's assertion that the church must function as the ethical justice of the state, this research underscores the potential decline into irrelevance should prophetic zeal wane. This investigation employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to bridge gaps concerning moral compromises within religious institutions, aligning practical leadership insights with broader socio-political contexts. Employing qualitative methodologies, including informal discussions and WhatsApp exchanges among church leaders and congregants from diverse denominations, the study generates nuanced insights into the lived experiences of church-state interactions and the preservation of prophetic integrity. Findings indicate a pervasive trend of ecclesiastical subservience to state interests, signifying moral decay and an imperative to restore the church's ethical foundation. To maintain spiritual relevance, a revival of prophetic assertiveness is essential, lest the church devolves into an inconsequential social entity devoid of substantive moral engagement with the state.

Contribution: The moral and prophetic authority of the Christian Church in Zimbabwe amidst political capture and ethical degradation, employing a decolonial hermeneutic and Critical Discourse Analysis, elucidates the intersections of faith, authority, and social justice. This article contributes to a discussion on church-state dynamics, advocating for restorative prophetic advocacy within Zimbabwe's socio-political landscape. The article contributes to the ecclesiological, missiological, historical, political, ethical and postcolonial perspective of the church during a crisis.

Keywords: moral bankruptcy; prophetic zeal; general elections; state-church capture; religious leaders; political exploitation; regime enablers; regime resisters; vertical transcendence; horizontal immanence.

Introduction

This study is premised on the run-up to the 2023 general elections in Zimbabwe. President E.D. Mnangagwa created various fronts to campaign for himself, such as *Varakashi4ED*; *Teachers4ED*; *Lecturers4ED*; *Mahwindi4ED*; *Mapostori4ED*; *Youngwomen4ED*; *MenBelievED* and *Pastors4ED*. These fronts did not only fight against the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHOCD), fronted by the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ), the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference (ZCBC) and the Union for the Development of Apostolic and Zionist Churches in Zimbabwe (UDACIZA), but has also been interpreted as an attempt to create parallel political structures, undermining the authority of the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) (Chirimudombo 2022). Thus, one said, 'These parallel structures have divided our party, they are using party resources to fight the current ZANU-PF structures as they are also after power' (Nyangani 2022a). These efforts have led to concerns about the potential capture of the church by the state due to moral bankruptcy within these institutions.

Interestingly, these parallel religious structures used state-party resources to divide and fight not only against ZANU-PF structures but the church as well, especially with its representation in the

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ZHOCD. This study will refer to the ZHOCD as the church in general and other particular formations. It also needs to be clear that the ZHOCD are not strictly referred to in the discussion, hence the term is used loosely as the Christian fraternity is bigger than this formation. Unfortunately, some church leaders from other formations like the Zimbabwe Indigenous Interdenominational Christian Council (ZIICC) led by Andrew Wutawunashe, and the African Apostolic Christian Council of Zimbabwe (AACCCZ) led by Johannes Ndanga, in their pursuit for personal relevance, fell prey to Mnangagwa's political machinations as they abandoned their prophetic callings (Mutongwiza 2018). These regime-enabling councils have individual bishops and prophets in Pentecostal, neo-Pentecostal, Zionist and Apostolic churches such as Bishop Samuel Mutendi (*Zionist Christian Church*), Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa (*United Family International Church*), Apostle Andrew Wutawunashe (*Zimbabwe Independent Indigenous Council of Churches*), Noah Taguta (*Apostolic Christian Church of Johane Marange*) and Prophet Walter Magaya (*Prophetic Healing and Deliverance Ministry*) who have aligned themselves with politicians and can be mentioned. They sought to advance personal interests rather than speaking truth to power. In contrast, some pastors like Evan Mawarire (*#ThisFlag Movement*), Talent Chiwenga (*Jesus Revelation Ministries*), and Ancelimo Magaya (*Grace Ablaze Ministries International; Zimbabwe Devine Destiny*) chose to remain faithful to their convictions, despite persecution and threats to their own lives. Some of them may not be classified with the ZHOCD, as they criticise the institution for being slow in its actions but are regime resisters (Dube 2020).

This article explores in some part how the 2023 general elections led to political uncertainty, which led to state capture as well as church capture to acquire votes. The church's complicity (the church here refers to the Christian voice, as represented by the ZHOCD) with the state compromised its prophetic zeal, which affected its moral and spiritual authority in the nation.

Theologically conceiving prophetic zeal and captured churches in Zimbabwe

The church has eternally been conceived to represent the voice of God. This is variously interpreted as the 'prophetic voice', 'prophetic zeal', or 'prophetic relevance'. It advocates for the rights and liberation of the marginalised and downtrodden. However, the complexity of the concept raises questions such as: What constitutes a prophetic voice? Can anyone, regardless of their religious affiliation or lack thereof, possess a prophetic voice? Is a prophet required to have a prophetic voice? In the Bible, Amos 7:14–15 and Acts 15: 13–29 provide biblical examples of prophets speaking truth to power, including female prophets like Esther in Esther 4:14. Prophets challenged the status quo to meet the concerns of those at the margins. However, this advocacy is not achieved without struggle, as prophets get attacked and

persecuted for their stand against the status quo like Pastor Evan Mawarire, Apostle Talent Chiwenga and Bishop Ancelimo Magaya (Chinowaita 2022).

Prophetic zeal thus can be referred to as a contrast to the process of making church leaders political choristers (Canen, Ch & Wantchekon 2023). Political choristers seek state resources and protection at the expense of their prophetic call. Many church leaders thus have compromised their prophetic values by colluding with the corruption and violence of politicians in their pursuit of power and riches. This has happened to several church leaders during their church political struggles like the Marange Apostles during the time of Noah Taguta (Mutongwiza 2018), among many others. This has also happened during the trying times in the Anglican Church, and in the 2023 elections, also in the Seventh Day Adventist Church with Kudakwashe Tagwirei putting that church to ransom (Masengwe & Dube 2023). This has been exacerbated by artificial economic challenges and market distortions created by Zimbabwean politicians and entrepreneurs to manipulate church leaders into becoming political allies (Chinowaita 2022). The state promised to protect and reward church leaders despite the loss of their moral integrity.

Electoral dynamics and pursuit for power on state capture in Zimbabwe

To talk of state capture in the context of electoral or political uncertainty is to be oxymoronic. However, the unpredictability of impending electoral outcomes, such as economic downturns, policy failures, and social unrest, influence how sitting authorities take advantage of state apparatus to achieve their current and prospective interests. Thus, state capture is when private actors, using bribes, lobbying and campaign finance, influence the design and implementation of public policies to their advantage (Dal Bó 2006). This can take two forms: direct capture and indirect capture (Burgess et al. 2015). By direct capture, state bureaucrats are influenced by private actors, who want to secure contracts and concessions, while indirect capture involves private actors lobbying elected officials to influence policy decisions. Xu (2018) also argues that state capture is often facilitated by patronage relationships between powerful entities and state officials. These relationships can provide access to valuable resources and information, allowing private actors to exert significant influence over policy decisions. In the context of Zimbabwe, the involvement of Kudakwashe Regimond Tagwirei, also known as Queen Bee, in electoral campaigns raised concerns about state and church capture (Masengwe & Dube 2023). Tagwirei's significant wealth and influence gave him the ability to manipulate policy decisions and exert control over state institutions with far-reaching implications. Zimbabweans began to distrust public institutions as elected officials lacked accountability and democratic norms and were responsible for distorted economic outcomes.

Navigating the concept of church capture and prophetic zeal in Zimbabwe

The concept of church capture and prophetic zeal, where powerful individuals and groups exert control over state institutions and decision-making processes in Zimbabwe, is a complex and multifaceted issue. The various fronts, i.e. *Pastors4ED*, *Teachers4ED*, *Mapostori4ED*, *Mahwindi4ED*, *Varakashi4ED*, *Youngwomen4ED*, *MenBelievED* and *Lecturers4ED*, formed to campaign for the incumbent outside ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe and are evidence of state interference in civilian politics (Nyangani 2022a). Unfortunately, some church leaders were involved in these processes, raising concern about the potential for state capture and erosion of democratic values (Canen et al. 2023). Such entities have been used to co-opt potential voters through coercion by issuing birth certificates and identity documents and issuing some vehicles to institutional leaders like Tagwirei at Solusi University (Nozithelo 2022). They also dominate in all entrepreneurship activities in mining, manufacturing, arms deals, estate, sales, agriculture and land alongside various 'intermediaries' (Canen et al. 2023). It happened in South Africa also (Mahajan 2019). This has also been extended to issuing bountiful loans to parliamentarians, 8 months before the 2023 general elections (Nyangani 2022b). It needs to be understood that the Zimbabwean constitution (Amendment no. 20 of 2013 Article 7, sections 155–158) advocates for a separation between church and state, but, in practice, the church is often used as a tool by politicians to achieve their goals, with a negative effect on consumer and civilian welfare as it did in Nigeria after Dangote's cement prices sky-rocketed (Adetayo 2020).

According to Bekithemba Dube, in *Religious leaders as regime enablers and/or resisters in the Second Republic: Church for/against the crisis in Zimbabwe* (2023), regime enablers are individuals who support the ruling party and work to maintain its power, while regime resisters oppose the ruling party and work to challenge its authority. Church leaders who align themselves with the ruling party are described as serving the ruling party, safeguarding the integrity of institutions, manipulating and abusing them to the benefit of the ruling party (Magaisa 2019), while those who speak out against the government are seen as regime resisters. Regime enablers agree to support the incumbent for prospective post-election contracts and benefits (Canen et al. 2023).

In the intricate web of electoral patronage in Zimbabwe, entrepreneurs and church leaders form a crucial nexus of state-church capture. This can be regarded as corporate capture, wherein private actors exert control over state institutions and decision-making processes, especially by entrepreneurs attempting to reduce a high political turnover due to increasing levels of political competition. The tendency of entrepreneurs to favour incumbents in exchange for lucrative contracts skews the playing field, creating market inefficiencies that translate to decreased benefits for

customers and increased profits for entrepreneurs. This symbiotic relationship fosters a vulnerable electorate, easily appeased through church leaders and fronts sponsored by entrepreneurs (Rijkers, Freund & Nucifora 2017). The church remains critical to this national dialogue due to its demographic advantage at an estimated 85% national following.

The introduction of the 2013 national constitution in Zimbabwe, with its emphasis on regular elections, has created a volatile and uncertain political environment, where political competition and factionalism have become the norm. This fluid and unpredictable political landscape encouraged the adoption of clientelist and corporatist strategies by political players, especially those representing the interests of the ruling party, ZANU-PF. The manoeuvring of ZANU-PF in an attempt to control significant entities such as the state and the church represents a response to the pressures of electoral reform and increased voter apathy (Moyo 2019). This was evidenced by increased breakaways from the major parties in both the ruling ZANU-PF and the opposition MDC-A, later CCC (Chikumbu & Chikwaza 2021).

The relationship between politicians and church leaders in Zimbabwe has not been quantitatively measured, but political patronage has been observed with the incumbent president attending conferences and church meetings of leaders, who are believed to give assenting voices to government policies (Mutingwende 2022). Church leaders, in a fashion one could think was state-church capture, received contractual agreements from electoral candidates in the form of goods and services, especially towards the 2023 general elections (Matiashe 2022; Prince Media Production 2022).

In all, church capture and prophetic zeal in the binary of state-church capture are deeply intertwined with issues of moral failure, greed and selfishness to uphold one's prophetic relevance amid of the erosion of democratic norms.

Understanding the living tradition of the prophetic voice

Prophetic zeal, as illuminated by Wright (2006) and Brueggeman (2014), is a clarion call for the church to embrace its transformative potential and moral obligation to speak truth to power, engaging in a dialogic relationship between God's word and the prevailing social and political realities (Wright 2006:82). Prophetic zeal demands that the church, empowered by its inherent resources such as theological institutions, universities, media, and civil organisations, acts as a prophetic voice both within (endogenous) and beyond (exogenous) its confines, transforming both itself and the broader world. Kelsey (1992/2007) further underscores the necessity of creating a conducive space within theological institutions, churches, and wider society to nurture prophetic voices, which must be trained, developed, and encouraged to

speak for God to the world. The 'houses of prophets', as the locus of prophetic development, play a crucial role in shaping the missional vision and direction of the church. Thus, there is a need to provide space and a process to 'test, develop and share their (the church's) prophetic insights, to encourage and at times correct the church and society' (Smith 2018:14).

The prophetic voice, as understood by Kohl (2009), Hunter (2019) and Pazmino (2010), is a dynamic and contextualised articulation of God's word, confronting the complexities of contemporary society and life with the timeless wisdom of Scripture. Kohl (2009) says:

[The] prophetic voice deals with the issues people face today and tomorrow, and how to deal with these issues in light of Christ's message of forgiving grace for every new day. (p. 78)

Hunter (2019:11) also remarks that '[p]rophets call the wayward back into alignment with God's law' and Pazmino (2010:361) argues: 'Every faith community requires ongoing transformation and the nurture of prophetic voices to reveal forgotten information or new truth'. In this light, the prophetic voice embodies both a fidelity to Scripture's timeless truth and an acute sensitivity to the contextual realities of human society. In this way the prophetic voice demands a commitment to justice, truth-telling, and a confrontation of evil and sin within one's socio-political spheres. This commitment often entails significant risks, as power centres may seek to silence and suppress the prophetic voices that challenge their authority and legitimacy.

Embodying God's truth, and unleashing the prophetic voice

The execution of prophetic zeal in the church requires a multifaceted approach that involves *identifying public life problems, developing leadership capacity, implementing programmes that embody the mission of God, and engaging in ecumenical strategies*. Hunter (2019) notes that the church has a public life role of speaking out against injustice, as well as building up relationships while working collaboratively with other players to create positive change in society.

According to Hunter (2019), the church should also develop leaders with expertise and capacity to deal with specific public life issues, which will qualify them to speak prophetically over issues that serve not only the nation but also the church in its mission. In Nigeria, the Baptist Church, with the assistance of theological institutions and church research centres, engaged the state on corruption or materialism, sexuality and sexual orientation, peace-making, Muslim evangelism and environmental concern (Smith 2018). It also assisted churches in revising their curricula to empower their graduates with the required skills and competencies. A similar situation was experienced by the Evangelical Church in Kyiv, Ukraine, which identified theologies of national identity and citizenship in its reflections to answers for public life issues, as well as presenting a contextual gospel to the inhabitants. It led to the development of new songs, the use of musical instruments, and sensitive

community worship programmes, among other varied political responses to national processes (Hunter 2019).

The development of programmes that embody the mission of God is crucial in transforming society to accept the holistic mission of God (Hunter 2019). As Brueggeman (2001:3) notes, 'the task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us'. In Sao Paulo, the churches embraced a holistic mission in belief and practice, with the help of the South American Theological Seminary in Londrina, Brazil, to develop a narrative of the marginalised (Hunter 2019), in a new interaction and paradigm that did not only engage the marginalised with the Scripture but was contextual enough to address their public life concerns.

Finally, ecumenical strategies are also essential in addressing public life problems biblically and theologically. It has been reported that the Arab Baptist Church in Accad (2019) used its values of pedagogy to serve Muslim communities with the word of God. Similarly, the Bethlehem Bible College in West Bank, Middle East, hosted a conference with the theme: 'The Kingdom of God has come. Evangelicals must reclaim the prophetic role in bringing peace, justice, and reconciliation in Palestine and Israel' (Bethlehem Bible College 2019). This dealt with issues of poverty, environmental degradation, migration, the *Diaspora* question, public disaster and globalisation.

However, it is important to note that the church's engagement with public life issues is not without challenges. As Smith (2018:23) notes, the church's ability to address public life issues is often hindered by its internal squabbles. While these approaches may be ideal for Zimbabwe with its 85% Christian following, and recent developments in its awakening with the National Vision Discussion Document of 2006, it is, however, crucial for churches to develop a shared vision and mission that transcends denominational and theological differences (ZCBC 2006).

In conclusion, the execution of prophetic zeal in the church requires a holistic approach that involves *identifying public life problems, developing leadership capacity, implementing of programmes that embody the mission of God, and engaging in ecumenical strategies*.

Upholding assenting voices in Zimbabwe's captured churches

In the research for this article, the conforming habit of church leaders to invite politicians into their church services for purposes of drumming up votes was noted with concern. The infiltration of religious institutions by political leaders to further their political agendas has raised eyebrows among political analysts and the general public. In April 2023, Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa was seen on Zimbabwe Television entering his church, flanked by the president and his deputy among other cabinet ministers and government

officials. The intentions of the Prophet may be difficult to ascertain, as many forces could have been at play, especially with the surreptitious pledge of allegiance to the ZANU-PF leadership and promises of UIFC sympathy during elections. Many similar church establishments openly pledged to flog their members to vote for ZANU-PF in the 2023 general elections (Manyonganise 2022). Albeit this practice was common in the first regime, where ZANU-PF leaders attended religious conferences, services and meetings (Masekesa 2012, 2013). In one of the Zimbabwe Indigenous Interdenominational Council of Churches (ZIICC) prayer meetings, hosted in Chitungizwa to campaign for the incumbent, led by Andrew Wutawunashwe, they likened President Mnangagwa to the biblical Moses (Kachiko 2022). This was not amiss, as Bishop Kunonga described the then president, Robert Mugabe, in the same way.

According to Canen et al. (2023), church capture is a form of political manipulation where the state co-opts religious leaders and institutions to promote its interests. In this case, the ZANU-PF's uncertainty with the electorate led it to church capture, where 480 pastors were mobilised through the founding chairperson, Evangelist Idirashe Dongo, to support the incumbent. This happened for instance in their Chitungwiza meeting under the theme: 'A Prayed 4 and SupportED leader delivers' (Bulawayo24 Staff Reporter 2022; Chinowaita 2022). The chairperson argued that there was 'nothing untoward about pastors supporting the President' (Kachiko 2022). This is a clear violation of the separation of church and state, as pastors were duped and coerced into supporting a particular political party, the ZANU-PF, as well as frog-marched to denounce smart sanctions (Kachiko 2022).

However, critics are concerned about religious leaders who formed the *Pastors4ED*. Religious leaders, who are supposed to be non-partisan to assist political parties, were driven into partisan politics and lost their constitutional and moral authority to advise political movements on how to behave. Kudakwashe Munemo (in Kachiko 2022), a political analyst, noted:

It's unconstitutional to overtly or covertly coerce the religious groups into rallying behind the leader of a political party. It eats their constitutional rights and freedoms to associate and participate in political activities at their own will. (n.p.)

Maxwell Saungweme (in Kachiko 2022) also added:

Religious leaders and their followers must follow political leaders of their choice like what other citizens do. No one must be cajoled, coaxed or wheedled to follow a leader they don't like despite their standing in society. (n.p.)

Effie Ncube argued as well in Kachiko (2022):

Churches must be the moral conscience of the nation and watchdogs over government and not an integral part of corruption, lawlessness and violations of human rights that some want churches to be. ... [This is because] [t]he church should be independent from the state so that it may be able to criticize the government whenever it went wayward for the betterment of the society at large. (n.p.)

Pastors4ED thus, is an unconstitutional and immoral movement.

For this reason, Bertrand et al. (2021) argue that the patronage system seen in *Pastors4ED* was driven by self-interest rather than the genuine needs of the community. Xu (2018) notes that this type of system could lead to the creation of oligarchs, who benefit from their relationship with the state. However, the separation of church and state remains crucial for maintaining a healthy democracy, because when the church is captured by the state, as evident in the Zimbabwean context where the church is complicit to political manipulation and corruption, it loses its ability to be a moral conscience and watchdog over government (Xu 2018).

In all, the co-option of religious institutions to promote political interests raises concerns about the erosion of democratic values and the integrity of such institutions; hence the urgent need to recognise and maintain the separation between church and state for religious leaders to remain independent and vigilant in their advocacy for social justice.

Silencing prophetic voices and censoring dissenting voices in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe has a history of the state attempting to capture and silence religious leaders who advocate for human rights and challenge government policies. There, however, are church leaders like Archbishop Pius Alick Mvundla Ncube (born 31 December 1946), who understand the cost of confronting a state that attempts to silence religious leaders on its policies and was subjected to blackmail and intimidation by the government after criticising President Robert Mugabe's failures as 'megalomaniac' (BBC 2007). Such leaders confronted it in any way to reduce the violations against human rights (Mudzanire & Banda 2021; Zimeye Correspondent 2021). The blackmail included incidents of illicit relations with an estranged woman, Rosemary Sibanda, the former wife of Onesimus Sibanda, for whom he was charged with adultery and had to pay damages of 1.3 million USD (Shaw 2007). This was deemed to be the government's honey trap (The Today Editor 2007) in 'some kind of orchestrated attempt to embarrass the archbishop' (BBC 2007; Shaw 2007). This forced the bishop to resign, according to the Catholic Code of Canon Law, Canon 401, Article 2,¹ as the bishop could no longer fulfil the requirements of his office. This has been common during President Mugabe's tenure, where traps (especially sex scandals) and blackmail were used to silence his critics. Archbishop Ncube eventually resigned to Pope Benedict XVI on 11 September 2007, but he was not outrightly silenced by ZANU-PF (The News24 Editor 2016; Thornycroft & Berger 2007).

Further, ecumenical bodies and individual denominations have advocated for human rights and challenged government policies, for example the ZCC, the Zimbabwe Catholic

1. See https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-icris-canonici/cic_index_en.html.

Bishops' Conference (ZCBC) and the EFZ against human rights violations and economic collapse. The three bodies, under the banner of the ZHOCD, engaged President Mugabe with the document, *The Zimbabwe We Want* (ZWWD), or National Vision Discussion Document (NVDD), in 2006 (Manyonganise 2022). Credit needs to be given to the effort that led to the birth of much more radical groups, such as the Christian Alliance (CA) and Churches in Manicaland (CiM), which operated without formal structures to avoid victimisation, causing goosebumps for politicians (Manyonganise 2022).

Individual bodies like the ZCBC, under Archbishop Robert Ndlovu of the Harare Diocese, released a pastoral letter entitled, *The march is not ended*, in August 2020, criticising government repression and human rights violations (Manyonganise 2022). The letter (ZCBC 2020) challenged the government, among other things, stating the following:

[T]hose who think they have arrived and those on the march has resulted in a multi-layered crisis of the convergence of economic collapse, deepening poverty, food insecurity, corruption and human rights abuses among other crises in urgent need of resolution. (n.p.)

The ZCBC pointed out that government repression was detrimental to the people's welfare. The government angrily responded by describing the ZCBC bishops (especially Bishop Ndlovu) as 'evil and narrow-minded and reckless regime change agents whose objective was to incite the public to rise against the government' (Bwititi 2020; Serfontein 2020). This prompted other ecumenical bodies and individual denominations to respond in support of the ZCBC pastoral letter.

The first to respond in support of the ZCBC was the ZCC, by giving its full weight behind the statement. Also, the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, Heal Zimbabwe, and the Human Rights Forum supported Manyonganise (2022). In 2006, the Anglican Council of Zimbabwe argued that it seemed as if the government wanted to 'dismiss the fact that the church is called to exercise its prophetic role, which can mean challenging ... political leaders on their conduct of affairs, particularly if this affects the people of God' (Manyonganise 2022), and was one of the newest of the respondents.

The political exploitation of religious leaders and churches

Church-state capture in Zimbabwe, as exemplified under both the Mugabe and Mnangagwa regimes, has catalysed a bifurcation within the church, polarising its leaders into partisan *sanitisers* and impartial defenders of the vulnerable. This has not changed, despite the Second Republic's promise of a new narrative 'as leaders appear accommodative when supported and vindictive when critiqued' (Magezi & Tagwirei 2022:1). Those who stand against political injustices are faced with double jeopardy: victimised by both their partisan colleagues and the political system. This leaves the

church vulnerable to capture and manipulation by the political regime, as its shepherds are unjustly targeted for their prophetic zeal (Magezi & Tagwirei 2022).

The spectre of church-state capture in Zimbabwe persists under the Mnangagwa administration, with dissenting pastors and religious leaders enduring brutal clampdowns from state security agents for their organised dissent, deemed 'enemies of the state' (Hove & Chenzi 2017:3; Magezi & Tagwirei 2022:3). This 'relentlessly violate[s] the rights of the citizens without censure' (Magezi & Tagwirei 2022:3). This article scrutinises the meaning and cost of prophetic (ir)relevance and (un)protection, tracing the diverging paths of church leaders: those co-opted by the status quo, those objecting to it, and those maintaining neutrality. They also aggressed against ZANU-PF by campaigning for alternative power bases through radical movements that organised prayer vigils.

The extent of church-state capture in Zimbabwe is elucidated by the compromising of church leaders, who in pursuit of personal gain have succumbed to political bribery and pressure, compromising the very institutions they are meant to shepherd. Examples abound in 2006: three ecumenical heads were induced with land, housing, and financial incentives before presenting their watered-down statement in ZWWD (Magezi & Tagwirei 2020). Furthermore, the state's co-opting of other bishops and high priests, since President Mugabe's era, into its fold, has created a system where the church can no longer perform its prophetic role as the moral conscience of society but rather becomes a complicit enabler of oppression (Magezi & Tagwirei 2022).

Finally, the insidious nature of church-state capture in Zimbabwe is aptly epitomised by the divisive takeover of the Anglican Church by Bishop Kunonga, backed by the state apparatus (Manyonganise 2022; Smith 2010). The situation was only reversed when the Archbishop of Canterbury visited Harare, to claim back the church properties. This toxic collusion of interests referred to as 'polarised society' engenders a climate of fear and self-censorship among church members; the state uses the police and courts to repress those challenging their preferred (state) narrative (Manyonganise 2022; Smith 2010). This practice was common during the colonial and post-colonial times. In a similar vein, church capture compared to state capture has spawned deep divisions within the church body-politic, causing immense harm to the faithful.

Strategies to alleviate church capture and rekindle the conscience of society

Pre-coup prophecies in Zimbabwe

This article highlights the significance of prophetic zeal in responding to local prophets' calls for change in Zimbabwe.²

²This was contrasted by the Nigerian Prophet Bishop T.B. Joshua, who predicted that change was coming to Southern Africa but was not going to happen in Zimbabwe but in other countries.

The example of Bishop Emeritus Joshua Dube, a 77-year-old retired bishop from the United Baptist Church, who emphasised the importance of biblical texts in understanding prophecy, indicated that God, as stated in Amos 3:7 and Hosea 4:6, reveals his plans to prophets through dreams and visions (Manzvanzvike 2011; Heb 1:1–2; Dt 18:15). Bishop Dube claimed to have received four personal programmes from God, which he carried out with great care: bringing nationals to the United Baptist Church, establishing mission schools, building mission stations, and working on national affairs (Manzvanzvike 2011). He contradicted foreign prophets who predicted that President Mugabe would not be replaced in the 2013 elections, and indeed, Mugabe won the election. The fulfilment of these prophecies supports Bishop Dube's claim that he successfully carried out his programmes within 4 years after his return from the United States (1971–1975) when the war of liberation broke out. His dreams predicted that many politicians would not make it to the presidency under Robert Gabriel Mugabe, which was still upheld by God.

Prophetic zeal by mainline denominations, particularly the ZHOCD, has remained steadfast over the years. Despite not being exhaustive, ZHOCD has drawn from the experiences of member organisations and churches worldwide. The church has consistently clamoured for a say in general elections in Zimbabwe, echoing a global trend where citizens are denied a voice in their history (McGrath 2013). This is particularly true in countries with a history of electoral violence and human rights abuses, such as Cambodia, Iraq, Nigeria, Iran, China, Burma (Myanmar), and North and South Korea (McGrath 2013; Moyo 2019).

The denial of people's right to freely choose their leaders in Zimbabwe has led to ecumenical bodies and individual churches demanding justice and peace. Just and fair elections are crucial for citizens to engage in a sustained effort to eliminate poverty and move towards self-reliance and sustainable development (McGrath 2013). Ecumenical bodies, with international partners, have been involved in the tumultuous history of election violence, corruption, and injustice in Zimbabwe since 2000.

Also, churches have played a critical role in reducing community tensions by encouraging political parties to shun past divisions. The 2013 general elections, following the acceptance of the new constitution, marked another term for President Robert Mugabe amidst claims of election rigging (Moyo 2019). However, the nation requires a decisive moment to break away from the past, as emphasised by Kairos Zimbabwe, also the NVDD (2006). Calls for pragmatic reflection to make life-changing choices in the fight for justice, peace, tolerance, freedom, equality, prosperity and unity in Zimbabwe are emerging cautiously on the national development agenda.

The Methodist Church under the ZCC has been vocal about its mandate to the nation, focusing on developing young

leaders to 'light one candle' and drive out darkness (Taylor 2014). To achieve this, the church organised a training workshop for young leaders from across the country, inspired by Dr Martin Luther King Jr's quote: *Darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that.* The workshop recognised that the current rulership was toxic and emphasised the need for young leaders to hold the light for a brighter future. This instilled hope of a brighter future for young leaders, grounding them in their faith and encouraging them to seriously consider public life concerns. In the face of a low life expectancy of 53 years, high national unemployment, abandoned minors by *Diaspora* parents, and disease prevalence in Zimbabwe, the workshop equipped young people with skills to resolve personal and community conflicts, deal with disease, and develop gainful employment skills.

I aim to conclude this article with a documentary, *In Bob We Trust*, which tells the heart-wrenching story of Father Bob, a church loyalist who embodied the principles of 'vertical transcendence' and 'horizontal immanence' of faith. This approach respects church structures while recognising God's presence among humanity (Graham 2013). This parallels the impending coup in Zimbabwe against President Bob, who was a drug addict and had befriended other drug addicts. His forced retirement serves as an authentic expression of the Catholic faith, condemning human flaws and not condoning the weaknesses of fallen priests by releasing them from duty, and serves as a witness to both the church and the world. This can only happen when church leaders are capacitated through theological education, and partnership with relevant bodies and resources to address key issues of concern in the nation, including addressing democratic freedom in Zimbabwe.

Towards the coup and post-coup prophecies in Zimbabwe

The coup and post-coup eras in Zimbabwe have seen a proliferation of prophecies by various individuals, many of whom have taken to social media platforms like *YouTube* to share their messages. These prophecies often focus on criticising the empire-building process by the status quo, particularly President Mnangagwa, and emphasising the need for change. Notably, some prophets have put themselves at risk by speaking out against the status quo and criticising the government's handling of public life challenges such as corruption, brutality towards opposition members, and empire-building (Southwell 2017). The mainline churches, led by Presiding Bishop Solomon Zwana, have also spoken out against injustice and oppression, calling for a need to revisit policymaking and governance processes (Southwell 2017).

However, not all churches have been equally vocal. Some have been criticised for being materialistic and focused on personal gain, rather than speaking out against social justice issues (Southwell 2017). According to Koh (2017), the church has a responsibility to help those without a voice to speak out for themselves and retell their own stories (Mk 7:31–37).

This can be achieved by creating spaces for people to share their experiences and perspectives.

In Zimbabwe, the diversity of Christian denominations has made it challenging for churches to work together on controversial issues such as gay rights and marriage equality (Greenall 2017). Nevertheless, Christians are expected to respond with love and compassion, even in the face of disagreement (Greenall 2017).

The proliferation of new religious movements (NRMs) has also created opportunities for diverse voices to be heard (Ndlovu 2021). Many of these movements have engaged with the nation through YouTube videos, sharing prophecies and visions that address various aspects of Zimbabwean society (Magondo 2021; Ndlovu 2019). These messages have covered a range of topics, from general prophecies about Zimbabwe to specific critiques of the government and political parties (Chitima 2020; Chiza 2022; Magondo 2021).

Conclusion

Mnangagwa's involvement in church-state capture in Zimbabwe has irrevocably compromised the prophetic voice of the church, which is inextricably linked to its ability to act as the conscience of society. The insatiable desire for control by the state has led to a vicious cycle of mutually exploitative interests between the ruling oligarchs, electoral candidates, and compliant church leaders, who prioritise personal relevance and protection over the integrity of their prophetic voice. Those church leaders who have refused to comply with Mnangagwa's machinations have faced attacks, arrests, and even death threats, and actual death, at the hands of state agents, weakening the church's internal cohesion and obscuring its moral compass.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contribution

G.M. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical consideration

This article followed all ethical standards for doing researching without direct contact with human or animal subjects. Ethical clearance was provided by Zimbabwe Open University with ethical clearance number ZOU-REC(RIED) 2024/1/03/24.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing does not apply to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

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