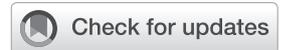


The church, state accountability and the Zimbabwe Gold currency



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This theoretical study explores the Zimbabwe Council of Churches' (ZCC) pivotal role in promoting social justice and economic accountability within Zimbabwe's repressive political climate under the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF). The ZCC embodies grassroots agency in resisting systemic injustices alongside the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHOCD), representing diverse Christian expressions. The study is anchored in decolonial theory, advocating for a vigilant prophetic tradition that counters internal colonisation and contemporary biblical oppression, urging ecumenical and localised initiatives to challenge state repression. The study highlights a disconnect between government rhetoric and policy outcomes, exemplified by the failure of the Zimbabwe Gold (ZiG) currency to ease socio-economic hardships. The study frames the disconnect through prophetic ideals, emphasising the importance of grassroots Christians to assume church agency in this scenario. The study asks the question: *What theological indictments should the church issue against prevailing state policies, and how can the ZCC's resilience foster effective resistance to repression?* Findings indicate that, despite numerous challenges, the ZCC advocates for impartiality in ethical governance and anti-corruption efforts. The study concludes that the church's prophetic mandate for social justice can be realised through engagement with grassroots communities, addressing the complex interplay of economics and politics, underscoring the necessity of prophetic witness and moral authority in Zimbabwe's collective pursuit of justice, and calls for unified civil society action to drive systemic economic reforms.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This interplay of faith and political responsibility reaffirms the church's role as a catalyst for transformative change in the face of escalating inflation. Ultimately, the article posits the necessity of the church's prophetic witness and moral authority as crucial to the collective struggle for a just and equitable Zimbabwe and calls for a united effort among civil society actors to effectuate systemic reform.

Keywords: theological foundations; political accountability; historical legacy; economic insecurity; public trust; social advocacy.

Introduction and background

The socio-economic challenges in Zimbabwe have been exacerbated by a complex interplay of political power, historical legacies and economic mismanagement under the ruling Zimbabwe African People's Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF). Zimbabwe, since gaining independence in 1980, has encountered chronic economic volatility, marked by hyperinflation, escalating unemployment and widespread poverty, intricately linked to allegations of governmental corruption and mechanisms of state repression designed to suppress public dissent and maintain control in favour of the incumbent.

Various scholars have commented on issues of social justice and economic accountability. Dansereau and Zamponi (2005:8) asserted that Zimbabwe's economic decline is deeply intertwined with issues of politics and historical legacies. This unavoidably led to 'the emergence of an opposition', in what Barure and Manase (2020:51) called 'the seeking of alternatives, [which] is commonly used by political actors when criticising other political parties'. This led to the underlying 'economic stagnation, lack of investment, rising debt levels, and shortages of foreign exchange' (Manase 2020:12). These inequalities may have been exacerbated by the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP), which worsened 'living conditions for considerable sections of the population', leading to a 'crisis of legitimacy', pushing 'ZANU-PF leadership to turn their backs on economic reforms and to gradually resort to an authoritarian and populist political strategy in order to maintain' (Manase 2020:28, 35, 37) political control amid this economic turmoil. Tizor (2009:1) further highlighted that 'corruption has become an accepted

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and almost expected way of doing business especially in the public sector'. In the same way, Nyoni (2017:285) further emphasised that 'corruption is one of the many unresolved problems that have seriously hobbled and skewed economic growth and development'. The perversity of bureaucratic corruption, termed 'greasing the wheels', has become so complex that state institutions have lost public trust, exacerbating the economic decline.

Historically, churches were regarded as influential transformative institutions that transitioned from 'piety in the pews' to 'vigilance in the public square' as they took on political discourses in defence of the causes of their members. It may be difficult to talk about the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) without elaborations of its history. It was formed in 1964 as the Christian Council of Rhodesia (CCR), in protest to a racist Rhodesia Conference of Churches (RCC), which was more of a conference and not a council (Gundani 2000; Verstraelen 1995:189). The ZCC was formed with direct links 'to the Ecumenical Documentation and Information Centre for Eastern and Southern Africa (EDICESA), and the All-Africa Conference of Churches (AACCC)' (Ruzivo 2009:5), with associate membership to the World Council of Churches (WCC). Thus, when the WCC inaugurated the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) in 1969, some elements in the council advanced it, hence its participation in the liberation struggle supporting combatants, prisoners of war and families of combatants. So, the ZCC was formed as a reactionary movement to the situation in the country and has remained resolute in its intent, especially when it campaigned against ZANU-PF forming a one-party state and later using the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) campaigned against repression (Kagoro 1999:7).

Churches, filling in the gap created by state repression on the media and civil society, have effectively challenged the dominant narratives of the ZANU-PF power machinery. It is in these 'weakened positions' that as civil society, the church has bravely confronted 'those in authority and come away with some gains' (Mutekwe 2023:122) to undo the state's 'silencing strategies' (Barure & Manase 2020:48), that is, 'brutal repression' (p. 12). This has left civil society fearful and unable to act. As Gwekwerere and Mpondi (2018) asserted, it is ZANU-PF's 'historical denialism' and 'selective amnesia' that have created false narratives of innocence, limiting civil society's ability to challenge the state. The party uses these tactics to portray itself as 'the progenitor and guardian of the postcolonial nation' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012:1), thereby delegitimising opposition politics to suppress alternative voices. Many Zimbabweans are worried on how much such rhetorics are distant from coloniality and how they deliver the civilisation they purport to bring. Rather, they represent a form of repression that stifles the growth of both a robust civil society capable of holding the government accountable and the state's inability to address the economic and social needs of the nation.

While the aforementioned studies indicate how attempts have been made by civil society actors, none have examined

the advocacy of ecclesiastical bodies on economic adversity and oppressive governance despite the church's centrality during the liberation struggle. This study acknowledges the evolving role of the ZCC, which unlike civil society cannot be cowed into submission because of its uniqueness, by representing the divine as mandated in the Scriptures, and its involvement that goes beyond the liberation struggle. That is why (Verstraelen 1998):

[W]here democracy is limited and civil society is underdeveloped, the churches are sometimes the only civil organizations that can inspire and support a movement towards true democracy and the development of a civil society which can counteract and change a monopolizing one-party political system which usually abuses its power. (p. 75)

Churches rise up in advocacy for social justice and economic accountability to 'speak for the voiceless' (Pr 31:8-9) because moral agency during difficult times is an extension of the Christian faith mandate. However, the aim of this study is to highlight the role of ecclesiastical institutions as transformative agents in the struggle for democracy and human rights, particularly in fostering socio-economic reforms. Interestingly, churches are aware of the perils associated with challenging authoritarian regimes but contend that remaining silent in the face of injustices implicates the church as colluding with the state. Thus, mobilising grassroots communities in the face of this intimidation highlights the transformative agency of an unadulterated faith.

This article is organised as follows: it begins with a theoretical framework that outlines the theological foundations informing the church's advocacy on economic mismanagement and political repression, followed by a discussion on the study findings, culminating in a conclusion that reflects on the implications of the results for future church engagements in the pursuit of social justice and ethical governance in Zimbabwe.

The prophetic tradition as a decolonial theory on social justice in Zimbabwe

The theory underpinning this engagement is decoloniality, a critical framework designed to confront the historical and ongoing ramifications of colonialism and imperialism on contemporary social, political and economic structures. Emerging in response to the prevalence of Eurocentric paradigms, decoloniality critiques the modern and/or colonial world system that has not only shaped global capitalism but also entrenched colonial legacies within societies. Notably, scholars such as Walter D. Mignolo and Aníbal Quijano have played pivotal roles in formulating decolonial thought, emphasising the necessity of cultural and epistemological plurality that honours indigenous knowledge systems (Mignolo 2007; Quijano 2000, 2007).

At its core, decoloniality posits that colonised societies must reclaim their histories, identities and epistemologies to resist

and deconstruct oppressive structures perpetuated by colonial antecedents. This theory highlights a pluralistic knowledge approach that challenges Western hegemonic absolutes, advocating for the incorporation of local perspectives to tackle social, political and economic injustices (Mignolo 2013). As Mignolo articulated, 'Decoloniality is a planetary critical consciousness that emerged [...] precisely out of the limits of abstract universals' (Mignolo 2007:499). This perspective lays the groundwork for a transformative understanding of social justice in Zimbabwe.

The significance of decoloniality is particularly salient in examining the role of the Zimbabwean churches in social justice advocacy. The enduring political oppression and economic despair under the ZANU-PF regime create an urgent imperative for churches to reclaim their historical roles in the liberation struggle, interweaving their theological foundations with decolonial perspectives. This reclamation allows churches to articulate a vision of justice that transcends colonial frameworks and affirms the dignity and agency of marginalised populations. Chitando (2020:404) asserted that 'Maintaining the dignity of Africans in African interpretations of the Bible implies accepting the full humanity and worth of Africans as part of the human family'. This approach not only enhances the church's advocacy efforts but positions them as moral agents confronting systemic injustices.

The intersection of decolonial theory and theological engagement sheds light on how Zimbabwean churches can critically advocate for ethical governance to address contemporary challenges. This necessitates a re-evaluation of the prophetic role of the church in advocating for social justice, which includes a call for ethical leadership, accountability and social equity. By engaging scriptural imperatives, Chitando (2020:406) stated that 'the Bible can be a veritable weapon in defending African resources'. In this way, churches can articulate compelling narratives that resonate with the aspirations of the oppressed. This distinct decolonial theological framework allows churches to critique governance models that perpetuate socio-economic disparities, demanding accountability and integrity from state leadership.

Furthermore, Mignolo's notion of 'delinking' from colonial narratives encourages the ZCC to explore alternative pathways for justice that reflect Zimbabwean realities rather than perpetuate state disconnect with the lived aspirations of its populace. He stated that 'the target of epistemic decolonization is the hidden complicity between the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality' (Mignolo 2013:54). These insights prompt Zimbabwean churches to confront the ZANU-PF regime's approaches to governance, which often exacerbate inequality and disenfranchisement. These insights (i.e. of a decolonial theological perspective) prompt Zimbabwean churches to move beyond mere critique, advocating for a transformative understanding of leadership rooted in biblical principles of justice and equity, as emphasised by Quijano's critique of contemporary social structures (Quijano 2000, 2007). The relevance of this

theoretical framing extends beyond critiques of governance to inform a broader understanding of the church's engagement with ongoing social injustices faced by the Zimbabwean populace. Here, the prophetic tradition within churches becomes a vital instrument for mobilising communities towards social justice, emphasising the liberation of marginalised voices. Chitando (2020) emphasised that 'the Bible should not become a fetish that is appealed to in order to provide miracles for the development of Africa' (Chitando 2020:413), implying that active, realistic engagement with scripture is essential for genuine transformation.

In all, the integration of decolonial theory with theological frameworks establishes a robust foundation for exploring social justice in Zimbabwe. This analytical framework highlights the moral imperatives driving churches' engagement with contemporary injustices. The prophetic tradition, enriched by decolonial insights, serves as a catalyst for transformative action, ensuring that the voices of the disenfranchised resonate within positions of power. Ultimately, this confluence of decolonial thought and theological advocacy paves the way for a more equitable society, fostering a collective commitment to justice anchored in divine moral imperatives.

Theological inditements to address state economic mismanagement

Faith in action: The church on social justice

The economic malaise in Zimbabwe, marked by hyperinflation and systemic governance failures, demands an urgent and robust theological critique from the church aimed at the ruling ZANU-PF party's policies. Joram Tarusarira's study underscored the complex dual role of Christianity in Zimbabwe, illustrating its historical position both as a facilitator of oppression and as a source of resistance against it (Tarusarira 2015:266). His analysis revealed that while the church has been a vehicle for social justice, it has occasionally aligned with oppressive regimes, thus complicating its prophetic stance. He noted that 'Christian actors have played dynamic roles with some working in collaboration with the perpetrators of violence and fanning conflict, while others resisted and/or intervened to resolve the conflicts' (Tarusarira 2015:266). This ambivalence has been felt in the execution of the Zimbabwe Gold (ZiG) currency that has led to the economic paradox towards public interest and trust, which highlights what Mutisi (2023) called a 'crisis of confidence', underscoring a critical need for religious actors to adopt a posture of moral courage in confronting injustices that affect human dignity and welfare.

Scepticism with the ZiG is deeply rooted in a historical context marked by substantial miscalculated operations that include ethnic violence, *Gukurahundi* [washing away the chaff] (1982–1987); forceful land grabbing, *Jambanja* (2001–2003); removing filth, *Murambatsvina* (2005) and voting surveillance, *Mavhotera Papi* (2008) with catastrophic human and economic destruction.

However, the church has historically provided counter-narratives to state repressions, as seen during Operation *Murambatsvina* (2005), which forcibly evicted thousands and resulted in widespread homelessness. In this instance, churches mobilised humanitarian assistance, embracing the biblical directive to 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Mk 12:31) and prioritising vulnerable populations over compliance with state injustices. Similarly, during the *Gukurahundi* massacres (1982–1987), the ZCC church leaders condemned state-sanctioned violence, framing it within a theological context that advocates accountability and justice. It attempted to show us that its witness was in line with its role, not just as a passive observer but as an active advocate for the oppressed.

The church's prophetic voice has been featured prominently in various critical movements. For instance, during the political upheaval surrounding *Operation Restore Legacy* (2017), the ZCC's call for reconciliation emphasised a theological approach aligned with healing and restoration. It advocated for transitional justice, reinforcing its commitment to moral governance, embodied in the scriptural admonition to 'do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God' (Mi 6:8). Its involvement in public discourse was underscored by its push for ethical governance, asserting that accountability and transparency in economic policies must benefit the impoverished rather than elite interests (Tagwirei 2022).

A report by the African Development Bank (2024) identifies key factors undermining the ZiG, including public reluctance to accept the currency, governmental opacity in economic policy management and insufficient measures to counteract purported economic saboteurs, all of which erode trust in new monetary instruments introduced by the ZANU-PF regime. In response to these economic adversities, the ZCC articulated a theologically grounded critique of ZANU-PF's management practices, asserting that socio-economic policies must embody biblical principles of justice and stewardship that prioritise public welfare over elite interests (Munongo 2024). The ZCC, in 2024, facilitated an economic dialogue with economists and community representatives to assess the ZiG's potential, acknowledging its conceptual merits while condemning persistent human errors that perpetuate systemic inequities, poverty and corruption (Munongo 2024). This critique resonates with calls for comprehensive economic reforms, as superficial measures, like a new currency, are unlikely to yield lasting change without substantial accountability and ethical governance (Panchia 2024; Tarusarira 2015).

What we find in the ZCC action is that it uses an ecclesiastical critique, centring on the necessity of evaluating economic policies through an ethical lens, underscoring accountability and commitment to the common good. The church's prophetic mission implicates ZANU-PF's prioritisation of self-enrichment, revealing broader moral deficiencies. As articulated by Tagwirei (2022), elite behaviours perpetuate injustice, prompting church leaders to advocate for policies that resonate with Christ's ministry of social welfare and upliftment. This proactive engagement, rooted in liberation theology, compels faith communities to confront systemic

injustices in the current economic order, not only to alleviate symptoms but also to foster a 'missional consciousness' that empowers the marginalised (i.e. congregants) as active participants in the prophetic mission (Maponya & Baron 2020).

More often than not, the ZCC utilises biblical insights, such as the parable of the talents (Mt 25:14–30), to navigate the intricate moral landscape of economic governance, emphasising responsible stewardship of resources. Ineffective resource management signifies moral failure, and ZCC has continuously urged politicians to consider their contributions towards communal welfare. This scriptural foundation reinforces the church's advocacy for ethical wealth distribution and community involvement (Du Plessis 2018). However, maintaining a critical distance from state powers is essential to preserve the church's prophetic role, as demonstrated by Mudimeli's study of post-apartheid South Africa, which cautions against compromising social justice advocacy through political entanglement (Mudimeli 2017:6).

The rise and fall of the ZiG manifest a profound ethical and theological conundrum, prompting Zimbabwean churches to critically reassess their role in socio-economic discourse. Grounded in biblical traditions, ZCC-affiliated denominations reject the self-serving practices of the political elite, advocating for public policies that prioritise collective welfare and justice. Their evolving theological critique underscores the necessity for systemic reform, framed in the form of 'participatory governance'. By embracing a holistic approach (echoing Tagwirei's [2022:16] assertion that 'economics cannot be ignored in today's ecclesiology'), the churches can foster resilience, dignity and hope amid adversity.

Biblical foundations for challenging state authority

The church is historically responsible for taking hold of the moral compass of society through its prophetic vocation, especially in contexts beset by injustice and corruption. This prophetic calling is anchored in the biblical tradition and compels the church to engage critically with state policies in contra to their effect on social and economic inequities. Theological assertions about the church's duty to confront and hold authorities accountable emerge from scriptural explorations that prioritise justice and righteousness as foundational tenets of a faithful community. However, many churches, including the Roman Catholic Church, do not have Canon Laws with regard to holding state authorities on how to account for state resources. This leaves scriptures as mere injunctions that are difficult to enforce in a secular state that believes there are many faiths.

However, there are biblical exemplars that abound, showcasing the prophetic duty to confront political leaders against injustices. In Isaiah, for instance, the prophet condemned the king by proclaiming: 'Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees' (Is 10:1, NIV). Such denunciations are not acceptable but

necessary because they serve as a clarion call to state authorities, as they awaken people to dissent against oppressive governance. This is what the ZCC Secretary General, Kenneth Mtata (2020) articulated saying: 'The nation is at the crossroads; the church must gather enough moral courage to confront those who perpetuate suffering in our communities'. The emphasis therefore is on the prophetic message, which is rooted in a divine mandate that seeks justice and advocates for the marginalised (Hays 2012).

In a similar vein, the ministry of Jesus illustrates the embodiment of prophetic dissent, as he challenged both religious and political authorities. His mission was encapsulated in Luke 4:18–19: 'He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor... to set at liberty those who are oppressed'. This scriptural framing demands that the church rigorously assess whether or not its engagement with pressing social issues aligns with Jesus' teachings. Clearly, biblical activism urges the church to advocate for just policies that prioritise communal welfare, particularly amid systemic corruption and economic turmoil as is showcased in Zimbabwe's current context.

This study encourages engagement in prophetic critique, which transcends mere spiritual contemplation, as it necessitates a dedicated interpretation of scripture through a social justice lens. Also, Matthew's Gospel highlights an ethical obligation to care for the least among us, indicating that acts of compassion towards the marginalised are manifestations of service to Christ himself (Mt 25:35–40). This theology of compassion obliges active participation in opposing policies that deepen poverty and disenfranchisement, which should reinforce the commitment of Zimbabwean churches to advocate for economic policies that ensure equitable wealth distribution and communal upliftment (Chitando 2020). I argue that if the church is only a critic of the state without being a facilitator of dialogue, no community can be mobilised to assume its agency.

Further, the biblical narrative of liberation, especially as articulated through the Exodus account, offers a foundational blueprint for confronting oppressive regimes. Lessons we get from the plight of the Israelites under Pharaoh serve as a poignant reminder of the struggles faced by Zimbabweans against pervasive governmental corruption. When we see God's declaration in Exodus 3:9, where he acknowledges the suffering of his people, it compels the church to act in solidarity with the oppressed. Such a theological foundation underscores that confronting state failures is not merely a political act but a divine obligation stemming from an intersection of faith and justice.

Furthermore, Paul's teachings, particularly in Romans 13, encourage a nuanced engagement with political authorities, urging submission while simultaneously beckoning ethical scrutiny. While this passage acknowledges governmental roles, it also poses critical questions regarding obedience in instances where authorities deviate from divine justice. Thus,

the church's prophetic voice emerges as essential in challenging unjust laws and advocating for policies aligned with God's justice and mercy. It is imperative for the church to uphold ethical considerations, ensuring that its engagements with governmental entities do not compromise its moral integrity.

In our case, the theological denunciation of Zimbabwe's governance, particularly concerning its economic policies such as the controversial ZiG currency, must highlight the failure to uphold human dignity and welfare. With approximately 70% of the populace living below the poverty threshold (Benhura & Mhariwa 2021; Murendo, Sisito & Chirongwe 2021), the church's response must be resolute, spotlighting the moral implications of economic mismanagement that devastates vulnerable communities. Daniel Silke, a prominent South African economic analyst, encapsulated this sentiment, stating that 'A new currency is like putting a plaster over a wound, rather than treating its cause' (Panchia 2024). This prophetic witness requires challenging the ZANU-PF administration's prioritisation of self-interest over collective welfare, mirroring the historical call for accountability and justice.

Moreover, faith communities must leverage biblical teachings to advocate for systemic reforms that reflect a commitment to stewardship and equitable governance. Micah 6:8 serves as a pivotal reminder of the ethical mandate, asserting that God expects believers 'to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God'. These principles provide a robust framework for contesting unjust policies that masquerade under claimed moral authority while neglecting those with pressing needs forgetting that 'the encounter with Christ is in the distressing disguise of the poor and needy of any type' (Masengwe 2020:61). Consequently, ZCC's prophetic voice should be integral in the pursuit of economic justice in the face of the ZiG currency.

In light of these theological foundations, the church is both equipped and mandated to challenge political authorities actively. Its prophetic heritage emboldens members to stand in solidarity with marginalised groups, ensuring that advocacy resonates with scripture's imperatives for justice. As the church engages in prophetic critique, it ultimately reinforces itself as a moral agent, catalysing change by upholding the dignity of all Zimbabweans and advocating for policies that harmonise with divine justice and compassion.

The church's action on ethics, governance and state policies

According to 2017 demographic studies, 'Data collected on religion shows that 84% of the population in the age group 15 years and older are Christian, while 1% are Muslim' (UNFPA 2017:xi, 6). This percentage is significant for changing the social, political and economic landscape of Zimbabwe if Christians were united. Unfortunately, 'The largest proportion of Christians belong to the Apostolic sect (34%) followed by Pentecostal (20%) and Protestant (16%)' (UNFPA 2017:xi, 6). In fact, there are 8% Catholic and 6.9% Prophetic-Pentecostal Christians (UNFPA 2017:15), wherein the most

vocal and active are the 16% Protestant and 8% Catholic, which is about 24% of the total Christian demography. This means Christian action without uniting Apostolic and Zionist Churches as well as Pentecostals remains futile. I therefore strongly believe there is a need to mobilise internally as well as conscientise for acts of justice, transparency and ethical governance that is sensitive to the faith sources of the other Christian groups. While the Bible remains ideal, its use to understand economic inequality, environmental degradation and human rights abuses remains contested. However, this cannot undermine the actions of the ZCC with its 16% demography to advocate for human rights and economic justice.

As I reflect upon the harsh realities that over 70% of Zimbabweans live below the poverty datum line (Benhura & Mhariwa 2021; Murendo et al. 2021), I recognise the urgency of the church's prophetic mandate, which should collectively call upon political leaders to realign their policies in favour of the impoverished. This notion resonates with Proverbs 31:8–9's exhortation to speak for the voiceless. Biblical principles are no mere verbal injunctions but calls to action, hence containing an ethical framework the church should use for its advocacy. The uncomfortable reality, as I see it, is that while no individual is truly without a voice, there are many whose rights can be easily trampled upon because they lack the impetus to stand for themselves. Advocacy, however, encourages individuals to participate in collective liberation efforts, rooting such actions in moral imperatives aligned with core Christian values (ed. Raftopoulos 2013). So, the Bible clearly charges the church to critique state policies that perpetuate poverty and marginalisation. Notably, the intersection of Christian mission with practical civic action enables the church to challenge policies that solely prioritise short-term economic gains over the long-term welfare of the citizenry. I often find myself pondering the implications of this dual role, asking questions like: How can we effectively harness our spiritual insights to influence public policy in a manner that uplifts the most vulnerable among us? It is this blend of faith and action that I believe is necessary to drive meaningful change in our society.

Further, the church's engagement with state policies begins with elections, where electoral integrity is central to the democratisation of the nation. Religious organisations, particularly Christian coalitions with civil society, have emerged as vital agents promoting transparency and accountability amid long electoral challenges. The author has been significantly aware of the general elections in Zimbabwe since the 2017 coup (Masengwe, Makuva & Dube 2021) and the associated events that serve as a litmus test for church participation to uphold democratic principles (Kwabena 2023). Thus, the presence of the ZCC through its elections civic organisation the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) has not only added credibility to the extensive monitoring efforts by observing electoral processes but also, to some extent, deterred rampant electoral malpractices. In the 2006 *Kairos Zimbabwe document*, Matikiti stated that

'Elements of the mainline Churches were in the forefront of demands for electoral reform and democratic political space' (Matikiti 2009:96). Thus, despite instances of electoral violence in various regions during the 2018 and 2023 harmonised general elections, the ZWWD (2006) reminded the state of the ZCC's resoluteness, which drew its strength from liberation theology to critique oppressive political structures (Gutiérrez 2023). To the church, electoral integrity is a moral cause important for broader societal health.

Using accountability as a moral framework, it transcends mere political engagements, reinforcing state obligations to defend individual freedoms in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). When religious leaders confront the state, they remind it to uphold justice as enshrined in its laws (Gutiérrez 2023). Nonetheless, the church faces challenges in promoting electoral integrity, particularly because of its internal divisions vis-à-vis the oppressive political climate that stifles dissenting voices. The fear of the state's use of extra-judicial measures to repress democratic efforts is not a lack of an ethical framework, nor deep commitment to ethical governance nor lack of theological principles, but the fear of cohesive action upon marginalised families.

There are other issues such as ecological sustainability encapsulated in Genesis 2:15, which have an impact on economic development. When a state ignores its people, it licences environmental destruction and perpetuates poverty. Besides, governments sanction projects that have a significant impact on the environment, requiring that the church engage with the state on ethical discourse. These projects become easy when the church collaborates with civil actors, lawyers and political parties in a collective effort that eventually reinforces democratic ethos.

Cultivating effective counter-measures through ecumenical resilience and advocacy

Faith as resistance: The role of religious institutions in social justice movements

When I joined the Christian faith, there was a lot of animosity between parents and family members who believed Christianity was in contra to the African traditional religion. However, faith convictions make it difficult to break one's choice because they have decided on how to organise their lives. Similarly, Christianity, and especially Protestantism, began and has lived as a resistance movement. There is little fanfare to place the church at the crossroads with the state because by nature of its identity it advocates against state-sanctioned repressions and bureaucratic corruption. Therefore, when Mafohla and Sipeyiye (2024:1) stated that 'corruption has caused serious dysfunction in most of the public institutions in Zimbabwe', they are instigating the church to act in the direction of social justice and liberation transformation according to their divine mandates.

At independence, it relaxed thinking they had removed the oppressor only to discover that the former liberator had begun to roost among the hens. However, it gained its feet in the second decade of independence reclaiming its tenet in liberation theology to resist repression by the formation of the NCA in 1996, which led to the debate on the national constitution, and possibly the 1999 formation of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). This is because the church emphasises advocacy that exists in its DNA and must transcend mere spiritual pursuits in the pews by confronting injustices such as the case of the ZiG. Proverbs 31:8 argues that the church must 'speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves', framing its mission within the elevation of voices to challenge any abuses. However, individual action is futile because it makes one vulnerable and exposed to victimisation hindering advocacy to fully achieve its purpose. Thus, the ZCC uses community mobilisation through acts of kindness like food distribution and health access as well as trainings like the Training of Trainers Course and Learning for Transformation (LFT 1 & 2), which conscientised and mobilised church leaders to act for justice. In this training, one key course, 'Let the People Speak Philosophy' (Kuveya 2007), was emphasised, which probably prepared a groundswell of support when the MDC was formed.

However, it needs to be noted that a salient feature in the ZCC advocacy efforts is the comprehensive understanding of socio-political realities in Zimbabwe. The ZCC mobilises community support through programmes aimed at addressing socio-economic challenges, such as food distribution and health care access through its arm, the Christian Care. These initiatives resonate with biblical imperatives advocating for the welfare of the needy (Is 1:17). As noted by Mafohla and Sipeyiye (2024:2), the church can only unlock its potential to combat corruption and injustice by undergoing self-reflection and reconfiguring its strategies to adopt a robust anti-corruption stance. This necessity highlights the transformative approach required for the church to align its actions with its ethical teachings effectively.

Integrating faith with social justice advocacy makes the church assume the role of a 'moral arbiter' in opposition to malpractices that undermine social integrity (Mtata 2020). This counterbalances state power. This goes beyond verbal opposition. It fosters community mobilisation, solidarity and resilience during crackdowns. As stated above, the ZCC has various networks in the continent and beyond, which are useful for moral support, information dissemination and dialogue. For this reason, such engagements require collaborative actions as individuals are vulnerable to victimisation and targeting. The faith thus is used in representation to the community, more so as a catalyst for social justice and human rights advocacy. This is why Mafohla and Sipeyiye (2024:2) argued that 'the church [must] not only critique injustices but also invest in transformative social practices that uphold human dignity'. The integration of faith into public life accentuates the role of the church as a

key facilitator of social change, urging congregants to be 'the light of the world' (Mt 5:16) by advocating for transparency and accountability.

In all, faith as resistance speaks to community solidarity in support of the church's theology and the call to prophetic action. This call, however, has become more urgent now, in the face of the escalating economic situation, than ever before; resilience and advocacy affirm the vital intersection of faith with social justice movements in Zimbabwe. By harnessing its theological foundation, mobilising community solidarity and assuming a prophetic role, the ZCC cultivates an environment where faith propels collective efforts towards justice, equity and dignity. This narrative underscores the church's critical engagement in socio-political contexts, reaffirming its commitment to being an agent of change amid the trials facing Zimbabwean society. As the nation grapples with complex challenges, the call for the church to fulfil its prophetic witness resonates with urgency, reaffirming faith's transformative potential in the pursuit of a just society.

Strategies for survival: Examining the Zimbabwe Council of Churches' organisational resilience in the face of oppression

The ZCC has always had strategies for survival. In 1964, it created the Christian Care to oversee its humanitarian work; in case as a council, the government closed it from operation. It has also done the same in 1996 when it formed the NCA with the support of labour and legal practitioners, and in 2000, among 36 civic organisations, it formed the ZESN. These efforts are meant to resist state-sanctioned oppression, especially violence, corruption and economic inequalities. Zimbabwe Council of Churches, unlike other civic organisations, has grassroots structures that are used as a platform for social engagement. Grassroots structures actively participate in addressing immediate social-spiritual issues.

These outreach initiatives are also accessed through the work of Christian Care, which reinforces ZCC's internal cohesion. Thus, grassroots mobilisation cultivates inclusivity and collegiality among members as they pray, worship and train together on how to confront state oppression. The ZCC's training school at Kentucky Hotel helps create spaces for social interaction and spiritual healing in a supportive environment. It is through collaborative efforts that alliances are forged and resilience is achieved. When Magezi and Tagwirei stated that 'the challenge is how and how far the Church can engage in political affairs' (Magezi & Tagwirei 2022:8), they are illustrating the efficacy of partnerships to promote cohesive approaches to advocacy without which the church has no clout because theological convictions alone are just convictions. For instance, as Mafohla and Sipeyiye (2024) stated that 'Corruption has caused serious dysfunction in most of the public institutions in Zimbabwe' (p. 1), they are calling for a prophetic voice to counter-narrate the political rhetoric but need the impetus to confront the state.

In dealing with governance failures in Zimbabwe, especially economic despair, engagement with civic leaders who are knowledgeable about both issues of money and morals will go a long way in empowering grassroots initiatives, exemplifying the profound capacity of faith-based organisations to inspire resilience amid adversity.

The intersection of faith and politics: Advocacy efforts versus authoritarianism

The ZCC advocacy is deeply rooted in theological principles where justice, righteousness and accountability are acts of moral authority for strengthening the marginalised. Faith provides a bedrock upon which oppression can be resisted. Echoing the convictions of Protestant leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., who asserted that 'silence in the face of evil constitutes complicity' (Mtata 2020), and biblical figures like Isaiah who called for justice and the defence of the oppressed (Chitando 2020), the ZCC can also use liberation theology to champion solidarity for the downtrodden (Gutiérrez 2023). To amplify its voice, the ZCC needs to form alliances with civil society organisations, human rights activists, legal experts and social justice organisations. These partnerships significantly enhance the capacity to mobilise resources and generate collective action against state abuses. Such coalitions are effective in that they challenge authoritarianism and provide a robust platform for combatting entrenched systems of repression (ed. Cavatorta 2012). The ZCC, since the coalition government, has been active in national dialogues, heightening public awareness on violations and promoting accountability. This has created open discourses with political figures, especially monetary reforms (Munongo 2024). These dialogues served as critical venues for addressing various grievances in the nation, especially the need for legal frameworks to observe human rights. This has not happened because politicians were yielding, but that the ZCC mobilised public sentiment for transformative change political resistance cannot ignore (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). We mentioned the issue of grassroots mobilisation as one such strategy the church used as a catalyst for social change (Chitando 2020; Davidson & Purohit 2004). Where the ZCC mobilises at least 2% of its followers, it gathers over 340 000 people, putting pressure to state authorities on the need to respect democratic principles (eds. Nyakudya, Mwatwara & Mujere 2022). However, church leaders have always faced the daunting task of balancing their commitment to justice and the associated risks of confronting an unpredictable regime (Johnson 2018).

In all, advocacy and authoritarianism can intersect through strategic partnerships, national dialogues and grassroots mobilisations, without which divine justice and human rights remain a mirage.

A path forward for Zimbabwe

The ZCC has a huge opportunity to engage the state on economic policies, especially the ZiG, in that even the state has come to the conclusion that corruption is destroying the economy. However, the church has a moral obligation to protect the interests of its congregants by advocating for

transparent governance. Grounded in a profound theological framework and commitment to its prophetic witness, the ZCC can draw mandates from the Bible and precedents from the history of resistance during the liberation struggle to critique the ZANU-PF financial regime. It was highlighted somewhere that national dialogues have championed social justice, but it was also mentioned that ZANU-PF is also known for its historical legacy of violence and intimidation against dissenters, including religious leaders. While this complicates advocacy processes by the church, church members, more often than not, have chosen to risk personal safety through actionable efforts that address problems rather than prolong them. So in pursuit of justice and equitability, churches have rather formed alliances with resourced organisations in order to empower their congregants to actively assert their rights. Thus, as we grapple with poor economic governance, the church's prophetic voice remains integral for systemic reform. This remains as a witness for the church to uphold its principles of justice, integrity and human dignity in the midst of turmoil and repression. This hopefully can address the twin problems of financial accountability and political accountability.

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Author's contribution

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Disclaimer

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