

Full Length Research Paper

Opposition political parties' coalition in Zimbabwe: Challenges and possibilities

Mungwari Teddy¹ * and Ephraim Vhutuza²

¹Centre for Language & Communication Studies, Chinhoyi University of Technology, Zimbabwe

²Department of Film and Theatre Arts Studies, Midlands State University, Gweru, Zimbabwe.

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This paper discusses the prevalent view among ordinary Zimbabweans that only a grand coalition among select opposition political parties could potentially unseat the ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) from power in the upcoming 2018 general elections. The paper argues that the prospects for such a grand coalition are only possible if select parties coalesce around the major opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change-Tsvangirai (MDC-T). This article takes this argument as the starting point for a discussion of the role and character of opposition political parties and party systems in Zimbabwe and further considers aspects of the performance of individual parties to date and the extent to which they fall short of people's expectations, what in this paper constitutes possibilities and challenges in forging a formidable grand coalition given the magnitude of mistrust within and among them. The state-controlled daily, The Herald was examined to ascertain how it framed the coalition of opposition parties in Zimbabwe. Therefore, secondary data analysis and observation through the lenses of a qualitative approach, of the unfolding political environment in Zimbabwe was done. The Herald which is supposed to be a public newspaper is allegedly a mouthpiece of the ruling party ZANU PF. It was concluded that The Herald's representation of the coalition was propagandistic. It was also concluded that despite personality clashes, mistrust, infiltration, bloated ambitions among leaders and party egos, a grand coalition is possible and that this could possibly fare better than if individual parties contest ZANU PF individually.

Key words: Movement for Democratic Change-Tsvangirai (MDC-T), Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF), pre-electoral coalition, Zimbabwe, individual parties, memorandum of understanding, 2018 elections.

INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe's fragmented political opposition parties have failed to outpoll Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) in the country's successive elections

since 1980 save for 2008 when the then united Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) defeated ZANU PF in the first round of the presidential elections of March that year.

*Corresponding author. E-mail: teddymngwari1@gmail.com.

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Unfortunately, the opposition party could not garner the much needed 50% +1 vote needed to avoid a run-off. A coalition of opposition political parties is presumably seen as the only formidable force which appears to be the only hope for many longing for political change in Zimbabwe. President Mugabe's rule has been characterized by massive company closures, deteriorating public health facilities, increased poverty levels and high unemployment rate and weakening commodity prices among a plethora of other social and economic ills (Raftopoulos and Mlambo, 2009). Despite these socio-economic challenges, ZANU PF has remained in power and this has given political parties the impetus to think about the possibility of fronting a united grand coalition to challenge ZANU PF in the 2018 general elections.

ZANU PF, which has been in power since independence in 1980, is also grappling with growing fissures as hawkish politicians in two factions: Team Lacoste (allegedly fronting Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa) and G40 (alleged behind First Lady Grace Mugabe) angle to succeed President Robert Mugabe who will be 94 when Zimbabwe goes to the next elections in 2018. Opposition parties are eager to take advantage of this seemingly unstoppable factionalism and succession struggles within the ruling party, ZANU PF. Zimbabwe's opposition parties are currently in an attempt to unite to dislodge the ZANU PF government which has been in power for 37 years. The closest attempts towards a coalition so far has been the National Electoral Reform Agenda (NERA), a platform which has united over 20 opposition political parties in the country including the largest opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change-Tsvangirai (MDC-T) led by Morgan Tsvangirai and the newly formed National People's Party (NPP) led by the former Vice President, Joice Mujuru. NERA is calling for electoral reforms that include the compilation of a new voters roll, cleansing the ZEC secretariat of ZANU PF aligned staff and the disbandment of militia that allegedly cause political violence. However, as if NERA is not enough, there is yet another grouping of mainly 13 smaller opposition political parties such as ZIPRA, Mavambo/Kusile/Dawn and others under the Coalition for Democrats (CODE). CODE is a group which is pushing for the grand coalition of Zimbabwe opposition parties to participate in the 2018 Elections. CODE wants to present a united front in order to push out ZANU PF and deal with the problems Zimbabwe is facing. The MDC-T has not been keen to be part of CODE.

Questions have been asked as to who will lead the coalition and Morgan Tsvangirai and Joice Mujuru's names should have been the likely contenders. Tsvangirai leads the biggest opposition in the country and he defeated President Robert Mugabe in a presidential election of March, 2008. He has been endorsed by both Didymus Mutasa of Zimbabwe People First (ZimPF) and Simba Makoni of Mavambo/Kusile/Dawn. According to the *Bulawayo24.com* online edition of the 19th of March, 2017, quoting the *Daily News* Mutasa in endorsing Morgan

Tsvangirai said: "For me, Tsvangirai is the natural leader of the coalition because of who he is... what the NERA is today stands for what Tsvangirai and the MDC-T built. The rest of us are latecomers in this game..." Mutasa's endorsement of Tsvangirai as the possible leader of the coalition was echoed by Simba Makoni who according to the same publication, said: "I am on record saying we need everyone and in the case of Tsvangirai, we all know the value that he adds, he has been in the opposition trenches this long." This paper also endorses Tsvangirai as the possible leader of the envisaged grand coalition to lead the opposition in the 2018 general elections.

On the other hand, Joice Mujuru commands some support from a large section of war veterans as a war veteran herself. She presumably has full support of war veterans seen as a vital cog in Mujuru's party as they are responsible for mobilisation and giving the party liberation war credentials that make it attractive to other opposition parties seeking a coalition. Mujuru is the torch-bearer and brand of National People's Party. A coalition of the opposition that includes genuine defectors from the ruling party and affiliates from the security sector as well as the war veterans tends to diminish the ruling party's imagery of indomitability and invincibility. It is under such circumstances that Mujuru's inclusion in a coalition of the opposition could turn the current political equilibrium in favour of the opposition which should present a single presidential candidate to the electorate in the 2018 elections.

However, she has been part of the ruling party, ZANU PF for a very long time including during the Gukurahundi era, Operation Murambatsvina and the violent 2008 presidential run-off. Her family is thought to have wealth across mining, farming, telecommunications and real estate, something she has denied. And to add to her blemishes, she did not voluntarily resign from ZANU PF. She was expelled from the party and some sections of the electorate still believe she could still be part of the ruling party had she not been expelled. To add to her woes, her party, ZimPF has since split and she now leads a new party, the National People's Party (NPP) which is a latecomer to national politics. Therefore, Morgan Tsvangirai seems to be a strong contender to lead the grand coalition if at all it comes to fruition before the 2018 general elections.

This paper examines the politics of opposition party coalitions in Zimbabwe by identifying faulty lines that have militated against opposition coalitions. Given the political context of an electoral authoritarian regime in Zimbabwe, the paper identifies measures that would help to improve the endurance, success and democratic quality of opposition coalition in Zimbabwe. This paper is informed by two factors. Firstly, the recent nascent attempts by opposition parties towards forging electoral coalitions ahead of the 2018 general election under NERA CODE. Secondly, it is influenced by the current state of fragmentation among opposition forces and the

democratic contingent in general (ZDI, 2016).

Pre-electoral coalitions

Kadima (2006:10) submits that a party coalition is “the coming together of a minimum of two political parties for a certain period, in pursuit of an agreed set of common goals to be reached by means of a common strategy, joint actions, the pooling of resources and the distribution of possible subsequent payoffs.” The National Democratic Institute and Oslo Centre for Peace and Human Rights (2015) define a coalition as:

“A temporary union between two or more groups, especially political parties, for the purpose of gaining more influence or power than the individual groups or parties can hope for to achieve on their own. By focusing on their common objectives and goals, all of the member groups can build their strength and get an advantage on issues of common interest. With a particular objective in mind-winning an election, passing a particular legislation, or forming a government-coalitions have a limited life span until the objectives are achieved”.

Browne (1982:2) postulates that a coalition is “a set of parliamentary political parties that: (a) agree to pursue a common goal or a common set of goals; (b) pool their resources in pursuit of this goal(s); (c) communicate and form binding commitments concerning their goals... (d) agree on the distribution of the pay-offs to be received on obtaining their goal”.

From the definitions, we argue in this article that there are pull and push factors motivating opposition parties to form alliances with the central strategic objective being the need to win power. The challenge may be that some members in some political parties in Zimbabwe, particularly those which are offshoots from the ruling party such as Zimbabwe People First (ZimPF) and National People’s Party (NPP) may be easily seen as ZANU PF creations. Such misgivings from the supporters from MDC-T have forced the MDC-T leader, Morgan Tsvangirai to embark on countrywide consultations to gauge their reaction towards a coalition with other parties.

When trying to compete against an entrenched competitive establishment like ZANU PF, opposition parties face an uphill battle. Howard and Roessler (2006) posit that there is a large degree of asymmetry between the ruling party and the opposition in competitive authoritarian electoral contests because in many developing countries, wealth is concentrated in the hands of government officials. In the case of Zimbabwe, it is difficult to separate government from the ruling ZANU PF party. Consequently, opposition political parties lack access to sufficient material resources to build a broad, nation-wide political party that is capable of mounting an effective challenge to the incumbent’s hold on power. The

more fragmented the opposition parties are, the more susceptible they are to government and ruling party manipulation, co-option and repression. According to Diamond (2002), an active and diverse civil society, though important for the consolidation of democracy as it checks the accountability and power of the government proves ineffectual when matched against an oppressive incumbent or ruling party seeking to guarantee re-election. Instead, opposition victory in a competitive authoritarian regime “requires a level of opposition mobilization, unity, skill, and heroism far beyond what would normally be required for victory in a democracy” (Diamond, 2002: 24). In short, what is important in competitive authoritarian regimes is how opposition leaders and civil society groups choose to organize in the electoral arena and their ability to create strategic coalitions that are resilient in the face of government force and fraud (Levitsky and Way, 2001).

The formation of an opposition coalition does not refer to the strength of the opposition *per se*, and it is not based merely on the degree of hostility to a leader or party in power (Howard and Roessler, 2006). Many authoritarian incumbents are deeply unpopular with the broader population, opposition movements and civil society groups ‘united’ in their agreement that the president must go. In Zimbabwe, the privately owned media and recently some war veterans and many other voices within the fractured ruling party, as well as political leaders within the region such as Julius Malema of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) have been calling on President Mugabe to go (News Day of 24 January, 2017). Yet, despite their lack of popular support, such incumbents often maintain their hold onto power because of the opposition elites’ inability to form organizational structures that effectively challenge government in the electoral arena. This paper asserts that what is important is the ability of these political parties to come together, not by giving up their own political parties and interests or by submitting to a charismatic leader, but in order to form a strategic coalition for the specific goal of winning an election.

Howard and Roessler (*ibid*: 371) postulate that “an opposition coalition can increase the probability of political liberalization in four ways.” First, it can take votes away from the ruling regime. When the opposition has joined together, an unpopular incumbent is less able to use repression and patronage to coerce and induce people to vote for him or her. Secondly, it can prevent incumbents from playing opposition parties and leaders against each other, thus making “divide and rule” a less effective strategy. Third, it can increase the perceived risks and costs of repression and manipulation. The police, army and bureaucrats may be less inclined to employ illegal practices to benefit the incumbent if they calculate that the opposition is sufficiently organized to mount a credible challenge to the ruling party since the authoritarian incumbent’s henchmen could face recriminations for their actions if the opposition wins. Finally, it can mobilize people to vote against the incumbent, as the electorate

has a sense that change is possible and they begin to view the opposition as an alternative governing coalition (Howard and Roessler, *ibid*).

In this paper and in the context of the foregoing discussion, we argue that the four ways may apply in advanced democracies not in Zimbabwe where the ruling regime has employed all forms of dirty strategies against the opposition and the electorate as was experienced in previous elections including the June run-off of 2008 (Raftopolous and Mlambo, 2009). The state apparatus was used by ZANU PF to ensure it remained in power through brutal violence, intimidation, harassment, torture, murder and disappearances among other means to both the electorate and opposition members. Security agents and youths were mainly used to perpetrate these heinous acts (Raftopoulos and Mlambo, 2009).

OPPOSITIONAL MOBILIZATION AND THE ECONOMIC FACTOR

In addition to the strategic choice of opposition leaders, widespread public mobilization can also play a crucial role in the opposition's ability to challenge the incumbent. Protests may weaken the legitimacy of the incumbent and provide signals to the electorate that the incumbent is vulnerable to defeat. Moreover, the more motivated and mobilized the electorate is, the more likely people are to vote in the elections, whereas a demoralized and apathetic citizenry will probably not bother participating in the electoral process. In cases of extreme high mobilization, sustained protests may force an autocratic incumbent to step down, as occurred in Indonesia in 1998 and Peru in 2000 (Howard and Roessler, 2006).

In this article it should be noted that Zimbabwe opposition and civil society have tried protests particularly in major cities in 2016 but the police have descended heavily on protesters using tear gas and water cannons. Most of the protests were initiated by Evan Mawarire, the founder of This Flag Movement which was followed by Tajamuka (both are social movements in Zimbabwe). More protests which were instigated by NERA followed in Harare, Gweru and Bulawayo. When the ruling party felt threatened by the wave of these sustained protests, police banned any form of demonstrations and this eventually put to rest protests in 2016. The arrest of the cleric Evan Mawarire at Harare International Airport on 01 February, 2017 and his denial of bail followed by his continued detention in the notorious "D" class at Chikurubi Maximum Prison till 9 February, 2017 might have been designed to cow and send chilling signals to oppositional formations in Zimbabwe.

One of the central findings of democratization literature is that economic crisis is often linked to regime transitions (Geddes, 1999; Haggard and Kaufman, 1995). The elections literature also supports this thesis that poor economic performance may lead to the ousting of

incumbent governments (Lewis-Back and Stegmaier, 1999). According to this argument, an economic crisis undermines support for an authoritarian regime, divides the ruling elites and creates opportunities for the opposition to mobilize. In short, a crisis may help to tilt the balance of power in favour of the oppositional formation and weaken the bargaining power of the incumbent. These conditions alone are however not enough to lead to authoritarian breakdown but need to be buttressed by opposition cohesion. Elite dis cohesion in ZANU PF, economic regression and opposition cohesion through coalitions are critical determinants in possible breakdown of the ruling party after 37 years in power. Economic decline undercuts the incumbent's legitimacy and shrinks his or her voting pool. While we agree that the foregoing arguments are true to a large extent, we also posit that this may more likely apply to established democracies. In a normal democracy, most of the ministers if not the entire cabinet should have long resigned due to economic failure and yet even in 2008 when inflation peaked at 231 million percent, the ruling party did not resign.

Zimbabwe Democracy Institute (ZDI) (2016) argues that elite dis cohesion in ZANU PF, coupled with dis cohesion in the security apparatus of the state and economic crisis are ingredients for regime breakdown. The think tank has also argued that coupled with elite dis cohesion and economic regression, opposition cohesion is of paramount importance in authoritarian erosion and possible regime breakdown. In Zimbabwe, attempts to have opposition cohesion have mainly been motivated by prevailing conditions for regime breakdown and authoritarian erosion. These conditions are elite dis cohesion within ZANU PF mainly on the issue of succession and the economic spiral downward trend resulting in increasing levels of poverty. The current economic crisis undermines support for the regime, divides the ruling elite and creates opportunities for the opposition to mobilize.

ATTEMPTS AT POST-INDEPENDENCE COHESION IN ZIMBABWE

Nkiwane (1998) argues that first attempts towards opposition cohesion in post-independence Zimbabwe dates back to 1992 with the formation of the United Front which brought together the Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM) led by Edgar Tekere, the United African National Council (UANC) led by Abel Muzorewa, the Zimbabwe African National Union (Ndonga) led by Ndabaningi Sithole and the Conservative Alliance of Zimbabwe led by Ian Smith. However, the alliance could not hold due to the vast diversity of the parties. A second attempt towards a coalition was between UANC and ZUM where Tekere and Muzorewa were co-presidents but the coalition ended prematurely after the former pulled out (ZDI, 2016).

In 2008, there were endeavours to forge a coalition between the two MDC formations, MDC-T and MDC.

However, the coalition could not be consummated owing to disagreements over the distribution of seats between the parties particularly in urban areas. Again, in 2008, Simba Makoni contested as a presidential candidate instead of forging a coalition with Morgan Tsvangirai. In 2013, the MDC-T and Mavambo/Kusile/Dawn led by Simba Makoni also formed a coalition. Nonetheless, the coalition was burdened by lack of support from grassroots structures resulting in the coalition fielding two parliamentary candidates in Makoni Central and both lost because votes were split thereby giving ZANU PF an advantage. We argue that the ruling ZANU PF party fears the possibility of a grand coalition between MDC-T and other parties such as ZimPF and NPP. A grand coalition is feared most if it also ensures that the electorate particularly the youths and first time voters register to vote in 2018.

Nkiwane (ibid) states that opposition parties have always existed in Zimbabwe since the attainment of independence in 1980. However, in 1990, factions emerged in ZUM leading to the formation of the Democratic Party led by Emmanuel Magoche. Also in 1993, former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Enock Dumbutshena launched the Forum Party for Zimbabwe. However, it is critical to note that these parties suffered serious challenges relating to fragmentation, poor funding and limited geographical representation as they were urban-centric (ZDI, 2016). This article argues that these challenges continue to be an albatross among the current oppositional formations. It is also argued that the overwhelming hand of the conflated state under ZANU PF, coupled with infiltration by state security agents assisted to scuttle attempts by regime opponents to coalesce. This was reported in the News Day of 30 March, 2016 under the headline, "ZANU PF Spies have infiltrated our party."

Mathisen and Svasand (2002: 2) assert that opposition parties in African states are highly fragmented and thus many countries are characterized by many small and weak political parties. In Zimbabwe, some of the small parties which usually mushroom towards election time are not genuine but may be created to destabilize the possibility of a grand coalition. The fragmented party system has in many instances strengthened the power of the incumbents and this is the reason why in this paper, we suggest a coalition of 'select' opposition parties and not a coalition of all the opposition parties. Others may not be genuine and after due diligence should be left out of the grand coalition. We believe the MDC-T is right in being cautious in joining CODE which is predominantly made up of small parties some without visible followers.

Rakner and Svasand (2002: 6) distinguish political party fragmentation into four types: (a) formal fragmentation: that is when a large number of parties are registered; (b) competitive fragmentation: fragmentation emerging "when more parties are able to nominate candidates in a number of constituencies"; (c) electoral fragmentation: which "occurs when votes are spread more evenly across a large

number of parties"; and (d) parliamentary fragmentation: appearing "when parliamentary seats are more evenly distributed across a number of parties".

From the aforementioned distinctions, it is clear that Zimbabwe is currently caught in competitive fragmentation where there are over 20 opposition political parties. As suggested earlier on in this paper, some of the small political parties could be a creation of the ruling party. Indeed, the number of political parties is not indicative of the quality of democracy and could actually be a drawback to democratisation. In this regard, Gentili (2005: 11) states that "the number of parties that appear with the opening to democratization is not a demonstration of increased participation, but rather of fragmentation and therefore weakness of the party systems." Howard and Roessler (ibid) argue that this fragmentation is beneficial to ruling parties as they consciously employ a "divide-and-rule" tactic to fragment and weaken the opposition.

ZDI (2016) notes that among other factors, opposition parties have also not been successful in ousting the incumbents in elections due to fragmentation and their failure to form a solid opposition coalition. For example, in 2008, the MDC-T leader Morgan Tsvangirai polled 47, 9%, President Robert Mugabe 43, 2% and Simba Makoni 8, 3%. Mathematically, it means that had the opposition considered a single presidential candidate, the MDC-T's Morgan Tsvangirai would have polled more than the required 50% +1 to avoid a re-run.

This article argues that as Zimbabwe treads towards the 2018 general elections, it is unavoidable that there is need for solid and genuine opposition cohesion. Ghandi and Reuter (2008) note that authoritarian incumbents usually want the opposition divided since they consider the formation of coalitions as a threat. Therefore, incumbent regimes implicitly or explicitly prohibit certain types of opposition coalitions. We argue in this paper that ZANU PF may infiltrate the opposition as well as use the state-owned media to scuttle coalition talks among the opposition. To counter that, there is need for the opposition to issue joint statements, create joint electoral lists and more importantly, forward a single presidential candidate in 2018. The negotiation to decide on this single candidate presents the greatest challenge for opposition parties.

ZDI (2016) argue that the competitive fragmentation that has become synonymous with opposition parties in Zimbabwe has to be understood in the context of how the parties emerged. Most parties, if not all, emerge as a result of factionalism, a lack of trust and elite dis-cohesion within the opposition (Mungwari, 2016). This has been a recurring phenomenon in post-independence opposition in Zimbabwe. For instance, the MDC-T led by Morgan Tsvangirai acrimoniously split in October 2005 resulting in the formation of the other MDC led by Welshman Ncube. The MDC-T further split in 2014 resulting in the emergence of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) led by Tendai Biti. The PDP party further split leading to the formation of

Renewal Democrats of Zimbabwe led by Elton Mangoma. On the other hand, Zimbabwe People First (ZimPF) once led by Joice Mujuru is a result of expulsions and brutal purging from ZANU PF after the 2014 congress. The ZimPF has since split with Joice Mujuru forming a new party, the National People's Party (NPP). These struggles within the major struggle have bred a culture of lack of trust in the opposition body politic thereby obfuscating efforts towards opposition cohesion as no party trusts the other with the reigns of the state, given the context of strong presidentialism in Zimbabwe.

Worse, if coalitions emerge in settings with a historical schism or conflict, other party members may see cross-party collaboration as a sign of weakness or a negation of fundamental party beliefs. Oyugi's (2006) assertion is that coalitions are mainly formed for purposes of seeking power, thus leading such coalitions may be referred to as 'opportunistic' or 'unprincipled' some among the opposition and most importantly the ruling party. Also against the background of personalization, a leader who is not accorded what they may deem a strategic and/or lucrative position may muddle any attempt towards the formation of a coalition. This has resulted in PDP splitting into Renewal Democrats. And when parties are constructed along personalities what follows may be a privation of ideological gravitas associated with such personalities. As a government in waiting, the role of the opposition is to provide policy alternatives particularly in the Zimbabwean context where government policies have been detrimental to socio-economic development (ZDI, 2016). The opposition should not oppose for the sake of opposing but must be rooted in clear ideological and policy alternatives that seek to provide answers to the existing societal challenges. This should also be the basis upon which opposition cohesion is founded rather than the need to seek political office. There is a general belief that ruling party's policies appear sound but the problem lies in implementation in the context of a cancerous culture of corruption within government and parastatals.

POTENTIAL FOR OPPOSITION COHESION IN ZIMBABWE

Given the general weaknesses of the opposition parties in Zimbabwe, the common consensus is that no single opposition party could possibly win an election alone given ZANU PF's monolithic nature owing to party-state conflation. Therefore, there is need to encourage opposition cohesion. But what kind of scenario would favour that set-up? There are internal and external issues the coalition will need to address to ensure that prevails.

First and foremost, the oppositional formation should agree on a sound and concrete coalition to increase its electoral competitiveness. There is thus urgent need for the opposition to close ranks, address issues of mistrust and enunciate an alternative policy programme that they

all embrace. We argue that the principle of forming a coalition may not be that difficult to arrive at but sustaining the coalition may prove insurmountable given the diversity and contradictions of the parties and individuals. We suggest that opposition cohesion should be predicated on broad ideological and policy alternatives rather than personalities. The coalition must transcend beyond an electoral pact seeking office and power to a coalition with answers that resonate with the people. The coalition should have policy alternatives and ideological congruency. This addresses the negative notion that coalitions are mainly built around opportunism and lack of principle.

Also, to be technically and intellectually competent is very critical because Zimbabwe is a competitive authoritarian regime. As put forward by Levitsky and Way (2010), competitive authoritarian regimes are understood as civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the private means of gaining power but in which fraud, civil liberties violations and abuse of state and media resources are so skewed the playing field cannot be labeled democratic. Such regimes are competitive in that democratic institutions are not merely a facade: opposition parties use them to seriously contest for power but they are authoritarian in that opposition forces are handicapped by highly uneven and sometimes dangerous playing field (ZDI, *ibid*). Competition is thus real but unfair.

Levitsky and Way (2001) also succinctly state that what is important in a competitive authoritarian regime is how opposition leaders and civil society groups organize themselves in the electoral periods and their ability to create strategic coalitions that are durable in the face of government and state repressive force and electoral fraud. We have argued earlier in this article that forging a coalition may not be that difficult but sustaining the coalition could be a challenge. The ruling regime in Zimbabwe has allegedly remained in power due to coercion and rigging of elections (Primorac, 2007). The opposition parties need to ensure that part of electoral reforms should address the issue of free and fair elections characterized by complete transparency on ballot boxes and the voting process itself. Polling agents and accredited observers local, regional and international need to scrutinize the ruling regime whose campaign particularly in rural areas instructs literate electorate to feign illiteracy so that specifically 'appointed' ZANU PF fraudsters vote on behalf of the literate electorate. Therefore, the issue of fraud in Zimbabwe is sophisticated in that traditional leaders such as headsmen and kraal heads are told to lead people in their constituencies in which the rural electorate are intimidated with lies that ZANU PF has cameras and complex mechanisms to detect which political party one has voted for (Primorac, *ibid*). It is alleged that ZANU PF deploys people who strategically position themselves fifty or so meters from voting ballots giving an impression to the rural electorate

that they are being watched from a distance and that the party will know who they would have voted for.

The grand coalition should then fight for voter mobilization, voter registration, obtaining a new and clean voters' roll, demilitarizing the elections and the electoral management body, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, demystifying the issue of fear particularly among the rural voters and massive registration drive for young and new voters. While opposition parties reflect on pre-election alliances and coalition for national cohesion, it is critical for them to learn from other African countries such as Kenya's lessons.

UHURU KENYATTA AND WILLIAM RUTO COALITION

Kadima and Owuor (2014) reckon that alliances and coalitions contribute to national cohesion in Kenya by bringing together polarized political parties and their ethnic groups and ensuring a more equitable sharing of national resources. They further argue that party alliances and coalitions tend to weaken smaller parties and the party system in favour of the larger parties. This is due to the fact that junior alliance and coalition partners are generally focused on short-term gains like appointments to lucrative posts, while the main parties focus on consolidating their parties and voting base precisely by poaching from their junior partners. Kadima and Owuor (*ibid*) observed that in the March 2013 elections an alliance between Kenyatta and Ruto resulted in more peaceful elections and improved inter-communal relations between two ethnic groups (Kikuyus and Kalenjin). This power-sharing is new in Kenya. In this paper, we note from Kenya's experience that the opposition parties in Zimbabwe who are contemplating to forge an grand pre-election coalition may have some lessons to learn for the success of both pre-election and post-election alliances (for more details see Kadima and Owuor (2014), article: "Kenya's decade of experiments with political party alliances and coalitions-motivations, impact and prospects").

ZANU PF'S FRAMING OF OPPOSITION COALITION

In clear contrast to the privately owned press' favourable coverage of coalition talks, The Herald of the 7th of January, 2017, in an opinion piece titled: "Coalition: When a rose by the same name smells different" casts a gloomy picture of the coalition talks among the opposition parties. This story was written by an anonymous writer in the name of Nathaniel Manheru, who is believed to be the Presidential spokesperson, George Charamba. Through his usual recondite writing and sophisticated jargon for the ordinary reader, he plays around with disparaging diction on the opposition parties' efforts to forge a coalition, implying the private press is blind to the realities about any possibility of a coalition. This is not surprising coming as it

does from a government mouth piece whose propaganda agenda is to scuttle coalition possibilities.

It is crucial to point out that ZANU PF and its anonymous state media columnists disingenuously encourage the understanding that forming a coalition is a sign of weakness among individual opposition parties. Nothing could be further from the truth and this could be a reflection of ZANU PF's fear of a pre-election coalition than honest assessment of the opposition's strengths and weaknesses. The desperation with which ZANU PF is dismissing the idea of a coalition of opposition parties shows the potency such a pact has. Apart from quantifying votes and increasing the opposition's chances of dislodging ZANU PF, a pre-election coalition demonstrates the leading opposition political parties' desire to govern with others. This is called the signaling-device theory. Opposition parties' desire for the formation of coalition before elections is a clear signal or a clear demonstration to the electorate that they would be able to govern the country in a stable coalition. Forming a stable coalition government is desirable after years of ZANU PF monopoly with its attendant clientelism, corruption, rent-seeking behaviour by government ministers and the culture of primitive wealth accumulation, unaccountability and impunity (Sachikonye, 2002). By drawing members from different political parties, a pre-election coalition provides a chance to heal national politics, inculcating tolerance and diffuse political polarisation introduced into Zimbabwe body politic by ZANU PF. Two political parties demonstrated this capability in Gweru in 2016, when the united ZimPF under Joice Mujuru and MDC-T held a joint rally and the two leaders Tsvangirai and Mujuru addressed the same gathering. This signaled a desire for unity and preparedness to work together for the good of the country.

The following headlines in the state-controlled daily, The Herald: "Mujuru Bikita West rally divides MDC-T"; "ZANU PF goes for broke in Bikita West by-election"; "Tsvangirai snubs Mujuru"; "Make Bikita West seat present for President"; and "Rude awakening for Mujuru party" were articles of 9, 11, 12, 19 and 23 of January, 2017, respectively. What comes out clear is that the government owned Herald is aimed at 'divide and rule' tactics and is specifically evidenced by the newspaper reports that divisions once again emerged in the MDC-T on whether Tsvangirai should address a joint rally with Joice Mujuru in Bikita to garner support for the latter's candidate for Bikita West by-elections, Kudakwashe Gopo. Clearly, the MDC-T did not wish to campaign for Gopo because when he was in ZANU PF, he had caused a reign of terror in Bikita West by-elections in 2001. Nonetheless, contrary to the same Herald reporter who authored the stories on the Bikita West by-elections, MDC-T's unwillingness to support ZimPF would not weaken coalition negotiations and it is not true that 'some of MDC-T officials wanted Mujuru's party to lose to cripple her bargaining power in the mooted coalition'. The Herald quotes ZANU PF

national political commissar, Saviour Kasukuwere, pouring out his propaganda:

“ZimPF is not a political party. It is a grouping of angry, expired politicians who are no longer relevant. They are also expecting a hand from an equally failed MDC. It is two teams trying to join each other and hope to make a difference. Above all, they are bed fellows trying an impossible marriage...”

This paper argues that political party leaders negotiating for a grand coalition should not be discouraged by press reports, particularly from the state controlled newspapers whose clear agenda is to frustrate the success of a coalition, which is the greatest fear of the ruling party, ZANU PF.

The Herald of 24 January carried another story titled: “MDC-T provinces reject Tsvangirai coalition bid”. The Herald’s representation is that MDC-T leader, Morgan Tsvangirai’s coalition consultations in Matabeleland have yielded nothing after party structures in the region rejected his proposals. The newspaper’s framing suits its sustained agenda to influence disharmony in order to escalate tribal and ethnic divisions by touching on political positions when the coalition is eventually consummated. The newspaper’s unnamed sources go on to say “... sources said the proposal included relegating Ms Thokozani Khupe from her current position as deputy president. ...If the coalition sails through, a number of people in our current shadow government will lose their positions and we are going to fight it. ...This coalition is useless and why should we be used by Mujuru who is testing opposition politics for the first time?” The Herald further claims that the party is facing serious revolt from the Khupe faction after indications that Tsvangirai now preferred Welshman Ncube in her stead. The newspaper also claims that Tsvangirai wants to consolidate his position against Khupe after his elevation of two other deputies, Nelson Chamisa and Elias Mudzuri.

BIOMETRIC VOTER REGISTRATION (BVR) CONSPIRACY THEORY

It was argued in this paper that one of the challenges confronting coalition is the controversial BVR kits. As pressure mounted in 2016 for ZEC to fulfill its constitutional obligation to carry out continuous voter registration, the electoral organization indicated intentions to start a programme of registering voters using biometric technology. This announcement was welcomed by opposition parties and civil society which have long protested that the old voters roll was shambolic and unreliable. When ZEC announced that the process of selecting service providers for implementing the BVR system was underway and that this process was supported by the United Nations Development

Programme (UNDP); the opposition parties and civil society organizations welcomed this too believing the presence of a third party in the form of the UNDP as an important mechanism that would add some checks and balances in the selection process. They were concerned that a process in which ZANU PF government had exclusive control would be subject to bias in favour of the ruling party. Opposition parties are wary of service providers that the Zimbabwean government has worked with in the past on the voters roll. One of them is Nikuvu international project, an Israeli company that was implicated in the rigging of the 2013 elections (Magaisa, 2017). The involvement of UNDP in the selection process was therefore seen as a risk-mitigating mechanism. But, as this article has argued earlier, ZANU PF is uncomfortable with any move that will threaten its hold on power so it creates conspiracy theories which manifest through state media.

The Herald and other state media carried out articles and news items whose agenda were allegedly to create anarchy and confusion over the issue of BVR system, registration and voting. The government announced that it would be taking over the funding of the BVR system from the UNDP in the selection process of the service provider. In effect, as we argue in this paper, this would mean the removal of the mechanism which opposition parties were banking on to check and balance ZANU PF’s wide powers as the governing party. Whenever ZANU PF senses that its exclusive control of the electoral process is in danger of being diluted, it takes defensive measures to protect its territory and this has happened before (Magaisa, 2017). Back in 2013, as the nation prepared for the July 2013 elections, leaders of all parties, including President Mugabe, had agreed that funding of the elections would be sought from the UNDP. The opposition was comfortable with this arrangement as it meant getting the United Nations (UN) involved in the electoral process and therefore providing a facility for the UN and general international community to observe the elections. ZANU PF was aware of what this meant and arguably was hostile to UN or Western countries’ observation of elections. It therefore continued to work in the background to find ways to circumvent the agreement to work with the UNDP. They had to find money from somewhere and they got funding from telecommunications sector. With the UNDP removed from the process, ZANU PF had the exclusive control that it coveted, which meant the July 2013 election was held without the checks and balances that the opposition had anticipated the UNDP would provide. In this article we argue also that this is precisely what is happening with the BVR system. After initially selling a dummy to the opposition that it was the UNDP to provide support for the BVR system and to have a role in the selection process, the ZANU PF government is once again renegeing on that agreement.

The other development is the propaganda blitz that has been launched by state media, in particular, by The Herald

newspaper, against the BVR system. Erroneously conflating the biometric voter registration and biometric voting, which are two different things, The Herald publishes articles and editorial comments to that effect.

The Herald of 13 March 2017's Editorial Comment: "BVR, a luxury we cannot afford a danger to democracy" sets a clear agenda of propaganda. The newspaper also raises concerns that the biometric voting system might be hacked, citing recent cases of alleged hacking of the elections system in countries like the United States (US). We reckon in this article that there may have been teething challenges in the past in countries like Ghana and Kenya where the BVR system has been used but improvements will be realized with time where favourable reports can be achieved. We argue in this article that state media is a mouthpiece of ruling party officials setting the pace for ZEC, a body which is supposed to be independent according to the constitution. When a state controlled press editor says "Those mandated to come up with a clean voters roll can have paradigm shift by thinking outside the box, because it is still possible to do so at a cost that Zimbabwe can afford"; and ZEC chairperson Justice Rita Makarau keeps wavering on the electoral body's position on BVR then it presumably sends messages that ZANU PF unilaterally dictates the outcome of the voting processes. This has resulted in the controversy following the government's sudden decision to sideline the UNDP from assisting in the procurement of the BVR kits in which government now wants to fund the purchase of the equipment. The opposition alleges that the government is bending to hijack the process to rig the 2018 general elections. We argue that the state media reportage is bending on deception and conspiracy theory to confuse the public.

This article asserts that the electorate should not have fears that capturing a person's biometrics would intimidate the voter since a voter registration technology has nothing to do with what will happen on the voting day.

Given these foregoing scenarios, the opposition should not give ZANU PF chance to go back to Tobaiwa Mudede's voters' roll. It is this fear of the opposition parties they insist to engage ZEC which is elusive and stage demonstrations like what they intended to do on 23 March 2017 but was frustrated by the police ban of the NERA marching across the central district business. We assert in this paper that the opposition parties and civil society organizations should soldier on pressing for total electoral reforms which will ensure level playing field for free and fair elections in 2018 for the benefit of the nation.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that the building of party alliances and coalitions in Zimbabwe is confronted with challenges such as disagreements, mistrust, uncertainty, infiltration, splits, personal egos, the issue of Biometric

Voter Registration kits, among other factors. On the hand, it shows that alliances and coalitions contribute to national cohesion in Zimbabwe by bringing together polarized political parties, demonstrated by signing of Memorandum of Understanding between political parties so far between MDC-T and MDC-N; and MDC-T and NPP, with possibility of more MoUs in the near future ahead of 2018 elections.

Political parties choose to enter pre-election alliances in order to avoid wasting their votes. By coming together, they increase their chances of winning elections and governing the country. Coalitions have the advantage of allowing partner political parties to combine their human, financial and material resources, broaden their base and their respective strengths and thus accomplish more than they could have achieved alone. However, coalitions have the recurrent disadvantage of being unstable, conflict-ridden and of being seen as undemocratic and lacking in transparency and accountability. Members may feel that their control over policies is restricted and that too many concessions end up compromising them while coalition matters take precedence over party priorities (Kadima, 2014: 21).

We conclude in this paper that Zimbabwe's possible opposition coalition is not only to be built around the MDC-T and Tsvangirai but that it should not be an end in itself. Major parties under both CODE and NERA should come together and form one grand coalition. It is encouraging to know that Tendai Biti who once declared that he would not work with Tsvangirai has made an impassioned plea to Tsvangirai to make up his mind on the grand coalition. According to the Daily News paper of 14 March, 2017, in a story headlined 'Biti appeals to Tsvangirai' the former finance Minister "made an impassioned plea to MDC President, Tsvangirai to move decisively on the mooted grand opposition alliance – warning that any further dithering on the matter would gift Zanu PF in next year's make- or break national polls." Biti did not refute distance himself from this story and what it means is that he indeed made that 'impassioned plea' for Tsvangirai to make up his mind. We agree with Biti's plea as we believe that only Tsvangirai as leader of the coalition stands the best chance of unseating the ruling party, ZANU PF from power.

More importantly, the end result of the pre-election alliance should cut across ideological divides. Thus, although there are challenges which may hamper the progress of coalition talks in Zimbabwean opposition political parties, Zimbabweans should remain hopeful of an opposition coalition in time for elections in 2018. Serious negotiations about a pre-election coalition are never conducted in the public domain. It should be recalled that both Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto have very huge egos but that did not stop them from forming a coalition that won the Kenyan elections in 2013. Zimbabweans should learn from this Kenyan model and learn to be patient as political parties talk among themselves away from the media. A hurriedly formulated coalition of all

parties is bound to fail. Careful due diligence should be done on each and every party especially the smaller parties that are known to be one man parties. What makes the coalition talks so long, difficult, and complex is generally not the lack of goodwill among elites, but the fact that the negotiations must appear the way they do in order to satisfy the members whose orientations are still largely attuned to the vocal, symbolic and ideological aspects characteristic of each respective political sub-culture. Even the ZimPF split ought not to dishearten political party leaders from continuing with negotiations. Media reports on the grand coalition from both the privately and state owned papers should not be used to gauge the success or failure of the coalition talks.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interest.

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