

‘ROCKING THE BOAT?’ CHURCH-NGOS AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN ZIMBABWE’

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ABSTRACT

Historically, relations between church and state in independent Zimbabwe have tended to be co-operative and on-confrontational. However, in 1997 the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) initiated the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), leading to the government’s defeat in the first post-independence referendum and setting the stage for the violent elections of June 2000. Nevertheless, as the NCA developed the strength and capacity which enabled it to challenge the status-quo, the ZCC withdrew. As a key-player said ‘... as churches we had to take issues that don’t raise too much dust or rock the boat too much, *but the boat was rocking.*’

This suggests that although the church may play a critical role in opening up space for debate, the state may still co-opt and weaken churches and other groups, in its effort to retain hegemony. Churches and church-NGOs relate ambiguously to both the state and to society – in both colonial and post-colonial Zimbabwe – and remain vulnerable to political, economic, and social pressures. Theories of democratization – and in particular the role played by churches and NGOs – must begin to recognize the complexity and ambiguity of state-society relations as detailed in this study.

Zimbabwe has a rich literature on the role of churches and church organizations in the colonial period, which neatly captures the complexity of their relations to the Rhodesian state.¹ Yet, post-independence church-state relations have been little studied. Upon investigation, many similarities between the earlier literature and the post independence period become apparent – especially in terms of relations between state elites and church elites.² These parallels suggest that attempts to understand state-society relations should take into account these earlier studies of how organizations interact with states and examine them from a historical perspective. The context may have changed, but the power relations between church and state remain much the same.

This article examines relations between church elites and the state in independent Zimbabwe through the prism of church organizations. This includes platforms through which the hierarchies of churches come together like the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference (ZCBC) and its subordinate body, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP), which is an NGO run by lay-people. In contrast, the protestant denominational heads meet as the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) and the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ), both of which are also NGOs with mainly lay staff.

Although NGOs are widely discussed in the African politics literature, church NGOs are often regarded simply as conduits of either development goods or democratization.³ Indeed, while NGOs in general are often romanticized, church-NGOs are even less critically examined.⁴ This is despite their prominence in development activities which gives them great social importance in Zimbabwe and in many other African countries.⁵ While enthusiasts of the civil-society paradigm often see NGOs in normative terms, as an essential precondition for democratization, the historical parallels between UDI-era Rhodesia and post-independence Zimbabwe suggest that the churches and their ancillary organizations are not a uniformly democratic or progressive force.

On an organizational level, NGOs and churches are vulnerable to the state's top-down co-option and containment. Institutionally, their dependence on foreign donor funding and tendency to become professionalized isolates them from the larger Zimbabwean society and imparts a self-referential quality to many of their activities. More generally, both the NGO community and the clerics – who are of course from Zimbabwe's educated elite – have been wary about confronting the Mugabe government, insofar as they would have much to lose in such a confrontation. For example, they have frequently used a public discourse in which seemingly apolitical ‘development’ is stressed over explicit political action.⁶ This has *not*, however,

resulted in the complete depoliticization of the church-NGO community. Indeed, the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) case study presented below indicates just how involved it was in opening up political debate. Nonetheless, at crucial moments, Zimbabwe's institutional churches have tended to hedge their bets – always looking for a safe way out of confrontation with the ruling ZANU(PF) should they end up on the losing side. While this ambivalence may be a prudent long-term strategy for institutions whose concerns are not purely temporal, it is at the heart of their ambiguous political role in post-independence Zimbabwe.

This article first discusses the experience of the historic mission churches in Zimbabwe during UDI and then after independence and then presents two case studies. The first documents church-NGO ventures into economic policy advocacy between 1990 and 1997. The second deals with their initiation of the constitution-writing process in Zimbabwe between 1997 and 2000. Finally, some conclusions are drawn from these cases, proposing that church-NGO structures provide a framework from within which political advocacy can be undertaken, but that, like other NGOs, they may also be subject to co-option and contain organizational weaknesses that prevent them being more effective governmental critics.

Church-State relations in Zimbabwe

The study of religious organizations in public life has become increasingly salient to the study of African politics in recent decades. Whereas during the Cold War churches were easily dismissed as agents of American imperialism,⁷ scholars are now more sensitive to their role in catalyzing internal political change, as in the cases of Malawi and Kenya, the West African national conferences, and South Africa.⁸ Yet this newer literature, perhaps buoyed by optimism like the democratization literature more broadly, tends to romanticize such groups.⁹ An historical approach, in contrast, contributes to a more sophisticated analysis of church-state relations.

The attitude of churches to the Smith regime after its unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) in 1963 was ambiguous and varied over time and between denominations. Some supported the guerrilla war while others backed the internal settlement, and some collaborated with the Smith regime. Bishops Skelton and Lamont of the Anglican and Catholic churches respectively took principled stands against the Rhodesian regime and in support of the guerrilla war, yet others within their churches participated in the Smith regime.¹⁰ After Bishop Skelton left Zimbabwe, the Anglican Church, more integrated into Rhodesian society, became increasingly supportive of the UDI regime.¹¹ While members of Catholic missions played crucial roles in negotiating with the guerrillas in the rural areas during the liberation war, they did so as individuals rather than on behalf of the church.¹² In general, members of the Roman Catholic priesthood were more inclined to side with the guerrillas because their church was more influenced by international pressures and their personal histories (especially those who had experience of colonialism or fascism), while their unmarried status isolated them somewhat from Rhodesian mores.¹³ With respect to the protestant denominations, Terence Ranger has proposed that to many early converts Methodism was inherently political.¹⁴ Still, the church took the less radical position of supporting the internal settlement advocated by Methodist Bishop Muzorewa's United African National Congress (UANC) party, which had rejected the armed struggle.

Yet while the churches carried on their day-to-day functions, NGO wings of the church were called upon, even designed, to carry out the more 'political' aspects of the churches' mandate. In 1967, despite internal tensions, the Rhodesian Council of Churches (RCC; later ZCC) created a new organization – Christian Care – to aid the detainees and their families.¹⁵ Similarly, the Catholic Bishops created the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) in 1972, which enabled the Catholic Church to play an advocacy role in documenting the human rights abuses of the Rhodesian security apparatus and civil institutions.¹⁶

Relations between the post-independence state and particular denominations depended to some extent on the stances which they had adopted during the liberation war.¹⁷ However, with few exceptions the churches linked themselves to the state's developmentalist ambitions, in both discourse and praxis. Indeed, twenty years after independence church hierarchies continue to be intertwined with the state and the ruling ZANU (PF).¹⁸ Although Maxwell has suggested that some age-groups and factions within the Pentecostal churches sought to distance themselves from the state, he also suggests that their hierarchies may court Presidential approval (and vice-versa), although this may have changed with the recent popularity of the Movement for Democratic Change.¹⁹

The post-independence Zimbabwean state has attempted to establish its hegemony over civil institutions which might have been tempted towards autonomy such as the labour movement, students, NGOs, and churches. Indeed, many of these organizations, with their origins in the struggle for independence, were only too keen to accommodate themselves with the new progressive state.²⁰ At the same time, those churches implicated in support for the UANC internal settlement, such as the Methodists (and by association the ZCC), attempted to (re)gain favour with the government. While the state was not shy of demanding the obedience and participation of the churches in the development process, it stopped short of legislating explicit controls on them.²¹ Instead, the President, Rev. Canaan Banana (an ordained Methodist) and the Prime Minister, Robert Mugabe (a lay Catholic) both called for unity between the churches and state, in which the churches would co-operate in 'developing' the newly independent Zimbabwe.²²

The state, however, did take a more active interest in ZCC affairs. In November 1981, President Banana criticized the ZCC in the national press for taking a 'wait and see' attitude towards the government.²³ The involvement of Bishop Muzorewa – who had been President of

the short-lived Zimbabwe-Rhodesia – with the ZCC, apparently led the state to see it as a political irritant. Moreover, a breakdown of communication between the ZCC and its parent body, the World Council of Churches (WCC), which had taken a more accommodating position, led to donor funds being withheld.²⁴ These developments led the ZCC to replace its general secretary, in the hope of restoring relations with both the state and the WCC.

The most significant post-independence division between church and state came as the state sent troops into Matabeleland, allegedly to quell ‘dissident’ activity instigated by ZAPU, which retained political strength in the area, and South Africa. The activities of the security forces against the civilian population of Matabeleland, led to numerous reports of human rights abuses being made to the CCJP. Their attempts to document and publicize the abuses being perpetrated by the security forces were rebuffed and denied by the state.²⁵ At the peak of the conflict, the CCJP Director, Nick Ndebele and the Chairman, Mike Auret, were arrested, although they were eventually freed by direct intervention of Prime Minister Mugabe.²⁶

Despite such sanctions, the CCJP continued to pursue cases of human rights violations, and finally in 1997 published a definitive and detailed report on the Matabeleland atrocities. However, the Bishops’ Conference, which oversees the CCJP, demonstrated their deference by refusing to release the report without the President’s approval.²⁷ The report was later leaked through the South African weekly *Mail and Guardian*.²⁸

With the exception of the CCJP, ‘... politically churches have avoided criticizing the government openly [they] feel it is not yet time for open confrontation with government since they have access to the government officials concerned to voice their fears and concerns’.²⁹ Indeed the option of co-option/engagement with the state is often more attractive than either disengagement or opposition to the state. The Anglicans, along with the Pentecostal movement, linked themselves fervently to Mugabe’s crusade against homosexuals in Zimbabwe.³⁰ The

Catholic Church has also retained its close links with the Mugabe family – two of the President’s sisters worked at Silveira House and Bishop Mutume recently married President Mugabe to his young secretary, despite widespread public condemnation.³¹ The Methodist church, as Banana notes, ‘unfortunately’ kept silent on the massacres in Matabeleland and the violence that occurred in the lead up to the 1985 and 1990 elections. In his study of the Methodist church Banana fails to propose any reason for this quiescence, although it is obvious that the church was reluctant to criticize the state.³² Gifford has also suggested that the refusal of the former Anglican Bishop of Harare to retire, restricted the church’s ability to criticize President Mugabe’s similar reluctance to hand-over the reins of power.³³

Church-organizations: from the developmental to the political

Church-NGOs in Africa play an increasingly crucial roles in bringing development assistance.³⁴ In Zimbabwe, church-NGOs are prominent and well-established, but their agendas have changed over the 20 years of independence from the developmental and towards the political. At independence, as attempts were made to redress the effects of guerrilla war and profound racial inequalities, NGOs concentrated on ‘development,’ for example, Silveira House – the Jesuit run training and development centre, the YWCA and the YMCA, and Christian Care.

Because of their origins in the independence war and the post-war rebuilding effort of the 1980s, most church organizations in Zimbabwe have been primarily developmental organizations, and have thus been particularly vulnerable to the co-optive tendencies of the state. However, Silveira House has had a ‘civics’ department since before Independence, focussing on leadership training, and, as discussed above, the CCJP has a long history of human rights activism.³⁵

In the 1990s, as elsewhere in Africa, there was a tendency – encouraged by donor funding

– for both NGOs and churches to take up activities such as policy advocacy, civic education, voter education, and election monitoring. Older organizations like the ZCC expanded their range of operations, creating a Justice, Peace and Reconciliation (JPR) desk in 1993.³⁶ After the 1995 general election, the ZCC and the CCJP joined with other organizations which monitored the vote to create the Church/NGO Civic Education Project.

New organizations also emerged to fill the funding ‘niche’. Ecumenical Support Services (ESS), formed in the early 1990s and funded by European church NGOs, began training NGOs to do ‘advocacy’. ESS is unusual within the community of church-based NGOs both because it is not formally linked to a church and because it does not do ‘development’ work.

The ZCC has described its JPR desk as playing a ‘midwifery role’ to bring the government into dialogue with civil society. The Council often uses this term to justify its interventions in public affairs, yet it also enables them to deny the politically risky consequences.³⁷ For example, when a ZCC-organized meeting between NGOs and a government Ministry became acrimonious, the ZCC representative reiterated that the Council’s role was limited to that of a ‘midwife’ – bringing state and society together, but not taking a stand on the issues. In response, a voice from the audience whispered ‘he is scared’.³⁸ Indeed, when I naively questioned the then General Secretary as to ‘why the ZCC was becoming so political’ he repeatedly insisted that it was not-political.³⁹

By the mid-1990s, this ‘non-political’ role of the ZCC had come to be seen as a strategically useful ‘umbrella’ for holding meetings which might otherwise arouse the interest of the security apparatus. Yet despite this rubric of ‘midwifery’ and desire to cast itself as apolitical, the ZCC did rapidly become politically controversial in the late 1990s. It is this new foray into formal politics with which this paper is primarily concerned. The two cases below trace the ambiguities of church-NGO attempts to influence government economic policy-making and

constitution-writing.

The Politics of Economic Policy-making: 1990-1997

In 1991 Zimbabwe implemented an economic structural adjustment and liberalization programme (ESAP). As in other countries, ESAP led to retrenchments, removal of subsidies, and the implementation of school fees and health user-fees. Unlike other countries, in the initial years of structural adjustment, Zimbabwe had few riots and no political party opposed the policy.⁴⁰ Indeed, the more prominent opposition groups urged stronger forms of liberalization. Between 1991 and 1994, during the implementation of ESAP, NGOs were little involved in advocacy – although efforts were made to stimulate debate about ESAP by the CCJP, Silveira House and within the Methodist Synod.⁴¹

From 1994 onwards, however, a small group of mostly church-based NGOs came together under the aegis of Ecumenical Support Services (ESS) to discuss the impact of structural adjustment on them, and their members. Yet the Lobbying and Advocacy Group (LAG), as they called themselves, was unsuccessful in both dealing with the government and in attempting to recruit more NGOs to their cause.

In 1995, the World Bank approached Zimbabwean NGOs for dialogue on the second phase of ESAP, in preparation for the annual IMF/World Bank meetings. In response, LAG proposed that ‘... [the people] are required to take an active role in defining the development paradigm, through churches, civic groups, and NGOs’.⁴² The NGOs urged the government to make structural adjustment (now known as ZIMPREST) more participatory and be accountable, claiming that as ‘development actors’ they must be involved in the planning process.⁴³ A World Bank poverty mission, which arrived in April 1996, also met with LAG. LAG further established an internal taskforce to evaluate ZIMPREST, yet this taskforce was rendered ineffectual because

the Finance Ministry would not reveal the draft ZIMPREST document.⁴⁴ LAG organized letters of protest about this lack of consultation.⁴⁵ The Ministry responded in what appeared to be an encouraging tone, welcoming the participation of civil society. However, hearing nothing further from the Ministry about participation, LAG, in late September 1996, forwarded a petition signed by 58 individuals, again requesting to be involved; there was no further response.

In November 1996, the ZCC hosted a 2 day national meeting on ZIMPREST ‘... a platform for civic actors and actresses, men and women of Zimbabwe, an opportunity to rethink and reliance the development process in Zimbabwe ...’.⁴⁶ Yet this bold attempt floundered when the Minister responsible failed to attend the workshop. Since none of the participants had actually seen the ZIMPREST document, it was difficult to debate it concretely. The result of the ZCC workshop input is unclear, as a ZCC official ironically stated, ‘we sent it [the statement produced by workshop] to the Minister and didn’t hear from him. We then sent it to ZANU(PF) after we heard that they make the policies.’⁴⁷

In February 1997, the Finance Minister was invited to address a LAG meeting to be held in March, which he refused to attend because ‘the ZIMPREST document was still in its draft stage ...’ As he explained, the:

... draft document is in the process of being discussed by heads of Ministries and the Cabinet. Thereafter the document will be discussed widely by the various stakeholders in a series of workshops. It is hoped that your organization will be invited to attend the workshops for your inputs ...⁴⁸

The irony that the document would only be discussed by ‘stakeholders’ when it was no longer in a draft stage, was not lost on the recipients. As NGOs were never invited to ‘workshops or consultations’, LAG stalled, and the NGOs moved on to other issues.

Inspired by the international Jubilee 2000 campaign, which had criticized the impact of debt-loads on developing countries and the South African Kairos document, in which Christians

were called upon to reject the apartheid state, ESS had convened a regional workshop in October 1996 on Prophetic Action.⁴⁹ This meeting was attended by the prominent churchmen from Zambia and South Africa – Rev. Edwin Sakala of the Zambian Christian Council and Dr. Molefe Tsele of the Institute for Contextual Theology in South Africa – as well as church-people and laity from Zimbabwe. The enthusiasm for the three-day meeting led to the idea of writing a ‘Kairos’ document for Zimbabwe which could then be used within churches for discussion or action.⁵⁰

The Kairos process revealed most strongly the importance of both language and content in the advocacy process. The former President, Rev. Banana, also Zimbabwe’s most controversial theologian, called for a ‘collective onslaught by the government, NGOs, churches and the people themselves’ against the impact of structural adjustment, although discussions also stressed issues of governance, youth, AIDS, gender and the environment. Yet, despite the meeting being entitled ‘A Call to Action’ – designed explicitly to move the churches towards action, participants felt insulted, rather than challenged, by Rev. Banana’s call to ‘more and more programmes of action’ in place of ‘pious prayers’; Banana’s ‘combat theology’ did not appeal to all.⁵¹

Drafting committees met to address the three main areas of concern – governance, economic justice, and gender and youth – through the drafting of a ‘Kairos’ document. At each meeting drafts were prepared, then read out and discussed. On the following morning, participants would examine a typed draft of the previous day’s discussions, and begin to discuss the impact of the word-usage, and, in some cases, add/derive a theological basis for the arguments being made. Participants balanced their desire to be critical, with the knowledge that if they were too shrill, the government would not listen.

As the highest profile participant in the drafting process, Roman Catholic Bishop of Mutare, Bishop Muchabaiwa had the most to lose by being connected with the project. He was most insistent that the document must be sent to the President before it was released and

absolutely refused to allow the inclusion of any reference to the Matabeleland crisis. But it was not just the inclusion/exclusion of material or the fashion in which it was released which concerned him, but also the language used in the document. He warned participants that ‘we should speak with the voice of God ... we must avoid speaking like an opposition party’.⁵² Subsequently, he again reminded participants, ‘[w]e are people sent by God to say something about our country ... We are not political people’.⁵³ And indeed, the most intractable debates were less about the inclusion of material – sexuality, references to vote-rigging, or Matabeleland – but instead about toning down the explicitly ‘political’ language in the document.

Institutional constraints

The advocacy and lobbying efforts of Zimbabwean NGOs described above were constrained by the institutions and sub-culture in which they were embedded, which did not facilitate a broader mobilizational role. These workshops and meetings were typical of the way NGOs in Zimbabwe work: ‘closed shop’ elitist meetings where NGO professionals meet each other regularly. The timing of these meetings frequently excluded those who had day-jobs, but who were still interested in these issues. Moreover, relatively few denominations or churches were involved. In general, personal links were more powerful than neutral appeals through mail-outs – most who attended the meetings or workshops discussed had prior connections to the host organization.

A related point is that often the same people, from the same organizations, participated in all of these meetings. NGO activity often seemed to degenerate into an in-club of regular participants, although more participatory events such as election monitoring reveal a wider potential constituency. Still, NGOs have ‘professionalized’ their activities, and are no longer run by part-time activists. One consequence of this development is that their staff and the clergy can sometimes be unwilling to meet outside of work hours which limits the participation of the laity.

Gifford has suggested that as the state weakens and is no longer a clear career path, the churches become an increasingly attractive option.⁵⁴ Similarly, I have argued elsewhere that NGOs, as a conduit for donor funds, are often attractive routes for employment.⁵⁵ Church NGOs, combining these two trends, may prove to be especially vulnerable to pressures towards ‘professionalization’ and a concomitant decrease in their mobilizational capacity.

Yet, the few times that the wider public was included, the results were substantial. For example, when ESS organized a series of public meetings on social justice and theological issues held in the Harare city-centre after five pm, a wide range of people attended. The consistently high level of attendance at such meetings suggests that there is a large constituency of people keen to debate such issues, yet they are rarely incorporated into further events.

In short, because of organizational and institutional weaknesses, the NGOs had little success in lobbying the government or mobilizing their fellow citizens to do so. NGOs won no concessions from the Ministry of Finance, and were left out of consultations on structural adjustment and the budget. Indeed, the NGOs had more meetings with the World Bank than with their own government. Their efforts neither reached wide audiences, nor stirred up political debate. Nevertheless, as the political climate changed and as the economic climate worsened, church-NGOs took on a much bigger role in Zimbabwe’s political life.

The ZCC and the NCA: The politics of constitution-writing

In 1997, the ZCC called a meeting for NGOs, churches and unions interested in discussing the constitution. Like most projects, this was not undertaken at the behest of the ZCC hierarchy but was rather at the initiative of lay staff who had received donor funding. This group became the nucleus of the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) which was launched in January 1998.

NCA discussions of the constitution – a ‘non-political’ way of talking about the exercise of

politics – rapidly gained momentum because they provided a framework within which it was possible to talk safely about political issues. Some participants wanted the NCA to be a free-standing body, autonomous from the ZCC, but were told in response that ‘we need an umbrella ... the church is always considered impartial. If we have ZCC as our umbrella no one will say we are being political.’⁵⁶ Even an outspoken human rights activist suggested that ‘[t]here is risk of a boycott or attack if not under ZCC ... maybe we should form an [autonomous] body corporate? But the ZCC umbrella is strategically a good one.’⁵⁷ It is this new ‘political’ activity – and the government’s reaction to it – which marks a fundamental shift in the relations of church-NGOs to the state.

Although donors and the ZCC were keen to emphasize that the plan was merely to ‘inform’ people about the constitution, but not to re-write it, others insisted that one year was not enough time and that constitutional reform could not be ruled out.⁵⁸ However, the ZCC was determined to keep the NCA project within its original terms, and resisted member attempts to extend the proposed time-frame and broaden its remit. While the ZCC made a safe umbrella under which to discuss politics, the ZCC was willing to co-operate only as long as the NCA seen to be providing merely civic education.⁵⁹ While most participants assumed that the eventual intention of the NCA was to reform the constitution, ZCC officials have insisted it was not until it was changed by the ‘political’ influences.

Throughout 1998, the NCA developed materials and trained facilitators to provide grass-roots ‘conscientization’ similar to voter education. The NCA intended to train 600 facilitators – 60 in each province – who would proceed to organize meetings within districts. At the same time, the NCA was also holding thematic discussions of land, business, youth and women’s issues in urban areas. NCA officials were pleased that the Minister for Lands and Agriculture had attended a meeting on land and the constitution in March. As 1998 progressed, the government’s

position on the constitution seemed to evolve from a reluctance to admit that there were any deficiencies to negotiating with the NCA over a joint framework for re-writing the constitution.

Yet, at the same time, the NCA was increasingly being portrayed by the state media as unacceptably 'political'. This was first evident in the reluctance of the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) to air NCA advertisements on radio and TV. Officials claimed that 'political advertising' must have government approval. Persistent court battles failed to gain the NCA access to ZBC channels.⁶⁰

The ZCC has always been wary of explicit political involvement and their increasingly fraught relationship with the NCA became visible in October 1998, as an NCA march was transformed into a demonstration against Zimbabwe's intervention in the Congo war. The ZCC was uncomfortable with the NCA's stand on an explicitly political issue. Some of its clerical leaders were unwilling to be associated with a protest against the government's foreign adventure – especially if they, as Bishops, were expected to lead the procession through Harare. On the eve of the march, the moderator of the NCA, Bishop Nemapare, who was also Vice-President of the ZCC, issued a press release stating that the ZCC would not participate in the march. This enabled police to claim that the march had been cancelled by its organizers, and used tear gas to disperse those who had gathered.⁶¹ Informed sources within the NCA and ZCC believe that Nemapare was pressurized by President Mugabe to call off the march.⁶² The ZCC was particularly vulnerable to government pressure at this time because they needed its support to ensure the smooth functioning of the upcoming World Council of Churches (WCC) meeting which was to be held in Harare in December 1998.

Frustration caused by the ZCC pull-out led the NCA, which had been housed within the ZCC, to move abruptly to new offices in November – a decision taken without notice being given to the ZCC staff who had been working with them. ZCC staff further felt alienated as the funds

and computers their donors had provided were shifted to NCA accounts.

The government's creation of its own Constitutional Commission (CC) in March 1999 led the ZCC to withdraw even from membership of the NCA. These decisions were taken at the highest level of the ZCC – representatives of member churches and staff were not consulted. The ZCC Secretary-General described the NCA as a process that had grown beyond the ZCC: 'we wanted to 'unpack' the constitution ... [by this time] the understanding of unpacking was lost' and was out of its control, '... they were using our credibility, the actors were being political, there was no way to control them Actors in the NCA were exploiting the ZCC.'⁶³

ZCC staff emphasize that as the impetus developed for the Zimbabwe Congress of Trades Unions (ZCTU), which was a major player in the NCA, to form a political party, '[i]t was difficult to separate issues from the party and constitutional reform'The churches felt threatened. As a key-player said '...as churches we had to take issues that don't raise too much dust or rock the boat too much, *but the boat was rocking*.'⁶⁴ By this time, the two ZCC staff members who had initiated the programme had left to take better remunerated jobs with international NGOs. The ZCC-NCA break was complete.

For its part, the government pursued a 'divide and rule' strategy of appointing key church members as Constitutional Commissioners, effectively splitting most mainstream church denominations. The NCA and the CC also held well-attended hearings through-out the country, but both encouraged the boycott of the other process, forcing individuals and organizations to take sides.⁶⁵

The Anglican Church did not take an official position on the NCA/CC divide, but the Bishop of Harare became Deputy-Chair of the CC and his Cathedral refused to let the NCA hold meetings on their premises.⁶⁶ No similarly placed Anglicans held positions within the NCA, although individual parishes and parishioners did not follow the Bishop of Harare.⁶⁷

Indeed, an Anglican priest, Rev. Tim Neill, was widely reported in the press as calling the draft constitution flawed. In a mock referendum, his upper income urban congregation voted overwhelmingly against the draft.⁶⁸

The Catholic Church was divided, with the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) remaining within the NCA, and several of their staff members playing high-profile roles. Their nominal superiors, the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Commission (ZCBC), supported the CC and called for priests and the laity to make representations to it.⁶⁹ Mike Auret, who was about to leave the CCJP and launch a political career, interpreted the Bishops' stance cynically: '[They] have no objection to our being on the NCA, but want to hedge their bets'.⁷⁰

The President of the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ), Pastor Andrew Wutawunashe, was a Constitutional Commissioner. However, he represented himself and his church, rather than EFZ, many of whose adherents were NCA supporters. His efforts to bring EFZ member churches into the CC failed, as did his effort to bring the NCA into the CC.⁷¹

In December 1999, the government revealed its draft constitution and announced that the first post-independence nation-wide referendum would be held in February 2000, in which the people would vote whether to accept the constitution or not. The draft constitution was widely felt not to reflect the content of people's submissions to the commission in the course of their hearings, which had been well-attended.

In one of the most high-profile defections, Bishop Ambrose Moyo, of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, resigned from the CC in December 1999 on the grounds that the draft constitution did not reflect the views of the people, that the commissioners had had no time to study or debate the draft, and that '... there was no democracy in the manner in which the chairman ... processed both the Draft Constitution and the Final Report of the commission'.⁷²

The NCA/CC conflict is unique in post-colonial Zimbabwe, and perhaps comparable

only to the debate over UDI, for the extent to which it sparked a public debate – carried on in public meetings, newspaper columns, and letters to the editor – about the appropriate role for Churches and Church leaders in politics.⁷³

In December 1999, the denominational heads met to establish a ‘united voice’ concerning the referendum. At this meeting, they expressed concern not just about ‘Christian values’ and the failure to declare Zimbabwe a Christian nation, but also because the draft did not reflect the views of the people.⁷⁴ The EFZ, in particular, campaigned vigorously against the draft constitution, on the grounds that it permitted homosexuality and did not proscribe pornography, euthanasia or abortion.⁷⁵ Media reports claimed that the denominational heads would call upon Christians to vote against the draft if the referendum were not postponed and the draft amended.⁷⁶ However, after a meeting with the Attorney-General in January they backed down, claiming that the current draft met their concerns about Christianity, abortion and gay marriages. Christians were called upon to vote ‘... according to their own choice, good sense and judgement on the political issues of the draft’.⁷⁷

The subsequent defeat of the government by the NCA coalition was a landmark in Zimbabwe’s post-independence political development. For the first time, the ruling ZANU(PF) party had not been able to impose its chosen policy. The NCA then, can be understood as a remarkably successful process, launched by a Zimbabwean church-NGO, which provoked a state-society dialogue on issues of governance, human rights and democratization. Unrest had been building for several years as the economy declined, but it was the NCA which created the structures, provoked the government into responding, and catalyzed a constructive process of dialogue. Yet, the experience split churches and church organizations decisively, revealing more ambiguity than coherence under strain.

In the post-referendum period, as rural, and then urban, areas were consumed with state-directed violence, the Church hierarchies were much criticized for failing to speak out.⁷⁸ Church-people were not immune from this violence, and in some instances were targeted for particular attention.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, in the post-election period, the Protestant leadership

continued to present themselves as available to ‘mediate’ between the state and aggrieved groups such as white farmers.⁸⁰ More recently, however, powerful statements have been released, condemning the violence and calling for the restoration of law and order.⁸¹

Conclusion: ‘Rocking the boat’?

In the anecdote above, it is not clear whether the boat being rocked – and hence made unsteady – is the boat of state or the ecumenical boat captured in the ZCC logo. Yet, there has clearly been an unsteadiness affecting both the state and the church-NGOs in recent years. The cases presented illustrate that church-state relations have changed because of external pressures in the form of donor funding and expectations, but also from internal pressures from membership and elites. These latter are often conditioned by historical legacies, personal connections between church elites and political elites, and concerns for the day-to-day survival of the organization. Just as historians of the liberation war stress the particularistic experiences that caused certain missions and churches to either support the guerrillas or the Smith regime, so the history of churches and church-NGOs affect their strategies *vis-à-vis* the state.

Domestic factors also help us account for the changes – and also the ambiguities – in church-state relations. Between the mid-nineties, when attempts to engage the public and parliamentarians in discussions about economic policies failed, and the February 2000 referendum, there has been a substantial change in political debate and mobilization in Zimbabwe; this is a reaction to the dramatically reduced economic conditions within Zimbabwe.⁸² The churches were a part of this trend, but also played their cards such that they did not burn all their bridges with Mugabe and the ruling ZANU(PF) – in the event of the latter winning the confrontation with the NCA. Their post-election quiescence suggested that this tactic had proved successful, until they were shamed into action by criticism from within

and outside the country.

Still, the position of churches in Zimbabwe did allow church organizations to engage in discussions that were taboo in other circles. They have consistently been more active and effective on economic issues, election-monitoring, voter-education, and constitutional reform than secular NGOs. The vehemence with which they defend their special status as ‘religious people’ suggests that they are aware of their ability to say and do things impossible for other organizations. Churchmen and churchwomen – ordained and laity – have been accorded a special respect in Zimbabwe because they are thought to represent both a moral perspective, and a grass-roots community.

The lessons of Zimbabwe’s liberation war and the early independent era, reinforced by the ambiguity of recent church-state interaction should remind us that neither churches nor NGOs are uniformly ‘democratic’ or ‘progressive’, but are implicated in society and political culture. Such realizations must be taken into consideration by those who theorize about ‘democratization’ and ‘civil society’ in Africa and elsewhere.

1. Carl Hallencreutz and Ambrose Moyo eds., *Church and State in Zimbabwe* (Mambo, Gweru 1988); Terence Ranger *Are We Not Also Men? The Samkange family and African politics in Zimbabwe: 1920-64*. (James Currey, London, 1995); Michael Lapsley, *Neutrality or Co-optation? Anglican Church and state from 1964 until the independence of Zimbabwe* (Gweru, Mambo, 1986); Canaan Sodindo Banana, *The Church in the Struggle* (Mambo, Gweru, 1996); Diana Auret, *Reaching for Justice* (Mambo, Gweru, 1992); J. A. Dachs and W. Rea, *The Catholic Church and Zimbabwe* (Mambo, Gweru, 1979); Ian Linden, *The Catholic Church and the Struggle for Zimbabwe* (Longman, London, 1980); R. H. Randolph, *Dawn in Zimbabwe: The Catholic Church in the new order: a report on the activities of the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe for the five years, 1977-1981*. (Mambo, Gweru, 1985); Janice McLaughlin, *On the Frontline: Catholic missions in Zimbabwe=s liberation war* (Baobab, Harare, 1996); Carl Hallencreutz, *Religion and Politics in Harare* (Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, Uppsala, 1998); David Maxwell, *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1999).

2. I am indebted to Prof. Terence Ranger for pointing out these pre- and post-liberation parallels.

3. See for example, Agnes Chepkwony Ongaro, >The role of the Church in the development market – the case of Zimbabwe= in Carl Hallencreutz and Mai Palmberg eds., *Religion and Politics in Southern Africa*, (SAIS, Uppsala, 1991) and Paul Gifford ed., *The Christian Churches and the Democratization of Africa* (Brill, Leiden, 1995).

4. On general tendencies to romanticize NGOs in Africa see Mahmood Mamdani >A critique of the State and Civil Society Paradigm in Africanist Studies= in Mahmood Mamdani and Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba eds *African Studies in Social Movements and Democracy* (CODESRIA, Dakar 1995) and Bjorn Beckman, >The Liberation of Civil Society: Neo-Liberal Ideology and Political Theory= *ROAPE* 58 (1993), pp. 20-33; on Zimbabwe see Sara Rich Dorman, >NGOs and State in Zimbabwe: Implications for civil-society theory= in Bjorn Beckman, Anders Sjogren and Eva Hannsen eds., *Civil Society, Authoritarianism and Globalisation* (forthcoming).

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5. Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its public role* (Hurst, London, 1998), p. 308; Goran Hyden, >Bringing Voluntarism Back In: Eastern Africa in Comparative Perspective= in *Service Provision under Stress in East Africa*, ed. Joseph Semboja and Ole Therkildsen, (CDR, Copenhagen, 1995), p.45.
 6. Sara Rich Dorman, >NGOs, Development and Depoliticization in Zimbabwe: a study of NGO discourse and practice= paper presented to the African Studies Seminar, Oxford UK January 1998.
 7. Paul Gifford, *The New Crusaders : Christianity and the new right in southern Africa* (Pluto, London ,1991) and Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its public role* (Hurst, London, 1998); an important recent criticism of this perspective is David Maxwell, >In Defence of African Creativity= *Journal of Religion in Africa* **30** (2000) pp. 468-481.
 8. Paul Gifford ed., *The Christian churches and the democratization of Africa* (Brill, Leiden 1995).
 9. An important exception to this tendency is François Constantin and Christian Coulon, *Religion et transition démocratique en Afrique* (Karthala, Paris, 1997).
 10. McLaughlin, *On the Frontline*; Donal Lamont, *Speech from the Dock* (Great Britain, Kevin Mayhew, 1977); Kenneth Skelton, *Bishop in Smith=s Rhodesia* (Gweru, Mambo, 1985).
 11. Lapsley, *Neutrality or Co-option?* p. 33.
 12. McLaughlin *On the Frontline*.
 13. Linden, *The Catholic Church and the Struggle for Zimbabwe*.
 14. Ranger, *Are we not also men?*
 15. Interview, John B Sibanda, Christian Care, 26 September 1995; CD Watyoka, *25 years of struggle* (ZCC, Harare, 1991).
 16. Auret, *Reaching for Justice*.

17. Hallencreutz and Moyo, *Church and State in Zimbabwe*; Matthew Schoffeleers makes much the same point regarding Malawi in his excellent *In Search of Truth and Justice: confrontations between church and state in Malawi, 1960-1994* (Blantyre, CLAIM, 1999).

18. David Maxwell, 'The Church and Democratization in Africa: the case of Zimbabwe' in Gifford, ed. *The Christian Churches and the Democratization of Africa*, p. 109; David Maxwell, 'Catch the Cockerel Before Dawn: Pentecostalism and Politics in Post-Colonial Zimbabwe' *Africa* **70**, 2 (2000); News stories regarding ZANU(PF) appeals to the Chitungwiza Vapostori Wechishanu appeared during the June election: ZBC TV evening news 18 June 2000; *Herald* 19 June 2000; *Daily News* 21 June 2000; *Sunday News* 25 June 2000.

19. Maxwell, 'Catch the Cockerel'; Personal communication, David Maxwell, 9 October 2001.

20. On labour and students, see *inter alia*, Norbert Tengende, *Workers Students and the Struggles for Democracy: State-Civil Society Relations in Zimbabwe* (Unpublished Phd thesis, Roskilde, 1994); for NGOs see Sara Rich Dorman, 'NGOs and State in Zimbabwe'.

21. Although in 1997 the Registrar-General claimed that a law to 'reduce the number of churches' was being drafted (cited in Oskar Wermter, 'Police to enforce ten commandments?': a look at Church and State in Zimbabwe' *Moto* February 1998, p. 8). Students, labour and NGOs were the subject of 'pre-emptive' legislation throughout the 1990s in the form of the UZ Act (1990), the Labour Relations Act (1992), and the PVO Act (1995).

22. *Herald*, 26 January 1981; *Herald* 27 January 1982; *Herald* 1 May 1982; *Herald* 2 March 1982; *Herald* 10 March 1982.

23. *Herald* 10 November 1981; *Herald* 16 November 1981; Carl Hallencreutz, 'Ecumenical Challenges in Independent Zimbabwe' in Hallencreutz and Moyo, *Church and State*, pp 267.

24. Hallencreutz, 'Ecumenical Challenges', pp. 270-276.

25. *Herald* 18 April 1984; *Herald* 19 April 1984; *Herald* 8 May 1984; *Herald* 20 February 1986, 1.

26. Auret, *Reaching for Justice*, pp. 215-217; Interviews Nick Ndebele, former CCJP Director, 27 September 1999; Mike Auret Former Chair and Director, 14 September 1995 and 28

September 1999.

27. *Independent* 21 March 1997; *Independent* 6 June 1997; *Standard* 22 August 1997; *Sunday Mail*, 6 July 1997.

28. *Standard* 4 May 1997; *Mail and Guardian* 9 May 1997; CCJP/LRF. *Breaking the Silence: Building True Peace. A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands, 1980-1988.* (Harare, CCJP&LRF, 1997).

29. Ambrose Moyo, 'Religion and Political Thought in Independent Zimbabwe', in Hallencreutz and Moyo, *Church and State*, p. 212.

30. *Sunday Mail* 20 August 1995; *Sunday Mail* 17 September 1995.

31. *Independent* 28 August 1996.

32. Banana, *Church in the Struggle*, pp 272-4.

33. Gifford, *African Christianity* p.345; *Times* (UK) 20 May 1995.

34. Gifford, *African Christianity* p.308; Hyden, 'Bringing Voluntarism Back In' p. 45.

35. Auret, *Reaching for Justice*.

36. Interview, Tawanda Mutasah, ZCC-JPR 15 September 1995.

37. Research Notes, ZCC pre-budget Consultation, 6 May 1997.

38. Research Notes, ZCC PVO Act meeting, 13 February 1997.

39. Interview, M. C. Kuchera, Secretary-General ZCC, 11 September 1995.

40. The Front for Popular Democracy was founded to campaign against economic liberalization, but never contested elections (Press Conference, 8 August 1994, Harare).

41. Auret, *Reaching for Justice* p.187; Peter Balleis, *ESAP and Theology* (Gweru, Mambo/Silveira House, 1992); Banana, *Church in the Struggle*, p. 297.

42. ZCC, >Economic Justice Network/Ecumenical Support Services/NGOs meeting on the preparation to meet the Zimbabwean Delegation going to Washington for the October 7 and 8 meeting=. Minutes compiled by Deprose Muchena, n.d.

41.>An appeal to IMF/WB on the occasion of your AGM, 9 October 1995, from the very concerned NGOs and church related organizations in Zimbabwe.= n.d, n.p.

42.ESS, Minutes of LAG meeting 24 May 1996; Leaders of the group did have access to a bootleg copy of ZIMPREST, but did not feel able to circulate it amongst the wider group.

43.Letter from ESS to Minister of Finance, 29 May 1996.

44.M. C. Kuchera, >Official Opening Address= ZCC National Consultation on the second phase of the ESAP/ZIMPREST 29-30 October, 1996, pp 2-3.

45.Research Notes, LAG meeting, Harare, 18 March 1997.

46.Letter from M Dzinotizei for Senior Secretary for Finance, to Jonah Gokova, ESS 10 March 1997.

49.Kairos Theologians Group, *The Kairos document: a theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa* 2nd rev. ed (London, Catholic Institute for International Relations/ British Council of Churches 1986).

50.The document was finally launched at the World Council of Churches meeting in December 1998 (*Ecumenical News International* 14 December 1998); *A Call to Prophetic Action: towards the Jubilee Year 2000* (ESS, Harare, 1998).

51.Research notes, >It is time for Prophetic Action: Towards a Threshold of Jubilee= Harare, 2 December 1996.

50.Research Notes, Drafting Meeting: A Call to Prophetic Action!, Mutare, 11 February 1997.

51.Research Notes , Drafting Meeting: A Call to Prophetic Action!, Mutare, 10 March 1997.

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54. Gifford, *African Christianity* p. 312; see also Jean-François Bayart, >Les Églises chrétiennes et la politique du ventre= *Politique Africaine* **35** (1989), pp. 3-26.
55. Sara Rich Dorman, >NGOs and State in Zimbabwe=.
56. Research Notes, Constitutional Assembly Meeting, Kadoma, 7 September 1997.
57. Research Notes, Constitutional Assembly Meeting, Kadoma, 7 September 1997.
58. NCA, >Minutes of the National Constitutional Debate Assembly at the Quality International Hotel on Monday 14th July at 1pm= nd.
59. Interview, Densen Mafinyani, ZCC Secretary-General, 29 September 1999.
60. *Sunday Mail* 30 January 2000; *Independent* 10 March 2000.
61. *Independent* 7 November 1998.
62. Interviews, ZCC and NCA staff, October and September 1999.
63. Interview, Densen Mafinyani, Secretary General ZCC, 29 September 1999.
64. Interview, senior ZCC staff member, October 1999.
65. For a more detailed discussion of the process see, Sara Rich Dorman, >The NCA: Politics of Post-Nationalism?= paper presented to the Southern Africa History and Politics Seminar, Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford, October 2000.
66. *Financial Gazette*, 13 August 1999.
67. *Financial Gazette*, 9 September, 1999.
68. *Daily News* 28 January 2000.
69. *Financial Gazette*, 5 August 1999; *Daily News* 7 August 1999; *Standard* 8 August 1999; *Financial Gazette* 13 August 1999.
70. Interview, Mike Auret, Director CCJP, 28 September 1999.

70. Personal Communications, David Maxwell, 9 October 2001; Useni Sibanda, 10 October 2001.

72. *Bulawayo Chronicle* 8 February 2000.

73. In addition to references above, see for example, *Daily News* 22 September 1999; *Daily News* 14 December 1999; *Daily News* 24 January 2000, *Daily News*, 13 August 1999; *Herald* 15 March 2000, 1; *Independent* 31 March 2000.

74. *Standard* 2 December 1999; *Daily News* 13 December 1999.

75. *Daily News* 26 January 2000.

76. *Herald* 26 January 2000; *Daily News* 26 January 2000.

77. *Daily News* 8 February 2000.

78. *Daily News*, 15 January 2001; *Daily News* 16 January 2001; *Daily News*, 31 January 2001; *Daily News* 6 February 2001; Personal communications, Jonah Gokova, 24 January 2001; Davie Malungisa, 25 January 2001.

⁷⁹*Daily News* 22 June 2000; *Daily News* 24 June 2000; *Daily News* 3 July 2000; *Mirror* 11 May 2001.

79. "Heads of Denominations statement on the Church's position on land reform" 25 January 2001; The Catholic Bishops later dissociated themselves from this statement: *Daily News* 2 February 2001.

80. Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference, 'Tolerance and Hope' Pastoral Letter May 2001; *Daily News* 4 May 2001; ZCC. "The truth shall make you free!" Pastoral letter August 2001; *Daily News* 27 August 2001.

82. For a concise discussion of changes between 1997 and 2000 see Sara Rich Dorman, 'Zimbabwe: Change Now?' *World Today* April 2000.