Elections, Politics and Identities in Zimbabwe

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Abstract. The study revisits the issue of identity and examines it within the political dispensation of the country during and after the recent elections in Zimbabwe. It is the assumption of the study that people shift identities and systematically switch between various political identities in an endeavour to position themselves strategically in different situations. In Zimbabwe, politics is not only about leadership and service delivery; it is about one's life chances, access to resources and even access to basic needs. Being identified by any particular political identity determines the opportunities and options available to an individual. The study also takes aboard an analysis of the most common indicators of identity in an attempt to uncover the politics of belongingness in Zimbabwe's political climate. Issues of dress and language are analysed to understand their contribution to Zimbabwean political identities. Case studies were largely drawn from Masvingo province with occasional reference to other parts of the country. Identities are crucial determinants in both macro and micro-politics characterizing resource distribution in Zimbabwe. Politics is crucial in resource distribution, and service delivery as supported by various examples which point to the politicization of resource distribution. Being labelled the Other, has implications on inclusion and exclusion in resource allocation.

Keywords: political identities; resource distribution, belongingness.

Introduction

The theme of identity can be seen to continue playing an important role within the lives of urbanites in Masvingo. Urbanites struggle for access to a wide range of resources, chief among them being urban space. Land for housing, peri-urban agriculture as well as for conducting business presents a rich field of struggles for these finite resources. Humans always find ways to include and exclude others in such struggles for access to resources. In this post-election era, political identities play a chief role in determining one's access to resources. Though the term identity has been marred by ambiguities and contestations as to what it

involves and means, (Fearon 1999; Deng 1995; Giddens 1993, Cohen 1993), the paper focuses on how issues of belongingness in the pre and post-election era have been usurped to give people strategic platforms of acquiring resources. It examines the various dimensions of identity in the Zimbabwean political landscape and also attempts to explore the rationale behind the popular constructions of political identities.

Understanding identity

The term 'identity' has been subject of much debate, elaboration and explanation. However most definitions can be summarised as involving ideas of self-definition, whether individually or as social groups as well as mechanisms of showing both similarity and difference between the self and the Other. In conceptualizing identity, Fearon's (1999) definition examines different dimensions. He notes that identity can generally be understood as encompassing either (a) a social category, defined by membership rules and (alleged) characteristic attributes or expected behaviours, or (b) socially distinguishing features that a person takes a special pride in or views as unchangeable but socially consequential (or (a) and (b) at once). The mentioned variables play out at different times, or work together to produce a particular identity among individuals or groups. Golubovic (2010)'s anthropological conceptualisations of identity bring out two dimensions of identity which point to individual as well as group understandings of belongingness. Identities are usually understood through the processes of self-definition as well as differentiation of oneself/a group from a perceived or existing Other. Some definitions of identity have sought to include the idea of the function. To Giddens (1993), identity in the modern era is a matter of being rational and dynamic. Giddens understands identity as a symbolic reconstruction which aid individual adaptability to different situations. Castells (2010) notes that it is given that identities are created. He directs the focus of inquiry into identities to seek to unravel how, from what, by whom, and for what identities are created. Issues in this paper try to address some of these questions raised by Castells through showing the nature and function of political identities in the country. I also adopt Castells' categorization of identities, which

differentiates between three categories of identity namely legitimizing, resistance and project identities. These three forms aptly captures some forms of identities which have cropped up within the political field in the country. Of particular note is the importance of project identities in the post-election period where new groupings such as the youth, women and entrepreneurs have tried to create new identities which challenge the existing power relations at various levels of the politico-social strata.

Though the issue of identity is not novel in politics, the current dispensation in Zimbabwean politics provides a new framework in which identities can be conceptualized due to a number of factors. These include

1) An uncertain pre-election environment which was difficult to determine a likely outcome of the elections

2) A shocking and unprecedented defeat of the rival party which had previously gained a commanding position within the Zimbabwean political field, especially in urban areas

3) A fairly calm pre-election period which enabled people to openly declare their political affiliations.

4) Control of key resources and state apparatus by ZANU PF which is the oldest political party in the country.

These factors had an effect of ensuring people identified with parties of their choice. The situation has a polarization effect as people are identified with specific political groupings. The major identities constituted people belonging to Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) and Movement for Democratic Change- Tsvangirai faction (MDC-T). Other political parties such as Movement for Democratic change- Ncube faction (MDC-N), Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) were not much visible in the political playing field.

Elements of identity

A number of factors could be seen to play a significant part in the creation of political identities in the country. These included party regalia and paraphernalia, language (seen mainly in party slogans and the ways of addressing each other), membership cards as well as attendance and

participation in party activities. The elements of identity exhibit the active and passive creation of identities in the area of study. They show how individuals create identities for themselves as well as the simultaneous process of reinforcing, authenticating, and legitimizing those identities. Claims of belongingness to a political grouping without the possession of some of the mentioned aspects could bring one into trouble since the individual could be regarded as an impostor and a spy. This often carry nasty consequences and in certain circumstances, can even rouse violent reprisals.

Language as identity

Language has been a crucial tool and indicator of identity within Zimbabwean politics. Anderson's (1991) views on imagined communities critically exposes the role of language in the creation of communal bonds within a nation. This idea corresponds to the character which identity has taken in the political discourse of the country. One is supposed to know the political lingo of his/her political party. Of note is the address of each other as 'comrade', a term carrying overtones of brotherliness within a common struggle. The usage of the term within various political parties could be seen to be gender-neutral and cross cutting generational and age barriers. It brought a feeling of equality, and masked the differences which characterised different social categories in the same political party. It demolished barriers which economic inequality and glaring differential access to resources could otherwise have erected. It was a word which, when used, evoked feelings of unity, solidarity and oneness even though social inequalities were visible. As noted in the words of one respondent

> 'We are all comrades fighting a common struggle to achieve total control of power and to defeat the enemy'.

Though the term may seem innocent, the way it changes people's perceptions could be noticeable. The top brass of most political parties could be seen to travel in top of the range vehicles and appeared well fed, but in the political field they became equal with their counterparts who travelled long distances in unpleasant conditions. Though others sat in shades whilst others endured the blazing sun, they were both comrades 'equal' and important in the struggle. The usage of that

term can be seen to persist even in the post-election period, demonstrating its importance in the achievement of unity and cooperation in the political field. This is a loaded term evoking memories of the liberation struggle and also differentiating liberation veterans with other general politicians.

The term "comrade" can be seen to have been included within the repertoire of the ruling ZANU PF party's language and address. Most, if not all their members of parliament are addressed by the term even in official communications. The state aligned media always refer to politicians from the ruling party using comrade as the proper way of salutation. The term also has a long history within ZANU PF's struggle against imperialist forces. The party has capitalised on the anti-colonial struggle and has presented as well as packaged itself as the vanguard of the ideals of the revolution. Hence the usage of the term 'comrade' is consistent with the presentation of a revolutionary party. Any analysis of the continued use of other liberation war terms, such as *'chimurenga'* also shows the war and struggle identity which continues to be presented in the party's ideologies. One avid supporter of ZANU PF recited the story of the party's struggle to me. He said

> *Comrade ZANU is the party. We have survived many struggles. From the first chimurenga up to the third chimurenga. These elections are the final struggle against imperialism comrade.*

Another supporter also related the indigenization drive which seek economic transformation, especially in favour of the black indigenous populace, as the fourth *chimurenga.* The term of 'comrade' gives a picture and reinforces an image of a situation characterised by struggles, where cooperation is necessary for the realization of goals. Christiansen (2004) also notes the role of comradeship in Zimbabwean politics. The observation by Christiansen that revolutionary nationalisms always explain national *and political* identities in opposition to the previous powers of domination also accounts for the continued relevance of the term 'comrade' within the *lingua franca* of the ruling ZANU PF party. I extend Anderson's (1991) views on national identities in ex-colonies as being constructed upon a process of rewriting the internal antagonisms of the past into a narrative of the triumph of the national spirit to the relevance of comradeship in

Zimbabwean political identities. It is quite evident that there has been a single nationalist identity which has emerged in Zimbabwean political discourses (Christiansen 2004, Onslow 2011). In this single discourse comradeship is an important category and the opposition does not have any part to play in the dominant narrative.

However, I have also noticed that the term has found its way into the language spectrum of other political parties in the political field. Though the term here performs the same cohesive functions, it also has another dimension to it. It can be conceptualised as a form of resistance identity. It is an attempt to define new dimensions of struggle other than the popular discourse of the liberation war heroes.

Another part of language could be seen to be the slogans specific to different parties. Knowing the current slogan could also be used as a marker of identity. As a way of addressing fellow members of the political group, one was supposed to utter the party slogan accompanied by the party symbol. Wrongly chanting a slogan could lead to one being regarded as belonging to the other political party and in some instances could even draw nasty retribution. Incidence are numerous where people were beaten for chanting the wrong slogan. Hence people took an active interest in knowing and memorizing party slogans so that they could benefit at particular moments. The diction of the slogans also show another dimension of differentiating between 'us' and 'them'. It is an important point to not that the majority of party slogans in Zimbabwe usually involve glorifying one's own party, its leadership while simultaneously denigrating other parties and their leadership. The language and diction also encompass the language which is used in speeches as well as party songs.

Identity and dress

Twigg (2009) regards clothing as part of a material culture. It is not simply an act of putting on garments, but it carries with it symbolic meanings and it is part of a situated body practice. Bourdieu (1984) notes the importance of clothing as part of cultural capital as well as a marker of identity which establish, perpetuate and reproduces positions of power and reinforces relations dominance

and subordination. Kuchler and Miller (2005) underscore the ability of clothing to elucidate who we are and what we stand for. Political parties are in most instances differentiated by their selection of dress. Different items of clothing including suits, hats, caps, t-shirts, formal shirts and clothes bearing party colours and logos constitute an important dimension of party identification. Donning party regalia is dominant in different epochs of crucial calendar events in politics. In the pre-election period virtually all parties distributed articles of clothing to sell their parties. These were supposedly distributed among their supporters. Hence wearing specific party regalia, at face value demonstrated one's political loyalty/affiliation. It is associated with issues of belongingness to a particular political grouping.

Apart from the most common forms of adornment, the recent elections were accompanied by other accessories such as wrist bands and bandanas. Though clothing is part of outward appearance, possession and donning of part outfits could be seen to be a crucial component of negotiating and renegotiating identities. It has an effect of including and excluding others and is important even in negotiating access to certain resources. One could be feared and respected at certain instances due to the regalia won. It is not the regalia which carried the respect, but the association of that regalia with a particular identity is important. This corresponds to Twigg (2009)'s observation that clothes are cultural artefacts, embedded in current and historical sets of meanings, shaped by social and economic forces, reflecting current social and cultural concerns.

Dress communicates a party's beliefs in a number of ways. I have noticed that in presenting the images of a party's ideologies, the design of clothing, sometimes, closely communicate the identities of the party. One particular aspect to note is the reinforcement of the 'comrade' identity with military clothing. In the present political dispensation, party regalia is replete with military images, something which we did not witness in previous dispensations. ZANU PF pioneered the use of articles such as berets which imitate the military berets. Other articles of clothing were also designed just like military fatigues. That also shows the intersection between dress and language as markers of identity.

Identity and access to resources

The foregoing discussion has shown some of the dynamics shrouding the issue of identity and representation. The identities which people picked through utilizing various mentioned mechanisms has had varied impacts. Perceived and real benefits of presenting oneself as belonging to a particular party led people to adopt different identities in the area under study. The rationality behind the choices of identities are discussed under the following categories

    a) Economic and material benefits

    b) Personal and security benefits

    c) Forced identities

Economic and material benefits are important in determining choice of identities by individuals in the area under study. These benefits could be seen to encompass business and investment opportunities as well as simply benefitting from the distribution of material goods. In the spirit of social exchange, most political parties could be seen to distribute food items like mealie-meal and this led people to assume situational identities to benefit in such scenarios. Most respondents noted that they could simply wear any party's regalia and attend rallies so as to acquire different goods. They note that they received food hampers, kitchen utensils, torches and even consuming meat at the rallies. Party regalia itself, for some is an important part of their clothing. It augments their wardrobes, hence it was not uncommon to find people possessing articles of clothing from different political parties.

On a larger scale economic benefits can be seen in relation to land acquisition for various purposes. Three dimensions of land use can be seen being crucial in both the pre-election and post-election periods. These included residential, business, and peri-urban farming. Utilizing political identities, people have made efforts at land acquisition for the mentioned purposes. At times, organized units and efforts can be observed when it comes to land acquisition. In housing, a number of housing cooperatives were also formed along political lines. Though membership was not strictly along political lines, ownership of a housing scheme, as well as holding crucial positions in a cooperative also called for a relevant political identity. Most of the owners and influential members in housing

cooperatives could be seen to be influential members in different political parties. Hence they utilized their identities to acquire land reselling as residential stands. Utilizing political identities as capital, urbanites and other people around Masvingo settled themselves in white-owned farms along Masvingo-Mutare road. They subdivided the land into small plots for the purpose of farming. For one to be included in the farm settlements, one was supposed to demonstrate participation and belongingness to the political group which acquired the land. Urban traders and vendors have also been in long standing battles by authorities since they struggle for space to carry out their activities. Again issues of belongingness were important in determining that one gets space to put a market stall in the flea markets as well as shopping centres in various residential areas. In the major trading centres people could be seen to constantly don different party regalia. The majority of those interviewed pointed to their desire to maintain an 'acceptable' political identities so that their business operations will not be hampered.

Apart from its perceived and real economic benefits, political identities could also be utilized in the pursuit of individual personal benefits. Some respondents noted that they commanded a lot of authority and respect by being identified with the winning ruling party. A popular practice was the use of ringtones aligned to the ruling party, and the use of wallpapers of the president. Respondents noted that these elements of identity gave them better positionality in relation to power contestations in various situations. Motorists are one class of people who narrated their struggle with the police at roadblocks. Their use of the winning party identity was perceived by some as enabling them to pass at police checkpoints without any hassles. Most vehicles could be seen having stickers of the president, his signature, bandanas belonging to the ruling party. Music linked to the party or praising the president would be played by some motorists as evidence of their ruling party identity.

Pre-election and post-election identities

Pre-election and post-election periods can be seen to offer two different sets of identities. In the first phase there is evidence of identities of competitors whilst

in the second phase, we witness victor and loser identities. The generally calm and peaceful campaign environment in the pre-election period allowed a considerably free environment of identity expression. People from different parties could be seen engaging in door-to-door campaigns bearing different markers of their party identifications. Most visible were the identities of MDC-T and ZANU PF members, and to a lesser extent, the Ncube led MDC. However in the post-election period we tend to witness a proliferation of only the identities of the winning party among the ordinary citizens. The paraphernalia found on the streets, including party regalia and even posters, show a growing presence of the victor's identity. Interviews held by different people show evidence of identity switching by various individuals so as to be associated with the winning party. Some members of the winning party have also tried to employ their party identity to reap benefits in various ways. In one incident a closed car wash business, which had been outlawed by the town authorities was reopened. Workers could be seen going about their business clothed in ZANU PF regalia. The individuals were exploiting ZANU PF's campaign ideology of indigenisation, empowerment and employment creation. The reopening of a supposedly illegal business establishment was interpreted by respondents as in line with the winning party's development strategy. Recently, some party supporters also resisted eviction from a business premises owned by an individual of Indian descent, and proclaimed takeover of the premises. They were taking cover of the indigenisation drive which the winning government has adopted. This was confirmed in some newspaper reports where it was noted that Zanu PF activists threatened to take over Lambart's properties as part of the party's indigenisation drive. Zanu PF posters were pasted on Lambart's vehicle by activists who were demonstrating evictions. This case shows the extent to which individuals can appropriate and utilize a particular identity so as to acquire wealth. The post-election era has motivated some individuals to exploit identities which they feel can give them freedom to pursue various economic ventures easily. The victory of the party has led to some of its supporters to assume that they can do anything with impunity.

The silence of opposition or loser identities has been accompanied by a switch of identities where some individuals have changed their identities to systematically benefit from the victor's policies and assistance. This has been evidenced by a number of respondents who identified themselves as having joined the winning party. One respondent added the adage, 'if u can't beat them, join them.'

Legitimizing identities in the pre and post-election period

Findings from the study confirm Castells' postulations on legitimizing identities. The history of power and control characterizing ZANU PF as a party with the longest service in government may account for people's inclination to be identified with the mainstream party. Evidence show that even in the pre-election period some opposition sympathisers did not openly declare their allegiance to opposition parties. Instead they consumed elements of the identity of ZANU PF since it was party of the mainstream identity. People participated in rallies and wore party regalia regardless of their own political affiliation. At some workplaces people received regalia and it would be difficult for an individual to opt out since it carried elements of belonging to other identities.

Resistance identities, electoral loss and the opposition

The adoption of the dominant identity cannot be regarded as a uniform strategy. Evidence from the survey suggest the continual challenge of the dominant identities. This can be seen through a number of respondents who have distanced themselves from the winning party and have even gone to the extent of publicly challenging and denouncing the winners. A number of respondents claimed that they still adhere to their opposition identities despite suffering electoral loss. These have continued participating in the activities of their losing party. This corresponds to Castells (2010)'s ideas of resistance identities. Castells claims that these identities are not only, marginalized and stigmatized, but they become a sort of resistance to the dominant identities. They are based on values and principles different from those of the mainstream identities.

Domination and identity

Identities can be seen to be dynamic and transient. People can never fully be lumped into specific identities since doing that may result in overlooking issues of power and struggles for domination of identities. Multiple identities struggle for domination in the social space. As competition over domination and advantage increases, even the elements of identity become more strict and restrictive, culminating in a bottleneck situation. As noted earlier, people tried to utilize particular identities to acquire resources for themselves, but this pursuit of economic gain can further split up the identities of people within the same camp. The study identifies groups such as women, the youth, the poor and entrepreneurs as forming sub-identities within even the winning party. The youth can be seen to be jostling for opportunities to get a foothold on the sources of economic empowerment. They position themselves as a once marginalized group hence they challenge the prevailing situation. This corresponds to Castells' postulations on what he terms project identities. The mentioned groups have tried to utilize their marginal identities to change their situation in different arenas. These include governance and the economy. The issue of taking land for various purposes shows that some groups were utilizing their marginalization as a project identity which challenges the status quo.

Conclusion

Identities are not fixed and are motivated by various issues. They are formed and adopted in response to different conditions. Individuals switch between many different identities for a number of reasons. These zero in on the advantages gained by an individual assuming a particular identity. The study has shown that within politics people strategically position themselves to reap different benefits. As suggested by Giddens (1993), identities in the modern age are a matter of rational action and being dynamic. Identities are not only ascriptive, but reflect people's choices as well as reveal that humans are, to a certain degree, calculative beings. They are negotiated and renegotiated due to a plethora of forces which structure the social world. The study has shown the constructions of various types of identities as well as the rationale behind some

of the identities in the Zimbabwean political field. Crucial to the issue of identity is also the aspect of resources, both material and nonmaterial. Identities are hence seen to be more salient during times of inclusion and exclusion.

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