

**THE POLITICS OF WATER IN POST-COLONIAL
ZIMBABWE, 1980-2007**

By

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ABSTRACT

Zimbabwe's political crisis has engendered a series of inter-connected crises. Of all these crises, water shortages have produced, perhaps, the most contentious aspect of the urban crisis, pitting the city and the state in a constant struggle over water control. For two decades, the postcolonial state focused heavily on rural water development at the expense of urban areas. But, from 2000 onwards the state's policy veered sharply from the rural areas to a sudden interest in the management of urban water supplies. How did this change come about and what have been the consequences of state intervention for urban residents' access to water? This article argues that democratic control over municipal water supply in Zimbabwe's cities has become a contested arena. For the first time, the question of municipal control of water has become explicitly linked to city/state conflict in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe's urban water crisis offers a powerful testimony of the harmful effects of state intervention especially if it is driven by political expediency. Ensuring universal public service delivery takes more than just the imposition of a water authority run by government functionaries. This requires profound political changes that render democratic space to urban citizens to decide who should govern them and to determine how urban resources should be harnessed and allocated.

Introduction

Zimbabwe today represents much of what Chabal and Daloz have called 'the political instrumentalisation of disorder'.¹ By this they mean 'the process by which political actors in Africa seek to maximize their returns on the state of confusion, uncertainty and sometimes even chaos, which characterises most African polities'.² An extension of this paradigm suggests that, in tandem with the above view, there is a general disrespect for the conventions that govern official political and economic sectors and activities, and a total dependence on personal or personalised and top-down solutions to societal problems.³ It is within such a context that we need to understand how the ZANU-PF government has sought to 'instrumentalize the resources' which it commands within the general political economy of disorder obtaining in Zimbabwe since 2000.

The current political impasse is the culmination of the electoral defeat of a draft constitution [Feb. 2000], the rise of a formidable opposition party, the MDC in September 2000, and the flurry of violent land invasions which preceded the elections of 24 and 25 June 2000 in

¹ P. Chabal and J. Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* (Oxford: James Currey, 1999), p. xviii

² Chabal and Daloz, *Africa Works*, p. xix.

³ Chabal and Daloz, *Africa Works*, p. xix.

which the MDC won 57 seats and ZANU-PF 62.⁴ These events produced conditions in which both violence and authoritarianism have been instrumentalized by the state to attain a measure of compliance from a restless populace.⁵ In addition, water, second only to land, has become an exemplar of the political use of resources by the ruling party to keep itself in power. It has used it to destabilise the longstanding water distribution arrangements in urban areas in total disregard of the laws that govern local authorities and to exploit the opportunities that arise from the resulting chaos.

This article is divided into three parts. The first part traces the evolution of the history and politics of water development in post-independence Zimbabwe from 1980 to 1990. It discusses the motivation behind the central government's long-standing commitment to water development in the rural areas of Zimbabwe in that period. The second part briefly focuses on the period 1990-2000 as a decade of neo-liberal reforms in which the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) was introduced, implemented, and abandoned. The article situates the imperatives for water reforms within the broader objectives of ESAP and discusses how these reforms led to the promulgation of the 1998 Water Act, replacing the 1976 Water Act, as well as the introduction of a new legislation, the Zimbabwe National Water Authority Act of 1998, which gave rise to a parastatal, by the same name, the Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA) established in 1999. The third part shifts to a discussion of the cabinet directive to the City of Harare in 2005 to hand over its water and sewer infrastructure to ZINWA. The order was subsequently extended to Zimbabwe's second largest city, Bulawayo, in 2007. The article also

⁴ Norma Kriger, 'ZANU (PF) Strategies in General Elections, 1980-2000: Discourse and Coercion', *African Affairs* 104, 414 (2005), p. 26.

⁵ T. O. Ranger, 'City Versus State in Zimbabwe: Colonial Antecedents of the Crisis', *Journal of Eastern and African Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (July 2007), pp. 161-192; A. Y. Kamete, 'The Return of the Jettisoned: ZANU-PF's Crack at "Re-urbanising" Harare', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 2, (June 2006), pp. 255-271; and A. Y. Kamete, 'Of Jinxes and Blessings: The Opposition in Zimbabwe's Urban Local Governance', K. Hulterström, A. Y. Kamete, H. Melber (eds.) *Political Opposition in African Countries: The Cases of Kenya, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe*, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala, Discussion Paper 37, 2007, pp. 39-60.

discusses the responses to the imposition of ZINWA on Harare and Bulawayo. The paper ends with a discussion on why ZINWA was detested in the country's two largest cities.

PART 1

BACKGROUND: REDRESSING THE COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL WATER IMBALANCES

One of the legacies of colonialism in Zimbabwe was that in 1980, the Zimbabwe government inherited a colonially skewed water allocation policy which effectively remained in place until 1998 when two pieces of legislation – a new Water Act and the Zimbabwe National Water Authority Act – were passed, putting an end to the colonial legacy of water. The colonial government bequeathed to Zimbabwe a dual and unequal property regime structured along racial lines. On the one hand, there was commercial land which was predominantly occupied by European settlers under private tenure. On the other hand, the majority of the African population resided on marginal lands known as reserves or tribal trust lands [renamed ‘communal areas’ after independence]⁶ but could not buy or sell them as they were subject to customary tenure. This inequitable division of land simultaneously mirrored the unequal distribution of, and rights to, water between African communal areas and white commercial farms, as codified in the 1976 Water Act.⁷ The postcolonial state's determination to eradicate the inequalities inherent in water allocation by introducing a just system of water allocation was, in part, an expression of its commitment to the establishment of a socialist and egalitarian society underpinned by social justice for all.⁸

⁶ B. Mbiba, ‘Communal Land Rights in Zimbabwe as State Sanction and Social Control: A Narrative’, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 71, No. 3 (2001), pp. 426-448.

⁷ A. Hellum and B. Derman, ‘Negotiating Water rights in the Context of a New Political and legal Landscape in Zimbabwe’, F. Von Benda-Beckmann and K. Von Benda-Beckmann, and A. Griffiths (eds.) *Mobile People, Mobile Law: Expanding Legal Relations in a Contracting World* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), pp. 181.

⁸ Government of Zimbabwe, *Growth with Equity*, February 1981.

Often employing Marxist-Leninist rhetoric which emphasised the twin goals of growth and redistribution, the government declared the provision of clean water and sanitation to rural communities to be one of its principal priorities in the *Transitional National Development Plan*:

The previous neglect in the provision of water supplies in the communal areas is to be corrected. The majority of people living in the communal areas have no adequate access to clean drinking water. Government will formulate a water development and management strategy; an integral part of the master plan for rural water supply under which existing domestic water supplies (including underground water in communal areas) will be surveyed, guidelines, priorities and strategies for the provision of water supplies established.⁹

Water development became part of a wider government community development strategy designed to guarantee the improvement of living standards for the marginalized rural people,¹⁰ especially women and children, 'through increased access to safe and reliable water and sanitation facilities and improved health and hygienic practices'.¹¹ There is no doubt therefore that the new government was overtly pro-rural in its redevelopment and reconstruction goals.

The government's rural bias was premised on both historical and political considerations from which it derived its legitimacy. It was historical because of the government's conscious desire to redevelop rudimentary rural infrastructure in most of Zimbabwe.¹² But it was also political because peasants and other rural-based social groups had been the linchpin of ZANU-PF's armed guerrilla struggle waged predominantly in the rural areas and ensured the ruling party's rise to power in 1980.¹³ Since then, it has mostly been the rural constituencies that have continued to vote ZANU-PF back into power and such unflinching support has not gone unnoticed by the leadership. On winning the 2005 elections, President Mugabe hailed the rural

⁹ *Transitional National Development Plan*, pp. 61-62.

¹⁰ J. Mw Makumbe, *Participatory Development: The Case of Zimbabwe* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1996), p. 79-80.

¹¹ Government of Zimbabwe: Ministry of Rural Resources and Water Development, *Towards Integrated Water Resources Management: Water Resources Management Strategy for Zimbabwe*, 2000, p. 16: See also Government of Zimbabwe: *Water Resources and Development: (Ministry of Energy and Water Resources and Development) Functions, Objectives and Policy*, Seminar for Provincial Governors, Heads of Ministries (2 May 1984).

¹² Davies, Sanders, and Shaw, 'Liberalisation for Development', p. 155.

¹³ Lan, *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (James Currey, 1985).

voters for being ‘the most consistent revolutionaries and decisive pillar of support for the party’.¹⁴ The government, it would seem, felt obliged to offer some kind of recompense to the ‘masses’ by investing state resources in people-oriented projects.¹⁵

The government made some notable improvements in the provision of water and sanitation to households in communal areas, and won it praise from the *WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation Coverage*, which reported that by 1988, 84 per cent of Zimbabwe’s population had access to safe drinking water.¹⁶ Inroads made into changing people’s lives as a result of the government’s social policies were acknowledged by even the most radical critics of Zimbabwe today, such as Patrick Bond, who recently noted that: ‘In Zimbabwe, in contrast [sic – with Botswana and South Africa] the experience of the 1980s expansion of health and water services to the low-income rural masses of people showed potential for enhancing linkages between the rural and urban, and improving overall productivity’.¹⁷

However, this success was limited to the two-year period between 1980 and 1981 when the new nation was experiencing a high economic growth rising to 26%.¹⁸ Thereafter, a series of negative factors such as the global recession which led to falling commodity prices, unequal terms of trade, a two-year drought, and mounting pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB), compelled the government to change course from its

¹⁴ *The Herald*, 11 April 2005: ‘Rural Voters Hailed’. Cited in Kamete, ‘The Return of the Jettisoned’, 255.

¹⁵ It is also not surprising that there have been exceptionally more scholarly writings on water development in the rural areas than there have been on urban areas – a trend that seems to have been influenced by the ruling party’s rural-based water development trajectory.

¹⁶ WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation Coverage Estimates, 1980-2000: Access to Drinking Water Sources, Zimbabwe’, (2001). Cited in A. Nicol and S. Mtisi, ‘The Politics of Water: A Southern African Example’, *Sustainable Livelihoods in Southern Africa: Institutions, Governance and Policy Processes* (www.ids.ac.uk), (Institute of Development Studies: University of Sussex, Research Paper 20, Dec. 2003), pp.7-8.

¹⁷ P. Bond, ‘The Socio-political Structure of Accumulation and Social Policy in Southern Africa’, J. O. Adesina (ed.) *Social Policy in sub-Saharan African Context: In Search of Inclusive Development* (UNRISD: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 206. See also A. Mlambo, ‘The Ambiguities of Independence, Zimbabwe 1990-1990’, M. C. Lee and K. Colvard (eds.), *Unfinished Business: The Land Crisis in Southern Africa* (Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa, 2003), p. 63.

¹⁸ S. Dansereau, ‘Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Zimbabwe’s Development Impasse’, H. Melber (compiler) *Zimbabwe-The Political Economy of Decline*, Discussion Paper No. 27 (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2004), p. 9.

developmental agenda between 1983 and 1984.¹⁹ Notably, state interventions in, and fiscal support for, the water sector was severely curtailed. By the end of the 1980s, Zimbabwe was in a deep economic crisis. In 1991, the government moved swiftly to adopt the IMF and World Bank sponsored Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) to rekindle investor interest and eradicate constraints on growth.²⁰ ESAP stripped the state of its controlling powers in the economy and relegated it to the role of creating an enabling environment in which market forces, and not the state, would reign supreme.²¹ The programme also chipped away the socio-economic improvements that had been introduced by the government in the 1980s.²² Rural water and sanitation provision did not escape the corrosive impact of ESAP as resources once committed to water programmes simply dwindled.²³ For example, dam-building projects in Mashonaland West, Matabeleland South, Manicaland and Masvingo ran out of funds to complete the second-phase of connecting irrigation infrastructure.²⁴ The imperatives of ESAP forced the government to embark on a new development curve in the 1990s to foster sustainable growth in the water sector – resulting in the revision of the 1976 Water Act among other changes.

PART 11

THE NEW WATER ACT OF 1998

From independence until 1998, Zimbabwe's water sector was fraught with contradictions. For all its pronouncements about eradicating the traces of settler colonialism and replacing them

¹⁹ Dansereau, 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place', p. 10.

²⁰ D. B. Ndlela, 'Zimbabwe's Economy Since 1990', M. C. Lee and K. Colvard, *Unfinished Business: The Land Crisis in Southern Africa* (Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa, 2003), p. 134.

²¹ Dansereau, 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place', p. 13.

²² L. Sachikonye, 'Whither Zimbabwe? Crisis and Democratisation', *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 91, 2002, 13. See also A. S. Mlambo, *The Economic Structural Adjustment Programme: The Case of Zimbabwe, 1990-1995* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1997).

²³ P. B. Robinson, 'Financing Sustainable Water Use in Zimbabwe: Institutional Barriers to Applying Economic Solutions', Expert Group Meeting on Strategic Approaches to Freshwater Management, 27-30 Jan. 1998: Paper prepared for the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1999 (website: www.un.org/documents/ecosoc), pp. 1-11.

²⁴ *Towards Integrated Water Resources Management: Water Resources Management Strategy for Zimbabwe*, 2000, p. 18.

with what Franke has called ‘an authentic post-colonial nation’,²⁵ the government inherited the infamous 1976 Water Act. From 1998 the government moved to repeal this legislation which was not only archaic but also exposed its inherent contradictions. For example, one of its weaknesses had been its provision for no less than five institutions housed in different government ministries dealing with water issues. Apart from the Department of Water Development (DWD), the main institution under whose ambit most water affairs fell, there were other units outside the DWD such as the District Development Fund (DDF), the Department of Agricultural, Technical and Extension Services (AGRITEX) and the Regional Water Authority (RWA) dealing with some aspect of water supply. The lack of ‘horizontal linkages’, ‘often resulted in institutional competition, duplication of human and material resources and uncoordinated development’.²⁶ Moreover, these institutions were a drain on the nation’s budget. Such replication of services became the target of the IMF and the World Bank’s restructuring regime which emphasised the formation a single entity that would operate independent of government and survive from profits obtained through the marketisation of water. Thus, the IMF and the World Bank were the prime movers behind the revision of the Water Act. In addition, the Rukuni Commission of Enquiry into Appropriate Agricultural Land Tenure Systems (1993) also gave impetus to the need for a coherent national water resources policy guide. The Commission forcefully argued that the land tenure system needed to be reformed in tandem with water, as the two resources were inextricably linked.²⁷

The severity of the 1992 drought left the government in no doubt that the repeal of the 1976 Water Act had to be effected forthwith, resulting in the promulgation of the Water Act in 1998. Unlike the old Water Act, a central precept of the new Act was democratisation of the management of water by ensuring that all competing users of water would be involved in making

²⁵ K. Franke, ‘Sexual Tensions of Post-Empire’, *Studies in Law, Politics and Society*, Vol. 33, 2004, pp. 65-90.

²⁶ *Towards Integrated Water Resources Management: Water Development: Water Resources Management Strategy for Zimbabwe*, p. 8.

²⁷ Derman, ‘Balancing the Waters’, p. 82.

decisions pertaining to its usage. Under the old Act, voting rights were exclusive only to water right holders who happened to be commercial, primarily white, farmers. The new Act was inclusive of representatives from communal, small-scale commercial and large farms, mines, urban representatives from industry, manufacturing and municipalities.

Although a number of aspects related to water governance were repealed, two fundamental changes in the 1998 Water Act are germane to this paper. First, the Act recognised water as an ‘economic good’ and not a ‘social good’ as previously held by the government. Secondly, the Act provided for the decentralisation of water management institutions and the adoption of new concepts of integrated water resources management. The Act recognised the principle, the ‘user pays’ in line with the prescriptions of the ESAP. This applied to commercial water as opposed to primary water which could not be priced.²⁸ The creation of catchment and sub-catchment councils under the Act ushered in a new decentralised management system intended to give basic-level functions for issuing permits thereby establishing an effective user-management interface.²⁹ The emphasis on fee collection gave rise to a new institution – ZINWA – whose functions would, in due course, metamorphose from being a mere parastatal, organisation to a political instrument of the state which it used to dispossess urban areas of their water supply responsibilities.

Simultaneously, a new Zimbabwe National Authority Water Act (1998) was passed to provide for the formation of ZINWA. It was mainly to replace the DWD and take over all former government owned dams and waterworks outside of urban areas. ZINWA was vested with powers to oversee the development and management of national water resources. ZINWA had to operate on a viable commercial basis (i.e. sale of raw water, clear water and provision of

²⁸ The Water Act defined primary water as water utilised for (a) domestic human requirements within or around the surrounds of one’s residential premises; (b) animal life; (c) brick-making for private use; and (d) dip tanks. Commercial water was characterised as water used for commercial purposes and such water must be obtained by permit while water for primary use does not require a permit. Water Act, 1998: Section 32, Cited in Hellum and Derman, ‘Negotiating Water Rights’, p. 180.

²⁹ *Towards Integrated Water Resources Management: Water Resources Management Strategy for Zimbabwe*, p. 7.

engineering services) and become self-financing.³⁰ For what all these water reforms were worth, their implementation coincided with the rise of political conflict between the state and civil society from 2000 onwards. Contrary to the ethos of the 1998 Water Act, namely to create an equitable access to water for the black majority, ZINWA's seizure of urban water management responsibilities, at the behest of the state, have diminished, rather than enhanced, urban people's access to water.

PART 111

CABINET DIRECTIVE: ZINWA'S APPROPRIATION OF URBAN WATER SUPPLIES

The current urban water 'crisis' in Zimbabwe owes its genesis to the central government's pervasive politicisation of most decisions affecting the municipal provision of water and sanitation in the country's cities and towns. This process has been given expression by the government's directive to ZINWA to take over the management of urban water supply and sanitation and from all the urban local authorities in Zimbabwe. Since then the government of Zimbabwe has continued to treat ZINWA as an extension of itself, financially propping it up, and defending it to the hilt even in the face of palpable operational deficiencies to further its political objectives. This strategy, I would argue, perfectly fits into ZANU-PF's broader strategy of debilitating the MDC to compel it to loosen its grip on the urban areas so that it could regain lost control and influence over urban areas, once again.³¹

³⁰ B. Derman, A. Ferguson and F. Gonese, 'Decentralisation, Devolution and Development: Reflections on the Water Reform Process in Zimbabwe', Broadening Access and Strengthening Input Systems Collaborative Research Programme (BASIS, CRSP), 9 August 2000.

³¹ L. M. Sachikonye, 'Between Authoritarianism and Democracy: Politics in Zimbabwe Since 1990', M. C. Lee and K. Colvord (eds.), *Unfinished Business: The Land Crisis in Southern Africa* (Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa, 2003), p. 98. P. Alexander, 'Workers, the MDC and the 2000 Election', 27, 85 (September, 2000), pp. 385-406; and E. Masunungure, 'Travails of Opposition Politics in Zimbabwe since Independence,' in D. Harold-Barry (ed), *Zimbabwe: The Past is the Future*, pp. 147-192.

The city-state conflict that ensued once the ZANU-PF government had decided to reinstate itself to its vanished political glory in the cities has been well articulated by Kamete.³² Briefly, Kamete argues that in response to the overwhelming rejection of its candidates in the 2000 parliamentary elections ‘a trend that was to be repeated with chilling regularity during the next four years’, the ZANU-PF government hatched a plan to ‘re-urbanise’ the city of Harare in particular. Kamete delineates two strategies that were central to ZANU-PF’s come back, namely, regaining control of institutions of local governance and being re-elected into council and parliament. Although Harare was the principal site of the intense city-state struggles, Kamete also presents the ‘big picture’ to show that other cities, experienced the wrath of the government personified by the Minister of Local Government, Dr. Ignatious Chombo who took it upon himself to ensure that the MDC was completely incapacitated.³³ Another strand of the government’s strategies to break up the groundswell of support for the MDC was the infamous *Operation Murambatsvina* (Operation Remove Dirt) which was clandestinely planned and executed in June 2005 with exemplary brute force.³⁴ The aim was two pronged. It was hoped that by chasing the ‘surplus humanity’³⁵ that swelled the cities in the 1980s and 90s out of the cities, *Murambatsvina* would reduce the strain on urban infrastructure (including water and sewer reticulation) mostly in the townships. Secondly and most importantly, it would defuse a political time bomb by ejecting the unemployed and informal workers into the remote communal lands away from the MDC influence.³⁶

This part of my paper builds upon and extends Kamete’s analysis by exploring a less examined strategy, namely that as the political crisis in Zimbabwe intensified, the ZANU-PF government instrumentally used water shortages in the cities of Harare and Bulawayo to wrestle

³² Kamete, ‘The Return of the Jettisoned,’ pp. 255-271.;

³³ Kamete, ‘The Return of the Jettisoned’, p. 268.

³⁴ Kamete, ‘The Return of the Jettisoned’, p. 271. D. Potts, “‘Restoring Order’? Operation Murambatsvina and the Urban Crisis in Zimbabwe’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (June 2006), pp. 273-291.

³⁵ A phrase borrowed from Davis, *Planet of Slums*, title of chapter 8, p. 174.

³⁶ *The Zimbabwe Standard*, ‘Chombo: Albatross Around Mugabe’s Neck’, 23 January 2006.

control of the cities from the MDC. The government sought to use water in the same way in which it had used land in the hope of gaining ‘legitimacy and consensus’.³⁷ This section focuses largely on Harare and Bulawayo because of a couple of reasons that make for an interesting comparison. Firstly, the Harare City Council’s relations with central government have, until recently, been relatively less antagonistic than those with Bulawayo.³⁸ Secondly, both Harare and Bulawayo have different historical experiences of water shortages: Harare has a much shorter history of grappling with water shortages and for Bulawayo, water shortages are as old as the city itself, and lastly, and both had slightly different responses to the imposition of ZINWA.

ZINWA’S TAKE-OVER OF HARARE’S WATER AND SEWER RETICULATION, 2005

In a major shift reminiscent of 1989 when the government reduced the scope of urban local government functions by transferring the generation and distribution of electricity nationally to the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA),³⁹ the government transferred the provision of water and sanitation from the Harare Metropolitan Province (comprising the City of Harare, Chitungwiza Municipality, Norton Town Council, Ruwa and Epworth local town boards) to a similar statutory body, the Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA) in May 2005. The government authorised ZINWA to take over Harare’s bulk water supply system and manage the capital’s water resources, abstraction of water from the dams, purification and pumping of the treated water to reservoirs as well as bulk water storage. The state justified this intervention as an

³⁷ Zamponi, ‘From Social Justice’, p. 30.

³⁸ C. Rakodi, *Harare: Inheriting a Settler-Colonial City, Change or Continuity?* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 1995), 9; T. D. Gwebu, ‘Urban Water Scarcity Management: Civic vs. State Response in Bulawayo’, *Habitat International*, 26 (2002), pp. 417-431; E. L. Nel and B. B. Berry, ‘The Problems of Supplying Water to Third World Cities: Bulawayo’s Water Crisis’, *Development Southern Africa*, 9, 4 (November 1992), pp. 411-422.

³⁹ S. Colquhoun, ‘Present Problems Facing the Harare City Council’, L. Zinyama, D. Tevera, and S. Cumming (eds.) *Harare: The Growth and Problems of the City*, (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1993), pp. 35-36.

attempt to salvage the city from ‘its persistent water woes’, after the local authority had failed to rectify the perennial water problems affecting the metropolitan area.⁴⁰

Since the late 1990s the city of Harare in particular, and other surrounding towns in general, had experienced severe water shortages, blamed on drought and increased consumption levels by the Commission-led council, which was forced to introduce a water rationing programme.⁴¹ This took place against the background of a general culture of mismanagement at Harare Townhouse. Harare, which once boasted of being ‘the cleanest city in sub-Saharan Africa’,⁴² had, over the years, progressively lost its sparkle. As Meredith observed, Harare was now ‘more noted for debris on the sidewalks, cracked cement pavings, broken street lights, potholes, uncollected refuse, and burst pipelines’.⁴³ A ZANU-PF executive mayor, Solomon Tawengwa, who took office in 1995 promising to root out corruption and financial profligacy left Harare in no better shape when, in 1999, he was fired, ironically, for gross mismanagement.⁴⁴ For more than two years Tawengwa was never replaced by a mayor. Instead, the government appointed the Elijah Chanakira commission to run Harare’s municipal affairs. However, during the presidential elections in March 2002, mayoral elections were also conducted in Harare and Bulawayo, as well as other urban centres, and the MDC won all positions. Although water quality and supply problems had already become an intermittent problem when the city council was under Tawengwa’s helm, water did not feature prominently in the local election campaigns as other issues such as job creation, improved transport services and access to residential stands, and

⁴⁰ *The Herald*, 11 May 2005. See also *The Standard*, 27 March 2005: ‘Water Shortage Hits Harare Suburbs’.

⁴¹ *Pan African News Agency*, 7 November 2003: ‘Zimbabwe: Authorities Tighten Control on Harare Water Supply’.

⁴² M. Meredith, *Our Votes, Our Guns: Robert Mugabe and the Tragedy of Zimbabwe* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), p. 159.

⁴³ Meredith, *Our Votes, Our Guns*, p.159.

⁴⁴ Tawengwa had spent Z\$75 million (then approximately US\$2million) on building a stately mayoral house in one of Harare’s opulent suburbs and decorated it with antiques. See G. Hill, *The Battle for Zimbabwe: The Final Countdown* (Cape Town, Zebra Press, 2003), p. 236.

as Manzungu and Mabiza have noted.⁴⁵ But the ‘macro-political cloud’ had already begun to influence local governance and politics at the Harare City Council, particularly when Elias Mudzuri of the MDC became the executive mayor of Harare. He immediately set out to repair ‘more than twenty years of neglect suffered under a succession of ZANU-PF councils’.⁴⁶ But when he tried to meet with residents particularly in Mabvuku and Tafara to explain his council’s commitment to solving the creeping water woes, he raised the ire of central government and was arrested several times for addressing gatherings without the express permission of the police. It was claimed that he was furthering the political agenda of the MDC.⁴⁷ His tenure was, however, short-lived. In April 2003, the Minister of Local Government fired Mudzuri on trumped-up charges of incompetence.⁴⁸ Since the last municipal elections in March 2002, urban democracy in Harare is a long forgotten concept. When the ruling party lost municipal power it launched a sustained assault on municipal liberties previously enjoyed by ratepayers in Harare. The government’s continued political interference with administration at the Harare townhouse ensured that the ratepayers’ right to vote was withheld so that they would not use it to vote an MDC council ever again. Mudzuri and his council were replaced by yet another commission headed by Angeline Makwavarara to run the Harare municipality.⁴⁹ Under the Makwavarara commission, the provision of water and other public services continued to progressively decline.⁵⁰ The *Financial Gazette* – an independent newspaper – reporting on a litany of ‘corporate governance breaches’ in the capital city, captured the general state of decay in some parts of the capital city:

⁴⁵ E. Manzungu and Collin Mabiza, ‘Status of Water Governance in Urban Areas in Zimbabwe: Some Preliminary Observations from the City of Harare’, *Physics and Chemistry of the Earth* 29 (2004), p. 1169.

⁴⁶ Hill, *The Battle for Zimbabwe*, p. 236.

⁴⁷ *The Zimbabwe Standard*, ‘Chombo: Albatross Around Mugabe’s Neck’, 23 January 2006. Manzungu and Mabiza, ‘Status of Water Governance in Urban Areas’, p. 1169.

⁴⁸ Hill, *The Battle for Zimbabwe*, p. 236.

⁴⁹ Makwavarara was formerly Mudzuri’s deputy also on an MDC ticket but she defected to ZANU-PF and was awarded for the cross-over by being promoted to the municipal high office.

⁵⁰ *The Zimbabwe Independent*, ‘Harare and Bulawayo: A Tale of Two Cities’, 6 June 2003

Residents have been forced to dump litter in open spaces, posing a serious health hazard that had been boiling underneath as a result of the population explosion and the mushrooming of squatter shacks, now home to over 500 000 people. Raw sewage is also flowing in some suburbs, while potholes have made some areas inaccessible in what could have inspired the lavish spending on 4x4 luxury vehicles by officials at Townhouse. Water supplies to swathes of Harare have largely been erratic with the eastern suburbs of Mabvuku, Tafara, Msasa Park and Greendale being the worst affected.⁵¹

Clearly, unlike the water scarcity problems in Bulawayo which were both due to anthropogenic and natural causes, those in Harare were mostly the result of mismanagement, as a Harare council employee simply put it, 'Our water problems are man-made'.⁵² The water problems which blighted the city's residents had as much to do with 'dilapidated and decaying' pipes, lack of chemicals to treat the water due to foreign currency shortages, as inefficient management and political interference from the Minister of Local Government.

Despite transforming Harare above ground (e.g. name changes, installation of digital traffic lights, etc.) soon after independence, the 'hidden city'⁵³ of pipes and sewers beneath the city streets and avenues laid by the colonial municipality did not get a parallel overhaul to meet the growing needs of an expanding postcolonial city. Inevitably, such negligence ultimately led to water wastage and eventually to incessant water crises. Consecutive ZANU-PF councils which had administered the municipal affairs of Harare since independence in 1980 failed to refurbish or expand the Morton Jaffrey Water Works built in 1953 to meet the rising consumer demands as the population of the capital city increased. Equally, the Firlie Sewage Works were also in a state of disrepair.⁵⁴ These structural problems with the distribution network have led to interminable water shortages for many townships. Perhaps the most affected have been Mabvuku and Tafara which have dominated media reports on water shortages. For example, Mabvuku and Tafara get their water from a reservoir which also receives water pumped from the city's main water

⁵¹ *The Financial Gazette*, 5 December 2005: 'Who Will Address Harare's Sorry State of Affairs?'

⁵² *Mail and Guardian* (South Africa), 'Bulawayo Faces Water Crisis', 16 September 2007.

⁵³ The idea of the 'hidden city' is borrowed from M. Gandy, 'Rethinking Urban Metabolism: Water, Space and the Modern City', *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action*, vol. 8, no. 3 (2004), p. 366.

⁵⁴ *The Herald*, 13 September 2004.

reservoir. The reservoir lies on higher ground and because of the breakdown of the engines at the city's main water reservoir the water has not been filling up the Mabvuku-Tafara reservoir regularly. The result has been that both townships have suffered from acute water shortages as the main Morton Jeffrey waterworks have not been repaired for a long time.⁵⁵

Apart from the decrepit water purification machinery, the quality of the water increasingly became a problem. Although reports about the levels of pollution in Harare's two main reservoirs, Lakes Chivero and Manyame, date back to the 1960s and 1970s,⁵⁶ pollution worsened over the years largely because of the location of the reservoirs.⁵⁷ Both reservoirs are located downstream from the city's sewerage works and to agricultural runoff. Because the lakes lie within the same catchment as the city of Harare which it supplies, Harare, therefore, takes 'some 95% of its water from the same body into which its waste products are discharged'.⁵⁸ Scientists who tested the water in Lake Chivero for pollution have concluded that 'pollution loads are at their highest level since the lake was built in 1952'.⁵⁹ This state of affairs became the rationale for the government's directive to ZINWA to take over the bulk water supply system of the Harare Metropolitan Province and to 'extend the takeover of the water distribution and sanitation services including billing and revenue collection in 2006'.⁶⁰

Given the severity of the water shortages and pipe bursts in the city, expectations among residents within the low and high-density suburbs of Harare that ZINWA would fix the problems were quite high. But within two years of assuming its new functions, ZINWA was under attack from various quarters as it failed to stop water shortages because of constant breakdowns of the

⁵⁵ E. Manzungu and R. Machiridza, 'An Analysis of Water Consumption and Prospects for implementing Water Demand Management at Household Level in the City of Harare, Zimbabwe', *Physics and Chemistry of the Earth*, 30 (2005), pp. 928-929.

⁵⁶ R. W. Tomlinson and P. Wurzel, 'Aspects of Site and Situation', G. K. and M. Smout (eds.) *Salisbury: A Geographical Survey of the Capital of Rhodesia* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), p. 10.

⁵⁷ Rakodi, *Harare*, p. 59.

⁵⁸ Tomlinson and Wurzel, 'Aspects of Site and Situation', p. 10.

⁵⁹ N. A. G. Moyo, 'Introduction', N. A. G. Moyo (ed.) *Lake Chivero: A Polluted Lake*, (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1997), p. viii. See also C. H. D. Magadza, "Water Pollution and Catchment Management in Lake Chivero, N. A. G. Moyo (ed.) *Lake Chivero: A Polluted Lake*, (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1997), pp. 1-2.

⁶⁰ *The Herald: Business News*, 'ZINWA Out to Tame Harare's Water Woes', 14 February 2007.

waterworks. To raise funds to meet its operational costs ZINWA increased rates ten-fold, yet taps went dry, while water borne diseases, especially cholera, broke out regularly in Mabvuku and Tafara which bore the brunt of water shortages more than any other township in Harare.⁶¹ The problem ZINWA faced from the beginning was that it did not have adequate funds and equipment to carry out its cabinet-sanctioned mandate.

PUBLIC REACTION TO THE IMPOSITION OF ZINWA IN HARARE

Both the public and some of the political leadership in government who had been party to the cabinet directive individually castigated ZINWA's lethargic performance. Vice-President Joyce Mujuru warned ZINWA that the continuously erratic supplies of water to urban areas were 'unacceptable'.⁶² On its part, the Harare Commission, despite being part of the problem, also lambasted ZINWA for failing to treat water to acceptable World Health Organisation standards. In self-defence, ZINWA denied the charges and put the blame squarely on the commission's failure to pay for water on time, thus, inhibiting its efforts to secure enough water chemicals. Even the state-controlled newspaper, *The Herald*, also joined the mounting chorus of criticism levelled against ZINWA by taxpayers, civic leaders, and some politicians. The paper berated ZINWA for having become 'an expert in crisis management' since taking over water supplies for the Harare Metropolitan area. It went further in its sardonic critique: '... the addition of distribution, the sewers and the sewage treatment plans have just given the authority more crises to manage. The latest problem, the breakdown of at least part of the giant Firlle Sewage Treatment Plant that treats all Harare's sewage from the Mukuvisi Catchment, is typical'.⁶³ The Combined Harare Residents Association (CHRA), the foremost critique of Government, dismissed the legal instruments upon which the much vaunted water reforms and subsequent creation of ZINWA had

⁶¹ *Inter-Press News Service (IPS)*: www.ipsnews.net Tonderai Kwidini, 'Zimbabwe: Good Intentions Plus Poor Communication Equals Dry Taps', 30 December 2007.

⁶² *The Herald*, 22 August 2007.

⁶³ *The Herald*, 17 January 2007.

been premised. To the CHRA, the problem lay with the Water Acts of 1927, 1976, and 1998.

Jabusile Shumba, CHRA senior programmes advocacy officer put it cynically:

This talk about introducing pieces of legislation aimed at improving water availability is bar talk. The coming in of these new laws have [sic] actually worsened the problem of water shortages, particularly the vesting of all water powers in the hands of ZINWA. In all fairness, the coming of ZINWA heralded a new era ... that of water shortages'.⁶⁴

In the two years (2005-2007) of its take-over of Harare's water supplies, ZINWA received huge grants from the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe to rehabilitate Harare's water works, but the lack of evidence of value for money did not spare it the wrath of the Reserve Bank Governor, Gideon Gono. Not known for equivocating, Gono reminded ZINWA that the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe 'will not stand by and watch as service delivery deteriorates in local authorities'. Addressing the Zimbabwe Local Government conference in Harare on 26 July 2007, Gono went to the core of the problem and questioned why ZINWA had accepted the wholesale appropriation of water and sewer responsibilities when it was obvious that it lacked the capacity to deliver, adding that 'it was disheartening to see that some sections of a city or a school go for up to 10 days without water'.⁶⁵

Such was the enormity of the problem confronting ZINWA that its sponsor, the Minister of Water Resources, defended the water authority and admitted that ZINWA had neither the funds nor adequate equipment to deliver water supplies in urban centres: 'We have a dedicated manpower which is committed to deliver, but there is a critical shortage of equipment to carry out the task', said Minister Engineer Mutezo.⁶⁶ ZINWA's operational deficiencies, lack of financial and technical capacity to deal with the problems obtaining in just one urban area raised doubts about its professed competencies as reflected in the Minister's confidence in the water authority.

⁶⁴ *Inter-Press News Service (IPS)*: www.ipsnews.net Tonderai Kwidini, 'Zimbabwe: Good Intentions Plus Poor Communication Equals Dry Taps', 30 December 2007.

⁶⁵ *The Herald*, 27 July 2007, 'ZINWA Must Deliver: Gono'.

⁶⁶ *The Herald*, 22 August 2007

Despite this depiction of ZINWA's incapacity, the government moved to impose the national authority on the city of Bulawayo. Unlike Harare where opposition was taciturn, in Bulawayo public opposition to ZINWA was more pronounced. The dominant popular view in Bulawayo was that ZINWA had been a failure in Harare. There was therefore no way it was going to succeed in Bulawayo which had a far more critical and complex water scarcity problem than Harare and a population that had grown skeptical of any promises made from Harare.⁶⁷ If Harare had an internal water distribution problem, Bulawayo's problem was very much an external problem. Its water scarcity problems were not so much caused by derelict or inefficient water reticulation systems, as by poor rainfall because it is located in a semi-arid region. All of its dams five dams are located in the same catchment area, about 40 miles south of Bulawayo and therefore extremely vulnerable to perennial droughts. In addition, Bulawayo's water scarcity problems are partly due to the government's reluctance to invest in the Matabeleland Zimbabwe Water Pipeline project which has been on the cards even before the end of colonial rule. I now turn to the government's attempt to seize control of Bulawayo's water supplies.

ZINWA AND THE TAKE-OVER OF BULAWAYO'S URBAN WATER SUPPLIES

Following ZINWA's appropriation of Harare's water and sewage reticulation operations in 2005, Bulawayo was the next city on the government's list of appropriation of water supplies in 2007. The case of ZINWA's take over of Bulawayo's water supplies only in 2007 poignantly demonstrates that the central government did it largely for purposes of political expedience than for the altruistic reasons underscored in Minister Mutezo's justification. The question of sustainable water sources for the city of Bulawayo has continued to be a political sore point for

⁶⁷ The people of Bulawayo had gone weary of being promised by the Government from one election to another that water would be drawn from the Zambezi River via a pipeline to be laid out from the river to Bulawayo and that this project was a top government priority but every Presidential term went by without anything having been done. See, M. Musemwa, "Disciplining a 'Dissident' City: Hydropolitics in the City of Bulawayo, Matabeleland Zimbabwe, 1980-1994", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 32, 2, (June 2006), pp. 238-254.

the residents and industrialists who hold the government responsible for disregarding numerous appeals by the BCC to provide a lasting solution to the city's water problems. A flashback to Bulawayo's historical conflict with the post-independence state over water beginning in the first 12 years of independence is necessary for us to see how the question about water is laden with politics. Elsewhere, I have documented the intense competition between the central government and the BCC over water and explored the social, economic, and political bases of this conflict between 1980 and 1994.⁶⁸ I have demonstrated how the government of Zimbabwe was not willing to help the city of Bulawayo to find long lasting solutions to its quest for sustainable water sources because of the government's perceptions of the city as a site of opposition politics. Therefore, to rein in the politically 'errant' city, the central government used water as a weapon of control. I ended this paper by pointing out that during the period under review, 1980 to 1994), Bulawayo became prototypical of how the ZANU-PF government would later discipline 'dissident' cities.

I reiterate these points to show the continuities of city-state struggles over water and to expose the contradictions inherent within government policy: at one time – and for a long time too – it is not interested in doing anything about water development in Bulawayo – a few years down the line, after losing crucial parliamentary and municipal elections,⁶⁹ it wants to expropriate water supplies from all cities and towns on the simple reason that they can no longer cope. Yet, a systematic analysis of how the take-over by ZINWA was engineered by the government, and the authority's lack of capacity and preparedness to tackle the demands of water treatment, distribution and billing, its failure to consult and the resultant widespread opposition to the scheme, all show that this was one of the significant ways in which the government sought to regain control over the urban areas.

⁶⁸ Musemwa, "Disciplining a 'Dissident' City"; and B. Berry and E. Nel, "'Operation Pipeline" – Bulawayo's Search for Water', *Geography* 78, 3, pp. 312-315.

⁶⁹ In Bulawayo, the MDC has 24 out of 29 wards, giving it a huge majority in the City Council. Four are ZANU-PF councilors and only one is an Independent (*The Financial Gazette*, 15 February 2007).

When the news of ZINWA's impending take-over gradually filtered through, various people ranging from councillors, politicians, to ordinary residents expressed their opposition to such a move.⁷⁰ The directive presented a rare occasion in the city for people from different political persuasions to unanimously come together and condemn the proposed take-over of the city's water supply systems. The MDC-dominated BCC led by its executive mayor, Japhet Ndabeni-Ncube, and the town clerk, Moffat Ndlovu vehemently opposed the directive. The mayor was particularly incensed by the government's announcement that ZINWA was not obliged to compensate councils for the infrastructure it was taking over. This raised the ire of Bulawayo's mayor who argued that taking water supplies from the municipality was tantamount to squeezing life out of the city. The water and sewage reticulation account contributed 40 percent of the city's income and the same account often generated a surplus which the BCC used to subsidise other important service delivery areas such as education, housing and community services. It was on this basis that the mayor, supported by both MDC and ZANU-PF councillors refused to surrender their water and sewage infrastructure to ZINWA.⁷¹

Members of the ZANU-PF Bulawayo provincial committee as well as Bulawayo-based members of the ZANU-PF politburo (the party's highest decision-making body) which included former Minister of Home Affairs and now Chairperson of the Matabeleland Zambezi Water Trust, Dumiso Dabengwa and Minister of Information, Dr. S. Ndlovu, all rallied behind the BCC's rejection of the directive. Their common position was that ZINWA should focus on its mandate enshrined in the ZINWA Act, i.e. to provide bulk water supplies, and in the words of Effort Nkomo, the ZANU-PF provincial spokesman, 'let Council distribute the commodity because it has the capacity to carry out that function'.⁷² Arguing that 'Bulawayo was the best run City in the country', Winos Dube, chairperson of the Bulawayo United Residents Association (BURA) pointed out that ZINWA had nothing to offer except that, 'our standards will tumble

⁷⁰ *The Standard*, 28 January 2007.

⁷¹ *Mail and Guardian* (South Africa), 16-22 February 2007.

⁷² *The Standard*, 28 January 2007.

because it has demonstrated beyond doubt that, in towns like Harare, it is not capable'.⁷³ The business sector, through the Zimbabwe National Chamber of Commerce (ZNCC) also protested against ZINWA and concurred with the arguments made by the BCC.⁷⁴

The threat to take over Bulawayo's water and sewer reticulation came at a time when Bulawayo had since 2005⁷⁵ been experiencing severe water shortages which continued until the end of 2007 when the city received good rains and all dams filled to capacity. By the time the cabinet directive was announced, the BCC had just de-commissioned two of its five supply dams after they had dried up in 2006, plunging the city into a water shortage crisis.⁷⁶ By the end of January 2007 dam levels had dropped drastically.⁷⁷ To conserve what little water remained, the BCC subjected residents to water rationing measures as some of the city's dams were almost drying up. In hard times like these, the city council would have taken recourse to the 77 boreholes (drilled during the severe drought of 1992) in the Nyamandlovu aquifer to augment its water supplies. But ZINWA had only managed to rehabilitate a total of 33 boreholes with funds it had ironically received from the BCC and these were inadequate under the circumstances.⁷⁸ Residents condemned the timing of the government order to the BCC to surrender its water distribution functions to the national water authority. This was coming at a time when the city was confronted with critical water shortages and needed immediate solutions. An irate BCC employee found it 'mind boggling to imagine how ZINWA will purify and deliver a non-existent commodity in the case of Bulawayo'.⁷⁹ Other councillors construed the government's act of issuing a directive without having taken recourse to consultations with a wide-spectrum of the people's

⁷³ *The Standard*, 28 January 2007.

⁷⁴ *The Zimbabwe Times*, 'ZNCC Protests Takeover of Bulawayo Water Management', 14 February 2007.

⁷⁵ See, *Chronicle*, 'Water Crisis – Can Something Be Done? 6 August 2005'; *Chronicle*, 'Water Crisis Worsens', 30 August 2005; *Chronicle*, 'Water Crisis Exposes City Fathers', 11 November 2005.

⁷⁶ *Sunday News* (Bulawayo) 'Byo Slides into Crisis: Supply Dam Dries Up', 8 October 2006. Bulawayo's water supplies are derived from five dams, namely, Insiza, Umzingwane, Inyankuni, Lower and Upper Ncema, all of which are situated to the southeast of the city.

⁷⁷ Eddie Cross, 'Bulawayo Must Leave!! The Water Crisis in Bulawayo', (<http://www.swradioafrica.com>)

⁷⁸ *City of Bulawayo: Water for Bulawayo*, 'Bulawayo Water Projects in Focus', insert in the *Zimbabwe Independent*, 29 September to 5 October 2006, p. 25.

⁷⁹ *The Insider*, March 2007 (The Insider Publications, 2007).

representatives at various levels as an unbridled display of arrogance. A senior councillor, Alderman Charles Mpofu, the only independent councillor in the BCC, was very blunt::

We were elected by the people in the same way that those in government were. So we stand by our decision: No to ZINWA. I am appealing to you that for the first time in the history of this country, can we be respected as the representatives of the people?⁸⁰

These protestations were followed by a two-day ‘Anti-ZINWA’ demonstration in the city following the Minister of Water and Infrastructure Development’s visit Bulawayo in mid-February 2007 to meet with city councillors to explain government’s decision as well as listen to their grievances.⁸¹ But the meeting did not result in any compromise as the Minister left after declaring that the cabinet would not reverse its decision.

The popular and official resistance to ZINWA in Bulawayo underscores the sense of ‘belonging’ by the residents of Bulawayo. Their view was that they were citizens of the city of Bulawayo who collectively owned the infrastructure passed from one generation to another. In other words they perceived it as their heritage. The Mayor of Bulawayo, Japhet Ndabeni-Ncube, (MDC), summed up the meaning of the water supply systems to the city in sentimental and possessive tones: ‘The people are simply saying this is our baby. The City of Bulawayo is ours. The infrastructure is ours. The infrastructure [that] ZINWA] wants to take over is ours. We need our revenue’.⁸²

Before the council and the residents’ anger at the imposition of ZINWA had subsided, Bulawayo was hit by a proposal from ZINWA that it was going to purify the polluted water in the Khami Dam for consumption by the people of Bulawayo in order to increase its water supplies following the de-commissioning of all but two of the city’s dams in late 2007. Khami Dam, built in 1928, had been de-commissioned in 1988 after a study had shown that its water had become heavily polluted. Once again, this proposal provoked an uproar among the city’s residents. The Bulawayo City Council, the Bulawayo United Residents Association, and senior ZANU-PF

⁸⁰ *The Financial Gazette*, 15 February 2007

⁸¹ *Mail and Guardian*, 16-22 February, 2007.

⁸² *The Insider*, 12 March 2007.

members rejected the proposal outright, arguing that it was ludicrous and bordered on contempt for the people of Bulawayo to be given water from a dam that had been ‘stockpiling raw sewage “everyday for the past 19 years”’.⁸³ Dabengwa’s rejection of the idea was even more dramatic and candid as he retorted to a *Sunday Mail* reporter’s question in his Ndebele vernacular: ‘*Ofuna ukunatha amanzi eKhami kabuye lenkomitsho yakhe azowakha azinathele*’ (If there is anyone who wants to drink that water he should take his cup and drink it alone), and he added, ‘That water is unclean and you cannot expect people to drink it’.⁸⁴ Following such opposition from Bulawayo, ZINWA and the Ministry of Water Resources and Infrastructure were forced to back down on the issue.⁸⁵

Intense opposition that unites people across political and other divisions especially at a time when a general election is imminent hardly augurs well for a ruling party which had become unpopular in the same urban area over many years. Indeed, some leaders from none other than the ZANU-PF party expressed concern about the timing and purpose of such a top-down imposition of a structure that sought to undermine the powers of a relatively functioning urban local government closer to the general elections on 29 March 2008. One anonymous leader claimed to have expressed this fear to the Minister of Water Resources: ‘We told him that we are battling to win back lost political ground in Bulawayo and then we have this. We made it clear to him that Zinwa was playing with fire and the ruling party should expect to get zero votes from this region in any elections’.⁸⁶ Fearing that this controversy could become a decisive factor in the elections, especially in a city in which the ruling party had become accustomed to losing, the government suspended the plan until after the elections.⁸⁷ The ZANU-PF local leader was right. The ruling party lost dismally to the MDC in Bulawayo urban constituencies and in the surrounding provinces of North and South Matabeleland – continuing a losing streak that began with the 2000

⁸³ *SW Radio Africa* London (<http://www.allAfrica.com>), 9 October 2007.

⁸⁴ *The Sunday Mail* (Bulawayo), 14 October 2007.

⁸⁵ *The Standard*, 4 November 2007.

⁸⁶ *Mail and Guardian*, ‘Zanu-PF Tries to Win Over Bulawayo’, 16 – 22 February 2007.

⁸⁷ *The Standard*, 6 February 2008.

elections. The government's dithering on the MZWP project on which the residents of Bulawayo have pinned their hopes for an enduring solution to a decades-old water problem is undoubtedly a significant factor which influenced the outcome of the recent elections. Water has engendered new forms of political tension between the BCC and the state. However, it has also advanced greater urban cohesion in colonial Bulawayo (if only among white ratepayers) and postcolonial Bulawayo as shown above. Similarly, for all its tacit reaction, Harare delivered the vote to the MDC in the recent parliamentary election.

In many ways, the current struggles over water between city and state in Zimbabwe have come to epitomise the 'struggle for the country's soul and spirit' and confirmed Bond and Manyanya's speculation that these 'will soon transcend Zanu-MDC conflicts ... which currently represent the superficial state of class and electoral struggle'.⁸⁸

Conclusions: Towards an Understanding of the Actions of the State and Reactions they Engendered.

In a conflict-ridden and polarized society such as exists in Zimbabwe today, and in which the state has been one of the main agents of discord, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which it was genuinely concerned about the state of water shortages in the urban areas. It is therefore, tempting to say that the cavalier attitude in which the government of Zimbabwe took over, and in the case of Bulawayo threatened to take over water and sewer facilities from all the local authorities in the country's towns and cities was largely predicated upon political considerations. Why was the Zimbabwean state prepared to risk losing what little popularity, if any, had been left in the country's urban areas by imposing ZINWA without following consultative procedures on an issue that was critical for the survival of urban residents? It may very well be that the state cared about the deplorable state of urban water affairs and was committed to providing a solution

⁸⁸ P. Bond and M. Manyanya, *Zimbabwe's Plunge: Exhausted Nationalism, Neoliberalism and the Search for Social Justice* (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 2002), p. 174.

to the cities' water woes. After all, the state had registered an impressive record of social spending on rural water development between 1980 and 1990 when ESAP reversed most of the gains it had made. The difference now was that the set of political and economic circumstances, both global and local, had changed. The ruling party was increasingly becoming unpopular both at home and abroad beginning with losing the February 2000 referendum, the rise of the opposition MDC, the violent land invasions, loss of the urban vote in both municipal and parliamentary elections, sanctions targeted on leadership of government, an uncontrollable inflationary surge, shortage of foreign currency, and many other shortages. All these factors forced the state to behave as if it was now under siege from the local and the global forces and hence it began to make interventions in heavy-handed ways, often couched in populist discourses.

Writing about housing in the third world, Mike Davis argued that 'the idea of an interventionist state strongly committed to social housing and job development seems either a hallucination or a bad joke, because governments long ago abdicated any serious effort to combat slums and redress urban marginality'.⁸⁹ This statement rings true of the state in Zimbabwe as far as urban water development is concerned. As I have shown in the first half of the paper, the state circumscribed its role in the provision of water to the rural areas and consigned a similar responsibility it ought to have undertaken in the urban areas to urban local authorities. This it did according to the letter and spirit of the 1976 Water Act (later the 1998 Water Act) which divided the roles of the central and local government. Central government would provide bulk water supplies, build dams and bring the raw water to the margins of the City from where local authorities would access, treat it, and distribute charge tariffs. Although local governments under the Urban Councils Act were accountable to the state they were very much left alone to distribute water.

The state's minimalist role in the provision of water was further fortified by the neo-liberal ESAP which demanded that the Zimbabwe government must remove subsidies on services

⁸⁹ M. Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006) p. 62.

such as water and cease to treat it less as a social good and more as an economic good – i.e. on that was to be priced, sold and generate profits – and this was to be best achieved through privatization of water. ZINWA was thus created as a demonstration of the government’s commitment towards commercialization and for a while its boundaries and activities remained confined to dealing with bulk projects whilst ensuring that it would be run as an independent commercial concern. But as the political control over the urban areas was beginning to slip away, ZINWA, in the words of an editor of *The Zimbabwe Independent* was converted into ‘a predatory monster, for ZINWA is, in material terms, no more than government’s paw to oust the MDC from urban local councils’.⁹⁰ This insinuation to the predatory nature of ZINWA has made me to think about what the meaning of ZINWA might be in the Shona language for it sounds very much like a Shona word: ZINWA (Zi – denotes a monster: - nwa –drink: ku-nwa to drink: a monster that gulps urban Councils’ water).

The cabinet directive also raises questions about its legality and constitutionality. On what basis or which provisions of what law the cabinet issued its directive has remained a matter for conjecture among analysts, local authorities, residents and civil society. In the absence of evidence of any attempts by the government to hold not least a commission of inquiry to seek the advice of independent experts on the state of urban water management or a repeal of the law that defined the state-city roles taking into account due process of parliamentary scrutiny and debates of arguments for and against the need for change, or to declare the cities disaster areas, the actual intentions of the cabinet in issuing this directive have remained baffling to residents and civil society who have interpreted ZINWA’s takeover as a political move by the state meant to control the urban areas.⁹¹ In fully operational democracies, this extra-parliamentary conduct by the cabinet would have led to a constitutional crisis.

⁹⁰ *Zimbabwe Independent*, 3 September 2007.

⁹¹ See, *Mail and Guardian*, 16-22 February 2007: ‘Zanu-PF Tries to Win Over Bulawayo; *The Zimbabwe Independent*, 2 February 2007: ZINWA Must Be Stopped’.

A broad spectrum of stakeholders in urban management ranging from politicians, senators and parliamentarians (especially those in Bulawayo), municipal authorities to civic bodies all argued that the government's attempt to render impotent urban local authorities, especially those controlled by the MDC, via the appropriation of water and sewage reticulation by ZINWA was 'ill-advised'. Submissions made to the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Local Government (PPCLG) in 2007 by various stakeholders concurred that ZINWA lacked the capacity and wherewithal to exercise its newly acquired functions in urban areas, let alone the legal powers to take over the from municipalities.⁹² Stakeholders questioned ZINWA's ability to provide clean water within urban areas, at a time when it was failing to manage existing bulk water supplies. They went further to argue that the expropriation of urban water infrastructure contravened the Urban Councils Act which authorises urban local authorities to provide and operate independent water and sewer services.⁹³

By the admission of the relevant Minister of Water and Infrastructure Development, ZINWA neither had the resources nor the competencies to take-over the provision of urban water supplies. Earlier on, in 2006, the Comptroller and Auditor-General had issued a jarring report on the performance of ZINWA which was in charge of water works in smaller towns, rural service centres and growth points. The audit, presented to the Public Accounts Parliamentary Portfolio Committee in 2006 pointed out that ZINWA had not been successful in providing a regular, uninterrupted and quality water supply: 'My audit revealed that Zinwa was failing to find provide undisrupted water supply and water of the right quality to its customers in small towns, growth points and institutional customers such as Prison Services, Zimbabwe Republic Police and the Defence forces'.⁹⁴ The Comptroller and Auditor-General also found out that the ZINWA did not

⁹² Parliament of Zimbabwe: *Second Report of the Portfolio Committee on Local Government on ZINWA's Take Over of Water and Sewerage Service in the City of Harare and the Proposed Take Over of these Services in Cities and Towns in the Rest of the Country*. Presented to the Parliament of Zimbabwe in March 2007. [S. C. 3, 2007]

⁹³ *Second Report of the Portfolio Committee on Local Government on ZINWA's Take Over*, 8.

⁹⁴ Quoted in *The Zimbabwe Independent*, 5 January 2007

have an operational business plan and had failed to maintain plant, equipment and standby facilities.⁹⁵ Similarly in its findings, the PPCLG concluded that ‘ZINWA was not in a position to take over these services’.⁹⁶ In a veiled critique of the Cabinet, the PPCLG noted that the Executive had been ill advised when it made the decision that ZINWA should take over the water and waste water services in urban areas wholesale. The PPCL offered a salutary recommendation that it was critical for the Cabinet, ‘to go back to the drawing board and make the take over of water and sewerage services in Harare a case study before ZINWA went on to take over these services in other urban areas’.⁹⁷ With all this information at hand, the GoZ has not reversed its decision but the urban water crisis continues unabated. It can only be surmised therefore that there are no clear substantive reasons why the GoZ of used the method of confiscation of local power from municipalities other than to render them ineffective and become unpopular with urban citizens and ratepayers.

In their new book, Bayliss and Fine have suggested alternative approaches to privatisation. They propose a new policy ‘that each public service should be attached to an “authority” dedicated to that purpose, water authority, energy authority and so on’.⁹⁸ Well, Zimbabwe has had both, ZINWA and ZESA, and water and energy public services are worse off today than they were before the birth of these authorities. Further a-field, Ayodeji Olukoju offers yet another salutary demonstration of how the National Electric Authority (NEPA) in Nigeria, established by decree in 1972, became an epitome of the ‘utter failure of state monopolies in the power sector’.⁹⁹ Ensuring universal service delivery in Zimbabwe and elsewhere, will take more than the imposition of a parastatal or an authority run by government functionaries. Instead, it will require, in the words of Susan J. Pronk, ‘no less than a radical transformation of society and

⁹⁵ *The Zimbabwe Independent*, 5 January 2007

⁹⁶ *Second Report of the Portfolio Committee of Local Government on ZINWA’s Takeover*, 17.

⁹⁷ *Second Report of the Portfolio Committee of Local Government on ZINWA’s Take Over*, p. 16.

⁹⁸ Kate Bayliss and Ben Fine, *Privatisation and Alternative Public Sector Reform in Sub-Saharan Africa: Delivering on Electricity and Water* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), p. 8.

⁹⁹ Ayodeji Olukoju, “‘Never Expect Power Always’: Electricity Consumers’ Response to Monopoly, Corruption and Inefficient Services in Nigeria”, *African Affairs* 103 (2004), p. 51-71.

economy in which citizens actively participate to determine how national wealth is produced and distributed'.¹⁰⁰

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