

Decentralisation and Central Government Control: Experiences from the Local Government Reform in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Post-independence state-building in Africa was hinged on decentralisation reforms aimed at increasing the participation and involvement of the previously disenfranchised black majority in governance and development processes. There was a realisation that the inherited governance and development challenges could only be addressed through decentralisation. The qualitative desktop analysis of the relevant literature that was undertaken in the recent research, however, indicates that decentralisation reforms implemented by most African countries since gaining independence failed to achieve the intended results. Building on this trend, this article is guided by Falleti's sequential theory of decentralisation and argues that the administrative, fiscal, and political decentralisation reforms implemented in Zimbabwe, rather than empowering the local people, further entrenched the central government's grip on and control of local governments – centralisation and recentralisation through decentralisation/devolution. Authors argue that the reforms created avenues through which the central government could micromanage, whip, and sometimes, undermine local governments thereby suffocating their capacity to provide basic services. The reforms allowed the central government to deepen its patronage networks.

Keywords: Centralisation, Decentralisation, Devolution, Recentralisation, Zimbabwe



Introduction

Historically, Zimbabwe, like other African countries, has experienced arbitrary, exploitative, suppressive, authoritarian, elitist and highly centralised governance practices. In the pre-colonial era, traditional kingdoms headed by traditional leaders assumed total control and authority. During this period, dissent and divergence were strongly discouraged and individual initiatives were thwarted (Jordan, 1983). The advent of colonialism in Zimbabwe, as in other African countries, formally centralised governance systems through the introduction of indirect rule. Colonialism encouraged and upheld the state's centralisation of power and laid a firm foundation for a governance system which was adopted and maintained after independence (Karuhanga, 1994).

The dawn of independence in Zimbabwe in 1980 resulted in a paradigm shift in the local governance discourse under the auspices of the Prime Minister's Directive on Decentralisation and Development (PMDDD) of 1984 and 1985. The PMDDD ignited the search for participatory, democratic, accountable, responsive, effective, efficient, and transparent local governance. Decentralisation of local governance, according to Larbi (1999:17, in Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2011:239), "involves disaggregating and downsizing of public services and are strands of new public management (NPM)" confirming the paradigm shift. Decentralisation was advocated by politicians at both the national and local levels as a reform strategy that could realise the goals outlined in the PMDDD. This saw the introduction and implementation of various administrative, fiscal, and political reforms aimed at transferring governmental powers and responsibilities to lower tiers of the government structure. The underlying motive for decentralisation was that the inclusion and empowerment of local government institutions in the development process could catalyse development, as they are closer to the people and in a better position to discern and respond to local needs (Nyikadzino & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2020a).

The central questions that this research addressed were how and why administrative, fiscal, and political decentralisation reforms, instead of empowering subnational governments, helped the central government to maintain its grip on local government. This article argues that, whereas decentralisation was seen as a cure for Zimbabwe's development and governance failings, in practice, its implementation further centralised and recentralised governing power and helped the central government to maintain its grip on local government to the detriment of the people. In a vertically divided authority context, decentralisation created dysfunctional local governments that operated at the mercy of the central government. The article reveals that, regardless of decentralisation reforms in Zimbabwe, the governance system remains centralised. The prevailing situation reflects what Olowu (2009) refers to as centralisation through decentralisation.



In this article, the introduction is followed by the theoretical framework that was adopted for the study, the conceptual framework of relevant concepts used in the article and the research methodology adopted for the study. The article then provides a historical overview of decentralisation reforms in Zimbabwe, exploring in detail the local governance and decentralisation in the pre-colonial era and local governance in colonial times. This is followed by an explanation of local government reforms in post-independent Zimbabwe: a mix of decentralisation and recentralisation efforts and decentralisation reforms after the 2013 Constitution; centralisation through devolution and an analysis of administrative, fiscal, and political centralisation. The article concludes with a synthesis of the findings, recommendations, and scope for future studies.

Theoretical Framework

The analytical perspective of this study was informed by the sequential theory of decentralisation (STD) proposed by Falleti in 2005, which views decentralisation as a government reform process aimed at reinvigorating governments through the empowerment (political, financial, and administrative) of lower tiers of government (Dickovick, 2014). Falleti (2005) argues that decentralisation can be assessed in three dimensions, namely fiscal, political, and administrative. Dickovick (2014) indicates that the sequence followed in decentralising across the three dimensions determines the level of autonomy that accrues to local governments. The STD comprises three major tenets: (a) it defines decentralisation as a process; (b) it takes into account the territorial interests of bargaining actors and (c) it incorporates policy feedback effects into the analysis of bargaining situations (Falleti, 2005). The theory also analyses the bargaining that takes place between the different actors involved in decentralisation, namely presidents, mayors, and governors. According to the STD, central and local government officials have different and conflicting territorial interests. These differences helped the researchers to analyse decentralisation reforms in Zimbabwe and understand the factors informing the tightening of the central government's grip on local governments. The theory highlights that central governments prefer administrative decentralisation (A) to fiscal decentralisation (F), which is preferred to political decentralisation (P), which is $A > F > P$ (Falleti, 2004). This creates weaker local governments and results in unfunded decentralisation where central governments can offload responsibilities without providing the necessary financial resources.

Conceptual Frameworks

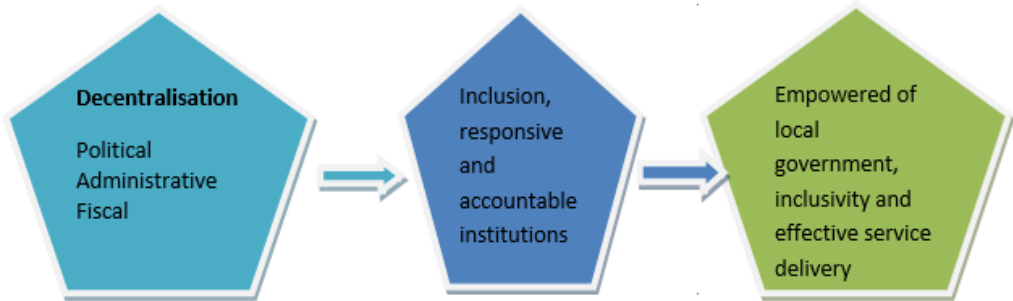
Decentralisation is a broad concept with varying definitions and interpretations and the researchers adopted Asaju's (2010) conceptualisation, which views decentralisation as a local empowerment reform strategy in which a nation's administration is shared by the local governments in a way that allows them to raise reserves and utilise assets to develop



and implement projects to improve the government’s assistance of those inhabitants within its jurisdiction. Simply put, decentralisation involves the sharing or diffusion of governmental authority and supporting political, financial, and administrative power to democratically elected lower units of government that are not under the central government’s direct control. In this article, decentralisation and devolution are used interchangeably. Devolution is also undertaken “to give local people a greater voice in local development” (Nyikadzino & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2020b:44, in Vyas-Doorgapersad & Shava, 2021:40).

Decentralisation occurs in three main dimensions – administrative, fiscal, and political. These dimensions provided the analytical framework for this study. It is important to note that the administrative, fiscal, and political dimensions of decentralisation are complementary and mutually reinforcing in creating sound local governance. Fragility in any of the three undermines the utility of decentralisation. The graphical presentation presented hereunder summarises the interdependence among decentralisation dimensions and their implications for good local governance, empowerment, and service delivery in general (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Decentralisation dimensions and their relationship with good local governance



Source: Adopted from Chhetri (2013)

Administrative decentralisation includes the deconcentration of local government designs and organisations, the assignment of local government authority and obligation to semiautonomous specialists of the state and decentralised enterprises of government offices filling roles through twinning courses of action across public boundaries (Cheema & Rondinelli 2007). It seeks to delegate administrative responsibilities from the central government to local administrative structures, thereby decongesting the centre and reducing the risks associated with central overload. Political decentralisation, sometimes referred to as democratic decentralisation or devolution, is the strongest form of decentralisation. Chhetri (2013) defines political decentralisation as the most important dimension that seeks to give local citizens and their elected representatives more power



and autonomy in the decision-making process. Chhetri (2013) further notes that fiscal decentralisation includes arrangements intended to build local governments' financial independence. A financial decentralisation arrangement can include various institutional structures, for example, incremental moves made by the local government to set new subnational charges, or the appointment of a financial authority that was before only at the central government level. Vyas-Doorgapersad (2012) explains that fiscal decentralisation plays an important role in ensuring that basic services are provided through the alignment of local expenditure with local needs and priorities.

An effective decentralisation programme that balances administrative, fiscal, and political reforms creates inclusive, accountable, responsive, and participatory local governments which can help to include marginalised groups (Chhetri, 2013). Thus, the greater the administrative, fiscal, and political decentralisation, the more empowered and effective local governments become and the greater their autonomy. If properly implemented, decentralisation enhances good governance and enables local governments to be strategic partners in the national development discourse.

Decentralisation can significantly improve the quality-of-service delivery at the local level, as the local government will be closer to the people and more sensitive to the citizen's needs. However, since independence in Zimbabwe, very few studies have been conducted to unpack the extent to which decentralisation reforms have administratively, fiscally, and politically empowered local governments. This article addresses the identified research gap by analysing how decentralisation reforms from the time of independence have fared in terms of administrative, fiscal, and political empowerment of local governments. The article's central argument is that decentralisation reforms in Zimbabwe strengthened the central government's control of local governments resulting in centralisation through decentralisation.

Methodology

To gather evidence to substantiate the article's central argument, the researcher employed a qualitative research approach "which is considered significant as it 'seeks to develop an in-depth understanding [and] views social phenomena holistically'" (Nyikadzino & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2020b:33; Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2021:1). As part of the qualitative desktop analysis, given the historical evolution of decentralisation reforms in Zimbabwe since colonialism, the researcher relied on a historical-comparative analysis. Mahoney (2004) defines a historical-comparative analysis as a field of research that characteristically uses systematic comparison and analysis of processes over time to explain large-scale outcomes such as revolutions, political regimes, and welfare states. Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, constitutions, government policies and directives, newspapers and Acts of Parliament were the main sources of data. The researchers



analysed the data from the aforementioned sources through qualitative content analysis, which allowed them to interpret text data and identify emerging themes or patterns. Given that unobtrusive research relies on the assessment of actual behaviour rather than self-reported behaviour and examines what people do rather than what they say they do (Curtis & Curtis, 2011), the researchers were able to gain an in-depth and balanced account of how decentralisation entrenched the central government at the expense of local self-governance.

A Historical Overview of Decentralisation Reforms in Zimbabwe

Countries across the globe have adopted devolution for various reasons. For Brazil, Spain and Mexico, the reason was the growing demand for democracy (Rodríguez-Pose & Gill, 2003). In the United Kingdom (UK), devolution was adopted as an institutional strategy to curtail long-standing regional inequalities (Costa-Font, 2010). Chhetri (2013:66) avers that devolution in most countries, for instance, India, was driven by the idea of reducing social inequalities and correcting allocative distortions. The literature suggests that by the 21st century, devolutionary reforms became increasingly fashionable in most African countries concerned with reinvigorating public sector operations in ways that enhanced citizen participation, accountability, transparency, effectiveness, efficiency, and responsiveness (Kauzya, 2007). The Ugandan devolution reform introduced in 1992 is regarded as “exceptional among developing countries in terms of scale and scope of the transfer of power and responsibilities to the local level” (Steiner, 2006:5), as “one of the most radical devolution initiatives of any country at this time” (Mitchinson, 2003:241) and as “one of the most far-reaching local government reform programmes in the developing world” (Francis & James 2003, cited in Steiner 2006:5). The Ugandan Government applied the subsidiarity principle and made local governments responsible for all functions and services that were not assigned to the centre or which “higher levels are less able and appropriate to fulfil” (Steiner 2006:5). In South Africa, fundamental power over public services that directly affect communities’ quality of life, such as electricity reticulation, water, sanitation, waste management and planning were devolved to local governments (De Visser & May, 2015). In Zimbabwe and African countries in general, since independence, the redistribution of governmental powers and responsibilities through decentralisation has been a fundamental component of the debates on restructuring the states’ administrative machinery. This was because African states had been formally centralised through colonial rule (Olowu & Wunsch, 2004). As this article attempts to provide experiences concerning decentralisation and local governance in Zimbabwe, it is important to bear in mind that Zimbabwe has a long history of local governance and decentralisation that shaped the current reform processes. The information regarding the history of decentralised local government in Zimbabwe since pre-colonial times is described in the ensuing sub-sections.



Local Governance and Decentralisation in the Pre-colonial Era

Zimbabwe has a long history of decentralisation and local governance that can be traced back to the pre-colonial era. Karuhanga (1994) traces the development of local government to the pre-colonial era describing traditional kingdoms headed by traditional leaders as representing embryonic forms of local government. Various projects were initiated at the local level through cooperatives with traditional leaders spearheading the planning and implementation processes (Kurebwa, 2015). However, it must be noted that highly centralised governance systems also existed in pre-colonial Zimbabwe. Under the rule of the traditional leaders, dissent and divergence were strongly discouraged and individual initiatives thwarted. In Uganda, as indicated by Karuhanga (1994), traditional kingdoms' governance, known as the Kiganda system of administration, was highly centralised and was accredited by the British colonialists who adopted and implemented it in other jurisdictions. Important to note is that centralised governance systems in Africa are a historical reality.

Local Governance in Colonial Times

The advent of colonialism in Africa formally centralised governance systems through the introduction of indirect rule. Zimbabwe, before gaining independence in 1980, was colonised by the British South African Company that arrived in the country in 1890 sowing seeds for a highly centralised government system (Chigwata, 2018). Olowu and Wunsch (2004) explain that colonialism swept away the pre-colonial rulers in most African countries, but the structures and methods of operation remained. The "colonialists adopted an incremental approach to governance by continuing with centralisation of power, arbitrariness in handling affairs and exploitation of the natives in the process making marginal changes to suit their self-interests. In the colonial period, decentralised governments called 'indirect rule' by the British and 'association' by the French were set up by colonisers to penetrate and manage the rural world" (Kurebwa, 2015:95). The governance system that was introduced was essentially elitist, suppressive, absolutist, authoritarian and inherently centralist (Olowu & Wunsch, 2004).

In Zimbabwe, governance powers were vested in the centrally appointed district commissioners and governors who were used to destroy and, in some cases, distort local rule and initiatives. To quote Karuhanga (1994), colonialism encouraged, sustained, and upheld the state's centralisation of power and created a governance system that was later adopted by the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) leaders after gaining independence. The British colonisers utilised a strongly centralised authoritarian governance system to exploit the Zimbabwean black majority. The governance structure mainly served the white minority at the expense of the black majority (Kurebwa, 2015; Nyikadzino & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2020a). The enactment of legislation such as the Land Apportionment Act of 1930 entrenched the racial segregation that dominated political, social, and economic development during colonial rule and the local government system



that emerged was divided into three typologies based on race: rural councils, urban councils and African councils (formerly native councils) (Makumbe, 1998). This explains why the local government system in Zimbabwe is divided based on urban and rural councils provided for in the Urban Councils Act (UCA) (Chapter 29) and the Rural District Councils Act (RDCA) (Chapter 29) respectively. In the view of Olowu and Wunsch (2004), the colonial local governance system failed to provide avenues for political participation and accountable governance structures.

Local Government Reforms in Post-Independent Zimbabwe: A Mixed Bag of Decentralisation and Recentralisation Efforts

At the dawn of independence, to demonstrate political independence through rapid development, the newly elected ZANU-PF Government dismantled instead of building upon the established local government legacy. The government adopted a socialist, centralised planning approach to development (Kurebwa, 2015) but emulated the colonial elitist, absolutist, and centralised governance system. Local government reforms adopted in the aftermath of the independence struggles followed the same centralised, elitist and absolutist colonial pattern. The ZANU-PF Government and post-independence African leaders went to great lengths to denounce and uproot the existing local government structure that attempted to create a space for democratic governance and became dictatorial and tyrannical (Karuhanga, 1994).

Since independence, the government of Zimbabwe has introduced several policies aimed at decentralisation. This was followed by the establishment and issuance of new directives and statutes. Upon independence, for instance, the Zimbabwean Government created a single Ministry of Local Government, hereafter the MoLG, which brought together and controlled the previously divided urban, rural, and African councils (Kurebwa, 2015). Compared to the situation that prevailed in the colonial local government system where the district councils were under the control of the Ministry of Internal Affairs with the rural and urban councils under the MoLG, all local government institutions were placed under the control of the MoLG. This institutional arrangement resulted in all local government legislations (statutory instruments and Acts) being placed under the control of the MoLG. This was accompanied by the introduction of the District Councils Act of 1980 which led to approximately 220 African councils being amalgamated into 55 district councils (Makumbe, 1998). However, the establishment of these local government units was not motivated by a commitment to democratic local self-governance but rather to remove colonial native authorities which were associated with the colonial indirect rule. At that juncture, local authorities were established mainly for political expediency and as a result, they were weak and incapacitated to an extent that they could hardly influence policymaking at the centre (Chigwata, 2018). Also, to note that “district councils provided a wide range of services for the local people but lacked taxation authority” (Jordan, 1983: 8). Subsequently, the decentralised district councils lacked decision-making autonomy;



they relied heavily on central government funding. This resulted in central government control and interference in local authorities through the MoLG. District councils were reduced to mere appendages and implementing agencies of the central government.

Kurebwa (2015) and Makumbe (1998) are of the view that although the 1980 District Councils Act decentralised several powers to the districts, they attempted to recentralise power through the parent ministry because the districts were headed by central government officials who served as district administrators. The executive role of the district administrators overshadowed their roles as elected officials and as a result, the districts were upwardly accountable to the central government rather than to the local people (Madhekeni, 2020). Consequently, the type of decentralisation pursued was largely deconcentration, mainly because most of the decentralisation reforms that were adopted transferred only the responsibilities leaving the powers vested in the hands of the central government. This explains why most of the decentralisation reforms failed to achieve the desired goals. Instead of creating local centres of power, the decentralisation reforms reinforced the one centre of authority: the central government.

The PMDDD of 1984 which was granted legal status in 1985 in the form of the Provincial Councils and Administration Act was an important step towards decentralisation in Zimbabwe. The directive introduced the most fundamental changes to the post-independence local government system, particularly in communal areas (Makumbe, 1998) and established a local government framework that is currently still being utilised. It provided for hierarchical representative structures at the provincial, district, ward, and village levels. According to Paradza (2010), the PMDDD revamped and decentralised local government to energise the grassroots investment in arranging and executing formative projects in their regions.

The directive gave rise to the office of the provincial governors (PG), now the Ministers of State for Provincial Affairs and Devolution (MSPAD), who are viewed as the political heads of provincial governments. The main role of the PG was to provide leadership for the provinces (Nyikadzino & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2020a). The PMDDD also created other supporting governance structures at the provincial level, for instance, the provincial councils (PCs), provincial development committees (PDCs) and provincial administrators (PAs). Makumbe (1998) views these provincial structures as agencies at the disposal of the central government used to strengthen central control and dominance in local governance. This was chiefly because the membership of these provincial structures was dominated by appointed rather than elected officials and the PG's operations were financed by the central government through the MoLG (Kurebwa, 2015). They acted more like representatives of the central government than of the citizens. Consequently, these provincial structures were upwardly accountable to the central government at the expense of the citizens. Therefore, PCs could not be regarded as an expression of democratic governance at the provincial level (Makumbe, 1998). Paradza (2010) is of the view that



although several reforms were implemented to deracialise local governance, more often than not, these reforms had the effect of consolidating the ruling party's grip on power. The creation of PCs, in Makumbe's (1998) opinion, was an unnecessary cost to the taxpayers because they had little devolved authority and lacked a meaningful resource base to sustain their operations. Kurebwa (2015) explains that the reforms under the PMDD were aimed at increasing the central government's administrative efficiency instead of promoting the local government's autonomy and citizens' participation.

Decentralisation Reforms Post-2013 Constitution: Centralisation Through Devolution

The Global Political Agreement hereafter referred to as the GPA art. XX (20), which led to the Government of National Unity (GNU) after the disputed 2008 harmonised election, provided a policy window for a paradigm shift from a centralised to a devolved system of government. The GNU comprised three political formations, namely ZANU-PF, the Movement for Democratic Change – Tsvangirai (MDC-T) and the Movement for Democratic Change – Ncube (MDC-N). This political arrangement significantly reduced and limited ZANU-PF's control over government operations, thereby creating opportunities for opposition parties and civil society organisations to influence agenda-setting (Madhekeni, 2020). The sequel to the GPA art. XX, the GNU, was tasked to draw up a people-driven, inclusive, and democratic constitution (GPA art. VI (6)). Consequently, an inclusive Constitution Parliamentary Committee (COPAC) was established in April 2009 to spearhead the constitution-making process. During this process, ZANU-PF, the then-ruling party, with its one-centre-of-power ideology, made it clear that it was against the idea of devolution (Muchadenyika, 2013). The two MDC formations, however, were clamouring for devolution. This resulted in contentious debates that threatened the constitution-making process. The devolution debate delayed the finalisation of the Constitution. However, the contentious devolution policy paradigm gained public support and pressure mounted to levels that ZANU-PF could not contain. A compromise was reached later paving the way for the adoption of devolution in the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act 2013, hereinafter referred to as the CoZ (2013). Zimbabwe adopted a devolved government system that “recognised the right of communities to manage their own affairs and to further their development” (Section 264 of the CoZ, 2013).

Devolution advocates celebrated the constitutionalisation of devolution. The celebrations were understandable given that Zimbabwe had adopted a constitution that devolved administrative, fiscal, and political powers to subnational governments for the first time in its history. The subnational governments (provincial and metropolitan councils and local governments) were provided for in the Constitution for the first time. Given the long history of centralisation, the constitutionalisation of devolution to the subnational governments was a landmark achievement worth celebrating. Now that, during the time of writing, a political party that opposed the devolution wave during the constitution-



making process is in power, to what extent will devolution be truly implemented to enhance local autonomy? Arguing that devolution further entrenched central control, this section presents an analysis of how administrative, fiscal, and political devolutionary reforms strengthened control, notwithstanding the constitutionalisation of devolution.

Administrative Centralisation

From a personnel administration point of view, nothing has changed since the adoption of the CoZ (2013). Although subnational governments are constitutionally entitled to govern at their initiative and employ staff (Section 273(1)(d); Section 276(1)), the central government is still heavily involved in provincial and local governments' personnel affairs (Nyikadzino & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2020a). Provincial and metropolitan councils, at the time of writing, were not yet constituted. Consequently, provincial affairs are administered by central government personnel under the control of the Civil Service Commission (Marumahoko, 2020). The Devolution and Decentralisation Policy passed in 2020, hereinafter referred to as the DDP (2020), however, promised to gradually withdraw the MoLG employees deployed to provinces and districts. The central government's reluctance to constitute provincial and metropolitan councils indicates the former's insatiable desire to control everything. Madhekeni (2020) holds that there is amplified rhetoric concerning devolution. Several devolution statements are not backed by reforms. For instance, the government is reluctant to align the Provincial Council and Administration Act to the Constitution (2013). The government is also reluctant to pass a Provincial and Metropolitan Act that can help in operationalising the middle tier of government. In the absence of such an Act, provincial affairs will remain under the control of the central government in violation of the CoZ (2013).

Slightly different from the preceding situation at the provincial level, local authorities employ their own staff (UCA (Chapter 29); RDCA (Chapter 29); DDP, 2020). Local government's autonomy over senior management is, however, limited. Local authorities play a minimal role in the hiring and firing of senior local bureaucrats (Chigwata, 2018; Marumahoko, Olugbemiga & Sadie, 2020). The local government board (LGB), a board composed of members appointed by the central government in consultation with the Public Service Commission, controls the employment and dismissal of senior local government employees (Marumahoko, 2020). The LGB provides a proxy for the central government's involvement in local affairs. Local councils, as local policymakers, cannot directly discipline senior local employees; they can only make recommendations to the LGB. This undermines local governments' "right to govern, on its own initiative, the local affairs of the people" (Section 276(1) of the CoZ, 2013). Given the growth of vertically divided authority and the dominance of the political appointee system in Zimbabwe, the central government uses and abuses the LGB to appoint party loyalists in strategic local positions. Thus, post-2013 administrative reforms reflect the dominance of a centralised policy paradigm in a devolved system of government.



Fiscal Centralisation

After the constitutionalisation of fiscal decentralisation in the CoZ (2013), the prospects for the transfer of fiscal powers to local units in Zimbabwe began to increase. Devolution advocates expected a dramatic shift in local authorities' capacity to raise their own revenues. These hopes are attributable to the strong constitutional provisions for fiscal decentralisation. For instance, one of the objectives of devolution is, "to ensure the equitable sharing of local and national resources" (CoZ, 2013 Section 264(2)(e)). Subsection 2(f) further indicates that devolution seeks to move liabilities and assets from the public government to create a sound monetary base for every commonplace and metropolitan board and neighbourhood authority (CoZ, 2013). Segment 301(3) accommodates intergovernmental monetary exchange, by stating that, at the very least, five per cent of the public income collected in any financial year should be distributed to the territories and neighbourhood specialists as their portion in that year (CoZ, 2013). The DDP (2020) Section 84 emphasises the centrality of funding mandates in the devolution endeavour.

However, hope for fiscal decentralisation began to recede soon after the collapse of the GNU in 2013. In the 2013 harmonised elections, the ZANU-PF party won resoundingly and gained a two-thirds majority in parliament (Madhekeni, 2020). This had serious implications for the implementation of fiscal decentralisation. The late Robert Mugabe, who stood vehemently against the devolution wave, regained total control over state affairs. Consistent with his policy position on devolution during the constitution-making process, unsurprisingly, Mugabe ignored the constitutional provisions for fiscal devolution. In line with the sequential theory of decentralisation, which stipulates that central government officials are reluctant to cede fiscal powers, Mugabe maintained a strong grip on local financial affairs. During Mugabe's post-2013 reign, not a single national budget provided for the stipulated not less than five per cent of intergovernmental fiscal transfers (Madhekeni, 2020). Mugabe's then Finance Minister, Patrick Chinamasa, ignored the five per cent devolution share in his national budgets and insisted that the devolution model was financially unsustainable and advised parliamentarians to consider amending the Constitution to reduce pressure on the national treasury (Langa & Nkala, 2017). Given the ZANU-PF's two-thirds majority in parliament, devolution advocates were left hopeless; they thought the government would amend the Constitution and remove devolution. This did not, however, occur. The government simply maintained its inaction policy stance on devolution. Fiscal centralisation helped the central government to use its financial muscle to manipulate and commandeer local authorities to be upwardly accountable to the central government (Tonhodzai, Nyikadzino & Nhema, 2015). Local authorities were left in a financial quagmire, as locally generated revenue could not satisfy service delivery demands.

The centralisation of budgetary powers forces local governments to be upwardly accountable because budgets can only be approved if they reflect the central government's preferences. Regardless of the constitutional provisions for fiscal decentralisation, there is still too much of the 'minister shall' in the financial activities of local governments; costing local governments the much-needed financial autonomy that can enable them to respond to local needs promptly. As Nkrumah (2000) cited by Ababio and Asmah-Andoh (2013) points out, an especially critical method of limiting neighbourhood government independence is through the government's control of the purse strings. Awortwi (2011:351) argues that "if administrative decentralisation takes place and the organisational capacity of the local bureaucracy is improved through, for example, training, but without transfer of funds and authority to make and implement decisions, the degree of LG autonomy is constrained".

Hope for fiscal decentralisation was revived in 2017 when Mugabe was ousted through a tactically executed military strategy. Mugabe was replaced by Emerson Mnangagwa, his deputy for several years. In his inauguration speech, Mnangagwa announced a surprise policy shift when he promised to respect the Constitution and implement devolution (The Chronicle, 27 November 2017). Despite Mnangagwa's policy pronouncements, the practice still reflects a centralised approach to governance. The Harare North Member of Parliament, Allan Markham, quoted in Kubatana (2021), expressed concern over the involvement of local councillors in the identification and implementation of devolution projects. He opined that "I do not know one councillor in Harare that has been consulted on the 2020 devolution funds" (Kubatana, 2021:1).

The determination and disbursement of devolution funds fell short of the consistency, predictability and transparency enshrined in the African Charter on Decentralisation of 2014. The Charter recommends that both conditional and unconditional intergovernmental transfers should be transparent and predictable to allow local governments to plan and develop their budgets. The current devolution funds disbursement system is centralised and surrounded by secrecy to an extent that local governments and other interested stakeholders are not sure about how the funds are calculated. As Machivenyika (2020:4) points out, "the disbursements were being done irregularly in the absence of legislation to govern the utilisation of the funds". The lack of consistency in the disbursement of devolution funds compromises the extent to which local governments can proactively plan and develop their budgets. In the absence of a governing legislative framework, intergovernmental funds can easily be abused by the central government to settle political scores and can be used to punish opposition-dominated councils.



Political Centralisation

Political decentralisation aims to ensure democratic local governance by giving local people and their elected leaders more influence in policy formulation and implementation for their social, political, and economic well-being (Resnick, 2021). Smoke (2003) opines that administrative and fiscal decentralisation are important but cannot achieve the needs of decentralisation and local government reforms in general without adequate political reform. Political decentralisation is particularly important in the context of Zimbabwe, where the poor and other disadvantaged groups were marginalised and excluded from local political processes. From a political decentralisation perspective, decentralisation is a mechanism for broadening local democracy and the participation of all interested actors including previously marginalised groups.

Local government elections in Zimbabwe are a major stride towards political decentralisation and are conducted simultaneously with presidential elections every five years. Due to the advent of competitive local government elections, opposition political parties won control over several urban councils including Harare, Mutare, Gweru, Bulawayo, and Kwekwe City Councils (Marumahoko, 2020). The vertically divided authority in Zimbabwe's local government discourse saw the central government using and abusing various forms of control (financial, administrative, and legislative) to force opposition-dominated councils to dance to the central government's tune (Madhekeni, 2020). Regardless of the constitutional provisions for devolution, the central government, through the MoLG, strengthened its supervision of local governments in the name of protecting the citizens' interests. Supervisory powers were abused by the ZANU-PF-dominated central government to control local governments through the back door. This resulted in numerous suspensions and dismissals of democratically elected mayors (Chigwata et al., 2019). In essence, in Zimbabwe's vertically divided authority context, the suspension of mayors in major cities has been weaponised to frustrate and hinder the extent to which local governments can democratically govern autonomously. The central government is, indeed, clawing back governing powers through the supervisory powers provided for in the UCA (Chapter 29). This explains why the central government is reluctant to align the UCA (Chapter 29) to the CoZ (2013); the status quo benefits the central government which cannot reform itself out of power.

To further entrench the central government's control, successive post-2013 governments have continued to appoint Ministers of State for Provincial Affairs. The CoZ (2013) Sections 268 and 269 provide for provincial and metropolitan councils, respectively. These councils are composed of democratically elected officials. From a local democracy point of view, the provision for democratically elected councils is a remarkable achievement given Zimbabwe's centralised governance history. For the first time, in the 2018 harmonised elections, the ten members of the provincial councils were elected in each province. However, the central government did not convene these provincial councils (Madhekeni,



2020). Rather, the Mugabe and Mnangagwa administrations continued to appoint Provincial Affairs Ministers, now known as the Minister of State for Provincial Affairs and Devolution (MSPAD). The central government made it clear in various policy pronouncements that MSPAD, instead of provincial and metropolitan councils, would play a key role in spearheading the devolution programme (DDP, 2020). Given the nature of their appointment, MSPAD may force the subnational government to be upwardly accountable to the central government. This may undermine local democracy and citizens' participation. To further weaken the devolution drive, the Mnangagwa government deviated from the devolution model defined in the CoZ (2013), emphasising an economic model of devolution (Zinyama & Chimanihire, 2019). Given the preceding narrative, even if the government is to constitute provincial and metropolitan councils, they may operate more like deconcentrated administrative extensions of the central government, which will control their affairs through the MSPAD, thereby making local democracy a fallacy.

Chagunda (2015) posits that the minister holds a significant administrative position over all local government units and partakes in a definitive force of mediation and the suspension of any neighbourhood chamber. There is a lot of the 'minister will' in the UCA (Chapter 29) and RDCA (Chapter 29). As Chagunda (2015) explains, there are more than 250 instances stipulated in the RDCA (Chapter 29, p.13) where the minister can intervene in the day-to-day running of rural district councils. Such powers are given to the minister to reduce the level of autonomy enjoyed by democratically elected councillors. In some instances, decisions made by democratically elected councils are disapproved by the minister, a situation that has forced local councils to be upwardly accountable to the minister rather than the electorate (Marumahoko, 2020). Paradoxically, there is a lack of a clear and adequate legal framework for the implementation of political decentralisation (devolution) provided for in the Constitution.

Conclusion

This article argues that the implementation of decentralisation in a vertically divided authority, an increasingly developing phenomenon in most African countries, creates complex intergovernmental relations that result in centralisation and, in some cases, the recentralisation of administrative, fiscal, and administrative powers. This article explained how this occurred in Zimbabwe and described that as more decentralisation and devolutionary reforms were implemented, centripetal forces tilted the balance of power in favour of the central government. The analysis that was presented, however, generated important lessons about the implementation of devolution in a vertically divided authority context. The first and most important observation is that, threatened by the growth and popularity of opposition parties in local governments, the ruling party will be principally concerned with power consolidation and the suppression of opposition activities. This makes the whole devolution process problematic; the central government will develop



strategies to neutralise and, where possible, completely avoid the process. Given ZANU-PF's unyielding centralist ideology, it will inevitably resist the devolution wave. With a two-thirds majority in parliament, the ruling party can easily amend, ignore, and completely abrogate the Constitution. This underscores the importance of constitutionalism, a third lesson drawn from the study. Having constitutional provisions for devolution is necessary but not sufficient in a country in which the Constitution can be deliberately ignored. Devolution advocates should, therefore, play a central role in defending the Constitution and pushing for the implementation of devolution. Civil society organisations, residents' associations, local government associations, subnational governments (elected and traditional), opposition parties, the citizens and parliament must activate their voices and advocate for devolution implementation. Without pressure from the abovementioned organisations, the ruling party will pursue and maintain its inaction policy stance on devolution and centralisation will continue unabated. The successful implementation of devolution requires a comprehensive and collaborative strategy that ensures the enactment of devolution-related legislative frameworks and alignment of the extant Acts to the CoZ (2013). The central government should respect laws and judicial judgements and orders.

The literature review and findings also emphasise that Zimbabwe's devolved constitutional structure contains a significant gap between what is written and what is occurring in reality. This can be interpreted to mean that the ruling party in Zimbabwe prefers administrative decentralisation to fiscal decentralisation so that it can use its fiscal powers to effectively control the lower tiers of government. This supports Falleti's (2005) observation in her sequential theory of decentralisation that if central governments are allowed to choose which type of decentralisation to implement first, they opt for administrative rather than fiscal decentralisation so that they can use their fiscal powers to tightly control the subnational governments' activities. Based on the foregoing statement, it is evident that there is fiscal centralisation in Zimbabwe – a development that has reduced devolution to a fallacy. The central government uses its financial muscle to firmly control and manipulate the subnational governments.

Scope for Future Studies

Future researchers should consider conducting interviews in selected municipalities to ascertain the level of devolution and its impact on service delivery; they can explore the types of capacity-building interventions required for municipalities in Zimbabwe to operate and administer devolutionary responsibilities within their areas of jurisdiction.



Note

This article is based on a completed unpublished PhD thesis titled: 'The devolution of governmental powers and responsibilities in post-independent Zimbabwe' by Tawanda Nyikadzino, in 2020 at the University of Johannesburg under the supervision of Prof. S. Vyas-Doorgapersad.

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