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Achievements and Limitations of Nation-building in Africa: The Case of Zimbabwe

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ADAM GROVES, JUN 19 2008

Recent months have seen inter-ethnic conflict in Kenya, exclusivist attacks aimed at immigrant populations in South Africa and continuing controversy surrounding the future of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe. Cases such as these expose serious societal tensions within some contemporary African states, including those traditionally considered the continent's 'success stories'. In light of this, it's pertinent to ask about the achievements and limitations of nation-building in Africa.

Mainstream academic perspectives on nations and nationalism are united in their assertion that stable states require some form of nation to underpin them. African leaders have sought to construct (or build) nations within boundaries set during the colonial era. It will be argued here that the nation-building process heralded some real achievements during liberation struggles. However, drawing on the case of Zimbabwe, it will be shown that nationalist liberation movements were often more fragmented than is commonly acknowledged. Upon gaining power, many leaders—such as Robert Mugabe—sought to cement 'their' state through coercive and homogenising policies towards the 'nation's' constituent groups. This has resulted in serious limitations to postcolonial nation building in Africa.

Constructivist scholars have emphasised the 'invented' or 'imagined' nature of nations (cf. Anderson, 1991). If a nation is a "collection of people who have come to believe that they have been shaped by a common past and are destined to share a common future", then nationalism is a political project aimed at "fostering those beliefs and promoting policies which permit the nation to control its own destiny" (Enloe, 1990: 45). During Africa's liberation struggles, nationalist movements sought to unite people around their common experiences under white rule and the potential for a common future as one nation. In Zimbabwe, for example, Terrance Ranger (1985) showed how a united peasant consciousness emerged following collective suffering. He highlighted the importance of colonial conquest, land alienation, authoritarianism and state-interventions into agrarian issues as dynamics that fostered

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collective actions which crossed the urban-rural divide. Similarly, David Lan (1985) emphasised close cooperation between peasants and spirit mediums, with the latter legitimating the authority of liberation forces as they challenged discredited chiefs. Notably, major players within the liberation movement, such as Robert Mugabe's ZANU, asserted that women had shared Zimbabwe's common past, and would be a part of its common future. ZANU's Women's League declared that 'for the revolution to triumph in its totality there must be emancipation of women' (in Seidman, 1984: 419). Some estimates suggest that women made up one third of the guerrillas fighting for Zimbabwean liberation. It seems that the nation-building process began during the liberation struggle; it incorporated diverse elements in a shared political project, successfully challenged minority white rule and heralded the possibility of a more equal and just future.

However, as Norma Kriger (1992) has shown, the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe was not fought by one group in pursuit of one future. The lens of nationalism often serves to conceal significant differentiations along the lines of gender, ethnicity, age, wealth and ideology. Ranger (1993) has acknowledged that his earlier works did not pay sufficient attention to the "multiple imaginings" evident in Zimbabwe. He maintains that nationalism (or, perhaps better, nationalisms) are integral to understanding the country's politics (past and present) and concludes that, given the diverse interests within the liberation movement, two options were open for its leaders following their successful struggle: "emancipating pluralist nationalism on the one hand and collective, majoritarian nationalism on the other" (Ranger, 2004).

Following the success of the struggle, the multiple imaginings in Zimbabwe were violently contested. Through the elimination of all opposition, ZANU's leaders sought to guarantee the integrity of the state – and of their own role within it. Raftopoulos (1999) writes that it was an authoritarian nationalism that emerged; it utilised state violence to repress opposition in the name of building the nation. ZANU conflated itself with the Zimbabwean state and, in its efforts to consolidate power and build a congruent nation, it has denied the potential for diversity, enforcing uniformity and homogeneity instead. Perhaps the most notable case of this dynamic was the crisis in Matebeleland in the mid 1980s, when ZANU used state forces in an attempt to eliminate its major political rival ZAPU. Beatings, rape and torture were used to attack the Ndebele minority ethnic group which formed a core of ZAPU. In a more recent example, Zimbabwean state media reported that "soldiers had signed up to protect Mr Mugabe's principles of defending the revolution", and that "If you have other thoughts, then you should remove that uniform" (BBC, 2008). Authoritarian nationalism is evident in other spheres too: women's rights have been denied and suppressed, and Ranger (2004) laments that even historical scholarship within Zimbabwe has been consumed, emerging simply as a 'patriotic history' which glorifies the achievements of ZANU guerrillas and vilifies 'Others' which contest (or were not part of) their story. Barnes (1999) summarises that in the 1980s, the canon of nationalism gathered threads of

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discontent “into a tow rope to freedom”. Today however, nationalist leaders fear that should any thread become “discarded from the weave, the notion of a unidirectional road to liberation” would be “incrementally discredited”. The lens of authoritarian nationalism simply leaves no room for alternative imaginations.

Zimbabwe provides an interesting case to illustrate some of the successes and limitations of nation building in Africa. Where nationalism has been emancipating and pluralist, it has achieved a great deal; in Zimbabwe, it brought multiple groups—and ‘imaginings’—together for the successful struggle against white-minority rule. However, once that battle was won, powerful elements within the movement sought to secure the integrity of ‘their’ state by homogenising the nation. This has resulted in hierarchical, coercive and ultimately divisive policies which have been authoritarian in character. Today, some civil groups—such as Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA)—and a few academics (cf. Ranger, 2004) seek to challenge authoritarian nationalism by contesting the narratives espoused by ZANU. Scholars have highlighted the diversity of the nationalist movement whilst WOZA has sought to reclaim ‘nationalist’ successes as urban achievements in an attempt to recreate a pluralist political discourse. Contemporary events in Africa demonstrate that many countries have yet to establish a stable pluralist political space. States such as Zimbabwe have simply not allowed such a space to develop, whilst in other countries where pluralism is evident it has often been manipulated by leaders who make divisive appeals to the ‘nation’s’ constituent groups. The failure to maintain—or create—an emancipating pluralist nationalism might be considered the central limitation of the nation building process in Africa.

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