

Democracy support in dominant party states

The case of Zimbabwe



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Introduction

Over the past few decades, the EU and its member states have provided significant democracy support to Zimbabwe. This case study will focus mostly on the complexities and dilemmas with regard to democracy support in the dominant party system of Zimbabwe.

In the first two decades after gaining its independence in 1980, Zimbabwe effectively transformed into a one-party state led by President Robert Mugabe and his party, the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU PF). The one-party state was seriously challenged by the formation of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 1999, which originated from a broad coalition of civil society groups who successfully mobilised for a ‘no’ vote in a constitutional referendum in 2000.

Against the backdrop of a deteriorating economic crisis, the following decade was characterised by severe state repression and gross human rights violations against MDC supporters and other pro-democracy actors. These atrocities particularly took place in the run-up to successive elections, which were characterised by irregularities and highly contested results. After extreme violence in the 2008 election run-off, a Government of National Unity (GNU) was negotiated under the mediation of South Africa. Although the newly adopted progressive constitution includes aspects that strengthened democratic institutions, ZANU PF used its continued control over the security apparatus to constrain the opening up of democratic spaces and block the implementation of key political and electoral reforms. This contributed to ZANU PF’s electoral victory in 2013, which marked the end of the GNU.

After years of intense factionalism in ZANU PF, a coup in 2017 ended Mugabe’s 37 years in power. He was succeeded by Emmerson Mnangagwa. Despite initial rhetoric of economic and democratic reforms, there has been a trend of sustained pressure on democratic space in Zimbabwe, particularly since the 2018 elections. ZANU PF won a resounding two-thirds parliamentary majority

during these elections, while Mnangagwa claimed the presidency with just over 50% of the vote. However, opposition leader Nelson Chamisa, who managed to reunite the different MDC groups under the MDC Alliance (MDC-A), continues to contest the legitimacy of the election and Mnangagwa’s government to this day.

Despite the emergence and establishment of the MDC as a major oppositional force, ZANU PF has managed to secure its power and maintain the dominant party system in Zimbabwe. Over the years, it has used a mix of various tactics and instruments to do so. Since assuming power, Mnangagwa has intensified his predecessor’s repressive politics against the political opposition and civil society. This has been done using a combination of strategies and measures calculated to systematically dismantle the opposition. In addition to frequent arrests, the regime has used its influence on the judiciary to ensure partisan rulings, for example in favour of a breakaway opposition faction in order to divide the opposition. These court interventions led to the appropriation of the MDC-A headquarters, party resources, and the recall of over 30 MDC-A legislators from Parliament and city councils. The Mnangagwa regime has been accused of conducting ‘lawfare’, whereby opposition members and civil society activists are subjected to arrests, lengthy pre-trial detentions, and unfair bail conditions as a result of what civil society and the international community mostly view as partisan rulings.

The 2017 coup was a confirmation of the continuing importance of Zimbabwe’s military. After the 2018 elections, several (former) army generals were appointed to influential Cabinet positions, which has led to an increased party-military-state conflation. The state

security apparatus has continued to be used against opposing voices, with the post-election violence on 1 August 2018 and the crackdown against demonstrators and civil society in January 2019 as the most notable recent examples. ZANU PF maintains an effective system of political control, through violence and several forms of subtle intimidation. These include the politicisation of food aid, and the use of traditional leaders and local ZANU PF leaders to install fear in rural constituencies. Furthermore, ZANU PF effectively controls all levels of the state, and most institutions are compromised, as ZANU PF controls appointments and manipulates who sits where and who controls which processes.

Democracy support in a one-party system: a continuous balancing act

In the past two decades, European development partners have provided significant democracy support to Zimbabwe, of which the contributions to the development of a thriving civil society and the new constitution in 2013 deserve particular mention. This section will highlight some of the dilemmas and frictions that democracy support actors experience in their work in Zimbabwe, with particular attention to the complexities of manoeuvring on an uneven political playing field.

Seizing momentum: Agreeing on a Code of Conduct

All the people interviewed for this report agreed that democracy support initiatives, specifically with regard to political party support, are most effective when there is an incentive for the dominant party to participate in the process. This could be witnessed ahead of the 2018 elections, where there appeared to be a willingness among ZANU PF and state actors to engage, also in an attempt to sanitize and legitimise the 2017 coup. This led to a more peaceful pre-election environment and an apparent widening of democratic space, Zimbabwe's opposition could, for example, campaign in rural areas which it could not previously access.

In order to capitalise on the momentum, a number of European donors funded a process which resulted in the main political parties in Zimbabwe agreeing on a Code of Conduct. This Code of Conduct outlined how the different parties would interact and committed the parties to promoting a more tolerant electoral climate. Those involved believe an important success factor of this inter-party dialogue was that it assisted in placing the parties on an equal footing and that the Code of Conduct confirmed this equality under the law.

This specific example demonstrates the importance of having infrastructure and networks in place, which enable democracy practitioners to capitalise on the momentum once it occurs. The organisations involved had existing relations, were seen as trustworthy by the parties involved, and could therefore engage at once when the opportunity arose. Since these organisations also maintained relations with Zimbabwe's Parliament, the Code of Conduct rolled through Parliament relatively quickly once the parties had negotiated and agreed to it. The role of the Zimbabwean organisation involved was particularly crucial for this process to succeed. All practitioners interviewed for this study indicated trust and relations are key to getting this complex work done.

European democracy support programmes have undoubtedly made positive contributions to democratic space in Zimbabwe. Nonetheless, the complexities of operating in Zimbabwe's dominant party context leads to a variety of challenges, which makes impact assessment for the majority of European democracy support programs difficult, which paints a mixed picture to say the least.

Over the past few years, the EU and some member states effectively kept a number of key human rights organisations operational, enabling them to continue their work in times of decreased funding. Having their structures and systems in place proved to be crucial in response to the 2019 crackdown on civil society. Yet, as will be outlined later in this report, this is not illustrative of European civil society support during the past decade, which has increasingly become short-term and activity-based in nature.

Similarly, the EU provided technical support to the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) in the run-up to

the 2018 elections, which contributed to a more robust voters roll and improvements in the voter registration process. This was a good example of how democracy support programmes and political engagement were synchronised, as the necessary improvements were also highlighted in various engagements between the EU and the Government of Zimbabwe. At the same time, a large part of European electoral support programs disbursed their funding relatively close to the election date, which reduced their impact. There was further criticism that there was insufficient support for key aspects of the electoral process, such as support for polling agents, which not only weakened the electoral process, but also affected the impact of other support programmes.

The next sections will examine in more depth the complexities arising from the features of Zimbabwe's dominant party context, as well as how European frameworks of support influence the ability to adequately respond to challenges as they arise.

Manoeuvring on an uneven playing field: dilemmas of political party support

While this paper looks at the effectiveness of specific interventions, it is also important to look at decisions *not* to do things, as these can negatively impact the democratic playing field. In this regard, one of the key dilemmas when looking at strengthening the democratic system in Zimbabwe is the position on political party support. Whereas several European donors funded Zimbabwe's opposition before 2013, European member states and donors currently refrain from supporting political parties and mostly support inter-party programs.

Although understandable, this position unwillingly reinforces the unlevel playing field. ZANU PF has access to a variety of state and other resources that the opposition does not have, which allows them to maintain and strengthen the dominant party system. European member states and donors are forced to perform a continuous balancing act, manoeuvring between the principled position of not supporting individual political

parties and the more pragmatic consideration of trying to level the playing field. Particularly in light of the intertwining of ZANU PF and the state, which means cooperating and strengthening the state also strengthens ZANU PF as a party.

Many practitioners working on inter-party programmes stress the importance of and need for intraparty initiatives (working with parties individually), which could also be as part of multi-party programs. Most Zimbabwean political parties, including the main opposition party, have weaknesses that affect their internal democracy. These also frustrate European donors and diplomats, who often question the strategies and internal processes of the MDC-A. Although the criticism itself is justified, there appears to be an impasse on how to address this lack of internal democracy and strategic direction. The expectation that the MDC-A will be able to solve this themselves under the current circumstances is unlikely to be realistic. In light of the ongoing and deep economic crisis, there are limited funding possibilities for the MDC-A, particularly following the aforementioned controversial court decision which allocated state party funding to a breakaway faction. This underfunding makes it more complicated for the MDC-A to try and strengthen their weakened party structures and internal processes, therefore making them more vulnerable to intra-party divisions. An important element to consider is the 'politics of the belly', which in this case refers to the fact that even high-profile political actors are increasingly driven by economic considerations, as they too experience personal consequences and hardship resulting from the deep economic crisis. As such, shifting political allegiances become a form of economic survival.

Consequently, a number of local practitioners question the current approach of European donors and believe there should be more support for intra-party work. This comes from the belief that for democracy to work, strong institutions and opposition parties are needed to ensure necessary checks and balances. All parties need the necessary tools to be democratic, which requires strengthening their internal structures, rules, processes, constitution, and the way a party is being

run. Local practitioners think this would not only improve democratic processes in Zimbabwe, but also make the opposition less vulnerable to internal divisions and attacks from the dominant party. They believe existing divisions deteriorate because of a lack of resources and weakened party structures and are concerned the lack of intra-party support means key problems are not being addressed and ZANU PF's dominance is further strengthened.

Another argument raised by a European practitioner is that ensuring intra-party stability is also in the interest of European donors, as this influences the context in which programmes take place, and therefore influence the effectiveness and possible successes of different programmes. Intra-party initiatives would be less vulnerable to what this practitioner called 'the challenge of moving goal posts' as a result of changing context and actors. When intra-party polarisation and power struggles result in expulsions or splits, it is often difficult to maintain gains since 'newcomers' don't always recognise or uphold agreements and promises made by their predecessors.

However, the challenge for European democracy support practitioners is that there is little evidence that such support would automatically lead to the desired outcome, as the issue is not only about capacity, but also requires the political will to acknowledge and address shortcomings in internal democratic culture and procedures.

Unintended outcomes of European support: strengthening the status quo

The decision to not support intra-party processes means the democratic system, in general, is weakened further. One of the resulting key questions that requires more attention is what European actors should do when the dominant party is actively using state resources to weaken the opposition, as is the case in Zimbabwe? As such, it would be good to put more thinking into the unintended consequences of European engagement

and decisions on what (not) to support, particularly since the political and democratic context influences the effectiveness of European democracy support programs. This thinking should not necessarily focus on how to fund the opposition, which would obviously complicate European engagement, but more on how to balance existing inequalities between parties and 'equalise the unequal.' This could require a more prominent role in European programming for key drivers of inequality, such as the massive access to natural resources exercised by ZANU PF leaders and the widespread corruption in state institutions. On a more micro level, this could, for example, be done by making intra-party support part of wider inter-party programs, whereby equal support is provided to all parties.

The resulting challenges also arise when looking at different European democracy support initiatives aimed at strengthening independent institutions. Over the past decade, the EU and a number of its member states have provided significant support to these institutions, for example to the Parliament, Judiciary, and Independent Commissions. However, in a dominant party system like Zimbabwe, this also leads to dilemmas for European donors. Both Parliament and the courts have been part of the systematic attacks on the opposition and civil society. This complicates the justification and continuation of such support and shows how working with specific political institutions in a dominant-party system is risky. Given the intertwinement of ZANU PF and the state in Zimbabwe, strengthening one of these actors could inadvertently strengthen the dominance of the ruling party. If a democracy support program is fortifying the status quo, it might do more harm than good.

At the same time, these institutions have different layers of which some can be worked within. It is lower court justices, for example, who have made politicized decisions, while a number of high court justices have demonstrated a greater degree of independence." This amplifies the need for sound political economy analysis, and a well-researched theory of how a programme contributes to levelling the political playing field.

(Mis)matching the needs: limitations of European funding mechanisms

This section will examine European funding mechanisms, arguing that most European models of engagement and funding frameworks are not sufficiently suited to the needs of democracy practitioners in Zimbabwe.

Those interviewed agreed on a number of issues that were crucial to successfully work on democracy support, and in particular party processes. The example of the Code of Conduct shows the importance of momentum, and the sudden opportunities that might arise. Most practitioners agree that within the complex Zimbabwean context, opportunities need to be sought and are always there, even amidst a continued political impasse and the closing of democratic space. However, where these opportunities occur is subject to continuous change, which makes it difficult to plan far ahead and amplifies the need for flexibility. Many practitioners express the importance of intuition in this regard.

One of the key complexities identified in finding these opportunities is that most pro-democracy goals inherently oppose the interests of the dominant party. This is also the reason why most practitioners suggest starting work on specific processes in Zimbabwe that are not directly seen as a threat by the ruling ZANU PF. The importance of trust in this kind of work is clear, as explained by a practitioner: 'In order to get trust of the dominant party you need to give cookies, on the basis of that you can bring them along, which can create further incentives.'¹

In building this trust, exploring and sensing openings, and responding adequately to opportunities, all European practitioners interviewed for this case study stressed

the importance of a good and trustworthy national partner. One organisation, in particular, was mentioned as having a lot of experience in inter-party dialogue processes. European practitioners narrate how they trust this partner to make the right decisions. One of the things valued is the ability to translate high quality analysis into a good program, whereby different activities serve the objective(s) set. The fact that this organisation had different programs with several (donor) partners and actors enabled them to maintain their infrastructure and operate even when dialogue processes were at an impasse. This enabled them to maintain their relations with various actors and respond quickly when opportunities for inter-party work arose.

Both donors and practitioners in Zimbabwe struggle to define which type of interventions and support are the most effective, particularly since the nature and complexity of the work makes it difficult to capture solid evidence. European and Zimbabwean practitioners have indicated it is difficult to strike a balance between trust (and intuition) and the evidence base of what they (want to) do. The need for accountability is not questioned, but the current models are believed to be too restrictive for complex political work.

'You do bad work if your log-frame is right': Increased instrumentalisation of funding models

In the past decade, the development sector has experienced a number of important shifts which has also influenced the effectiveness of democracy support interventions in Zimbabwe. The increased need to

¹ Interview with European democracy practitioner, March 2021.

measure results of donor interventions has led to more focus on compliance, due diligence and reporting. This has also contributed to a severe reduction in institutional support, and an increased focus on short(er) term activity-based funding and quantification of results.

As such, there is a serious mismatch between the realities of Zimbabwe's dominant party system, the resulting needs for effective democracy work, and the set-up of the majority of European funding mechanisms. The prospects for significant change in Zimbabwe's democratic space are low and depend on a variety of unpredictable factors that are mostly outside the control of democracy support practitioners and donors. Yet, funding frameworks are still mostly constructed along traditional result-based models and log-frames, which do not sufficiently capture the unpredictable nature of Zimbabwe's political landscape. A European practitioner explains: 'it is very much a straitjacket if you must make a log-frame in our kind of work, we write it down as if we are going to dig wells. I am convinced that in our field, you do bad work if your log-frame was right.'² There is a shared belief among practitioners, that Zimbabwe's political context is complex and unpredictable, and that many uncertain and uncontrollable factors decide the (extent of) success of specific interventions. It is believed there is insufficient attention for these factors in the program design phase.

There is a strong sense among practitioners that they are part of risk-taking business. Their work is informed by a notion that they should try and get the most out of the space that exists, and if opportunities arise, see how far they can push it. This has created friction with a trend emerging over the past decade that has seen European donors become more risk-averse, which has led to the increased instrumentalisation of funding mechanisms. As a result, one key challenge for European and Zimbabwean practitioners is that current funding models have limited room for adaptation and flexibility to pursue opportunities as they occur. At various moments in time, this also became clear when protests and social movements gained momentum in their push

for democratic change, when the EU and its member states were mostly forced to adopt a reactive position and mostly limited themselves to issuing statements.

The EU is particularly mentioned as being very strict on rules and regulations. Over the past few years, funding procedures have become increasingly complex, which has lengthened administrative procedures. This means the time between the submission of a proposal and the actual disbursements of funds can take a very long time, thus hindering the ability to quickly seize opportunities or plan adequately. When looking at European support for civil society work around the 2018 elections, for example, some funding was received only one month before election day, even though initial discussions had started a year earlier.

This could also negatively impact earlier successes, as could be witnessed recently with the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission (ZHRC). The ZHRC, which received significant funding from European donors, was one of the few commissions that acted quite independently and released a number of critical reports, strongly condemning the violence of Zimbabwe's security forces in August 2018 and January 2019. However, the renewal of its funding took a protracted length of time, which immediately weakened the ZHRC, thereby undermining the previously mentioned gains.

Unrealistic expectations, self-censorship and overpromising

Many of these issues of course warrant further discussion, but what is clear about the way things are done now is that often there is no common and shared vision of the why and how of many programs, and that there is a high level of 'we have to work with what we got.' Consequently, practitioners are balancing between the realities of Zimbabwe and the realities of European funding frameworks.

It appears that donors try to include too many

² Interview with European democracy practitioner, February 2021.

considerations and interests in the set-up of democracy support programmes. They want to make significant impact, be able to measure the results, have stringent accountability mechanisms in place, and avoid as much risks as possible all at the same time. Making significant impact and avoiding risks are particularly challenging, and therefore this is the most disputable consideration in a dominant party context like Zimbabwe. The increased instrumentalisation of funding frameworks contributes to unrealistic expectations and program documents. Many practitioners believe democracy support programs should be allowed to take risks, and more importantly allowed to fail, adapt, and try again. As explained by a practitioner: ‘there is a serious risk, and costs, attached to *not* trying.’

A complicating factor, in addressing these issues, is the dependency relationship between donors and practitioners. In times of general funding scarcity organisational motives often prevail, and these critical issues are not really pushed, also because their operations depend on donor funds. Zimbabwe is not on the priority list of most European countries, which influences the decisions of organisations to maintain their support programmes in Zimbabwe. Consequently, both European democracy organisations and their Zimbabwean partners face increased uncertainty with regard to the continuation of their programmes.

A European practitioner points at a resulting dilemma: ‘there are so many ifs and buts to what we promise in our funding proposal, yet you are chosen upon the results you promise.’³ This results in practitioners projecting and stating results they know they are unlikely to achieve. This overpromising is reflected in many program documents, with an apparent mismatch between what is envisaged, and the number of resources allocated to achieve set objectives. Or, as stated bluntly by a local practitioner: ‘People say they want democracy in Zimbabwe, but they don’t put their money where their mouth is.’⁴

These dynamics also hinder the effectiveness of European democracy support, and the exploration of alternative, more flexible, funding models. For example, if an implementing organisation currently decides to reduce its budget during the year because of a continued political impasse, this would most likely lead to a permanent budget reduction in the following year(s). This is a dynamic that does not stimulate honest assessments and communication. Moreover, it signals a lack of flexibility to adapt to developments as they take place. As mentioned by a European practitioner: ‘As a sector, we should challenge that more; we have a good story and good political reasons to make our claims.’⁵

Uneven power relations

Donors have also become more involved and/or prescriptive in designing and deciding the desired focus of specific programmes, which can lead to tension with the local partner. This is further fuelled by the fact that because of the administrative complexity of many European funding systems, European donors often channel their funding through international organisations at the expense of Zimbabwean organisations.

Given the uneven power dynamics involved, the local partner does not always feel able to express their sentiments and challenge donor positions. More importantly, certain European diplomats and donors simply push through their own beliefs. After the 2017 coup, warnings and analyses of Zimbabwean civil society were largely ignored, and a few European diplomats were perceived as actively trying to silence a more critical narrative.

3 Interview with European democracy practitioner, February 2021.

4 Interview with Zimbabwean democracy practitioner, March 2021.

5 Interview with European democracy practitioner, February 2021.

Conclusion

Zimbabwe's dominant party system is characterised by a very uneven playing field and a ruling party that uses a wide range of strategies and instruments to systematically target opposition and civil society actors. Most practitioners agree that despite the complex and unpredictable Zimbabwean context, democracy support programmes can be effective. Windows of opportunity always appear, even amidst the continued political impasse and the further closing of democratic space. It is crucial to have strong local partners in place who are able to quickly identify and utilise these openings as they emerge.

In navigating this difficult terrain, European practitioners and donors face a number of challenges and dilemmas in their work. This case study showed some of the challenges with regards to intraparty support and the mismatch between the complex unpredictable realities of Zimbabwe and the complex European funding structures. Whereas practitioners amplify the importance of flexibility, a solid local infrastructure, and willingness to take certain levels of risk, the design of most European funding frameworks complicates rapid adjustments to unfolding events.

In order to better align European funding frameworks to the needs of democracy practitioners, the following key recommendations are made:

1. European funding frameworks require more flexible ways of programming and budgeting

1.1. Flexibility in funding

More options for flexible interventions should be incorporated into European funding frameworks. If circumstances complicate the envisaged work for example, it should be more acceptable to reduce the activity budget since prospects for change are low. However, part of such a construction would be that additional funds could be released easily once opportunities occur.

1.2. Institutional support

The crackdown in January 2019 showed the value of long-term (European) institutional support, as it allowed certain human rights organisations to respond decisively. Local organisations working on complex political processes would benefit from similar institutional support. Given the limitations that both European political engagement and funding framework provide, this would be an alternative way to build in flexibility. This would also require a change in mentality, as the Zimbabwean context requires a willingness 'to be in it for the long run' and build in, and accept, failures.

1.3. Contributing to a level playing field should be (more) central in European program design

The position of the EU and its member states not to provide support to political parties is understandable. However,

given the intertwinement of ZANU PF and state institutions in Zimbabwe, European positioning and support might contribute to increasing the non-level playing field. In their program design, European democracy support donors should therefore place more emphasis on how their envisaged support contributes to levelling the political playing field. This could include a (re)assessment of European positioning on political party support.

In doing so, more consideration should be given to possible unintended outcomes of European engagement and support, which could include alternative means of supporting the party system and adopting a system outlook that focuses on reducing the uneven playing field. This should also entail an analysis of what the EU's own limitations, both in terms of its decision-making structures and funding frameworks, mean for its ability to support this complex political work.

2. European support needs to be better aligned to the work of Zimbabwean democracy organisations

European funding frameworks should be less prescriptive. Accountability is necessary, but more trust should be placed in Zimbabwean democracy support organisations. European donors and practitioners agree Zimbabwean actors and organisations are central in challenging the dominant party system, yet this is not always reflected in the way priorities are set or funding is channelled.



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