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The mystery of recurrent housing demolitions in urban Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT



This paper reflects on how to interpret the dearth of radical activism in Zimbabwe's peri-urban areas: why Zimbabwe's urban 'subalterns' do not mobilize against the recurrent heart-wrenching demolitions of their informal settlements housing. It contributes to the understanding of how politics in context is a major determinant of informal urban and peri-urban developments in which working classes, middle classes, elites and the state are major actors. A significant proportion of demolition victims are aspiring risk-taking middle classes socially located in a double bind of the ruling ZANU (PF) party-state's *jambanja* empowerment-disempowerment social contract within which alternative uprising looks unfeasible. Intrinsically, *jambanja* is about the emasculation of prevailing laws such that, when demolitions occur, both victim and sympathizer activism is undermined by the illegality of the original housebuilding. Consequently, demolitions will persist for as long as *jambanja* and the pervasive structural informality of the ruling ZANU (PF) party-state endure.

KEYWORDS

Urban informality; peri-urban land and housing; Zimbabwe; demolitions; social relations

1. Introduction: unanswered question on Zimbabwe's urban political economy

Amidst the rising death toll from COVID-19, two other phenomena in Zimbabwe marked the end of 2020 and dawn of 2021; namely, demolitions of illegal peri-urban developments and widespread flooding of these peri-urban developments as waves of heavy sub-tropical storms pounded Southern Africa (see Appendix). This paper will focus on the demolitions. Discussing changing dynamics of urban land grabbing and accumulation by dispossession in Harare, Mbiba (2017a, 231–233) identified questions for further interrogation, one of which was on how those affected by processes of urban dispossession react: and in particular, why Zimbabwean citizens appear not to engage in sustained grassroots resistance (Edelman, Carlson, and Borras 2013) against marginalization, demolitions and land wars to resist fraudulent and forcible state transfer of land from public to private hands, as is the case in India (Levien 2012), Turkey (Kuyucu and Unsal 2010; The Guardian 2014), Latin America or Kenya. The question comes to the fore once again following ongoing (2020–2021) demolitions of urban and peri-urban houses (described in the third section). Recently, Muchadenyika (2017) compiled persuasive evidence and analysis on how, between 2000 and 2015, social movements of the poor in Harare emerged in the context of *jambanja* (the Fast Track Land Reform (FTLR) Programme – explained in the next section) to provide or facilitate access to peri-urban housing plots for thousands of 'urban poor' residents or the subaltern

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(Bayat 2000) in Harare. Given this subaltern agency, it is intriguing first why these social formations, capable of facilitating access to land are incapable of helping protect the homeowners from demolitions or to ensure that future demolitions will not undermine the 'progressive' housing initiatives of these organizations. Second is why residents resort to illegal peri-urban land purchases and house building when they are aware of the consequences. '*Kwadzinorohwa matumbu ndiko kwadzino mhanyira*' a Zimbabwean (Shona) saying referring to wild animals seems apt in this respect 'where they are beaten, in that direction they continue to stampede'. The mystery is why?

Residents' social movements such as the Combined Harare Residents Association have been tenacious in the fight for people-oriented local governance in Harare (Kamete 2009). Recently, some MDC councillors have reinforced these initiatives to resuscitate good governance (City of Harare 2010). However, their efforts seem to be in vain. Glaringly, there seems to be no grassroots mobilization or agitation against urban mis-governance and demolition of houses. Why this is so has been explained *inter alia* in terms of the legendary capacity of the Zimbabwean state to unleash unprecedented wholesale and targeted violence on citizens and creating a state of permanent fear (CCJP 1997; BBC 2001; Solidarity Peace Trust 2004; United Nations 2005; The Observer 2008).

This reflective paper draws on media reports and recent field research data on peri-urban Harare, PhD theses produced by emerging Zimbabwean scholars (Hungwe 2014; Muchadenyika 2017; Toriro 2018 and Mazhindu 2021). Other than the candidates and the examiners, few people read PhD dissertations most of which remain unpublished especially in Africa. Yet, these PhD studies are original research which, when considered together as in this case, offer valuable cumulative data. This paper draws from these data to illustrate that house builders/owners in informal peri-urban settlements are a diverse mixture and not just the urban poor (Muchadenyika 2017), the subaltern or 'outcasts' (Mpfu 2012). In particular, they exhibit middle-class characteristics and aspirations, which may curtail expected radicalism. Furthermore, the manner of their socio-political incorporation into the illegal peri-urban developments limits house builders/owners' capacity for radical activism outside of the patronage of the ruling ZANU (PF) party-state politics.

To give context to the arguments in this paper, the next section sketches key concepts of peri-urban, neoliberalism and *jambanja* whose grasp is essential to appreciate the nature of informality as used in this paper in relation to the mystery of demolitions. The third section outlines the nature of urban demolitions in Zimbabwe and the dearth of activism other than in cyberspace among built environment professionals and journalists. In the fourth section, the paper describes the socio-economic characteristics of recipients of illegal peri-urban land allocations (the who). The fifth section's discussion contributes to the understanding of the political nature of illegal peri-urban land allocation and development (the how) and why radical activism is unlikely outside the straight jacket set by the ubiquitous '*musangano*' - the ruling ZANU (PF) party-state. Key in this (and detailed elsewhere) is the informality of the state epitomized by *jambanja* (Chaumba, Scoones, and Wolmer 2003; Muzondidya 2007; Mbiba 2017b) officially the FTLR since 2000 (Matondi 2012). Thus, the paper contributes case material to debates on urban informality (Matamanda et al. 2019) as a site of critical analysis (Banks, Lombard, and Mitlin 2020).

2. A note on the peri-urban, neoliberalism, *jambanja* and informality

The peri-urban remains a contested concept, socio-economic, spatial terrain and policy space (Mbiba and Huchzermeyer 2002), a polyglot (Browder, Bohland, and Scarpaci 1992). For this paper, peri-urban is land at the urban fringes or spatial periphery that is subject to processes of conversion from rural to urban or agriculture to built development. Until 1999/2000, the bulk of land surrounding Zimbabwe's urban areas was freehold large-scale commercial farms whose owners were predominantly a demographic yet powerful minority of European heritage – as a result of settler colonial intrusion and land dispossession and redistribution over the 1890–1930 period. Zimbabwe's independence at 1980 failed to resolve the political tensions arising from this redistribution while neoliberal policies exacerbated them (Bond and Manyanya 2002; Mbiba 2017b). The global

restructuring and economic structural adjustment policies that Zimbabwe adopted in the early 1990s (Bond and Manyanya 2002) led to the erosion and undermining of the Zimbabwean welfare state of the 1980s. Deindustrialization and economic collapse left the elite and the state with dwindling welfare resources to distribute, leading to rural and urban land emerging as the newfound welfare and patronage resource since 2000 as presented below. In similar ways to the settler colonial redistribution, this focus on distribution is important as it determines all subsequent livelihood opportunities – including the production alternatives. Hence, distribution should be considered as the analytical starting point. Crucially, the negative socio-economic effects of 1990s neoliberal policies coalesced with the unresolved pre-1980 land distribution grievances and tensions to explode as popular war veterans-led land invasions (Buckle 2001; Sadomba 2011) or *jambanja*. To reassert its authority, government reformulated this into a FTLR programme (Chaumba, Scoones, and Wolmer 2003; Muzondidya 2007 and Matondi 2012)

The FTLR from year 1999 to 2000 converted all rural agricultural land to state land with no compensation to the freehold landowners. Although section 72 of the 2013 constitution (GoZ 2013a) provides for timely compensation, the government has no money to compensate. However, as explained elsewhere (Mbiba 2017b, 377–378) regarding FTLR and *jambanja*,

... using the official government of Zimbabwe term FTLRP normalises and depoliticises this process and denudes it of the cultural dimensions leaving it as a technical and administrative phenomenon. The language of FTLRP is reassuring and gives certainty and normalcy. Yet, in reality, Zimbabwe remains an uncertain terrain where life is fragile and contingent as is captured in *jambanja*. Moreover, *jambanja* was not just an event in 1999–2000 but remains the central mode of statecraft and everyday life not only in the rural countryside but everywhere including in urban and peri-urban areas, in institutions and households.

Central to *jambanja* was/is state informality (Roy 2009, 81) whereby in order to achieve its redistributive objectives, the state places itself outside the law. Debates on informal urban settlement or developments generally characterize informality as a phenomenon existing outside the state (Mpofu 2012; Kamete 2013; 2017; Goodfellow 2016) with significant attention paid to the interface between the state and informal actors or activities. Extending this literature using the Zimbabwean case, this paper takes the view of the state as not only acting informally on occasions (Roy 2009) but that political and institutional informality (Goodfellow 2019) pervades the state and manifests itself as informal peri-urban settlements. From 1999/2000, the Zimbabwe state abandoned (or selectively used) its own laws including constitutional provisions, marginalized the legislature, the courts and government departments while giving power to ruling party ZANU (PF) activists (youths, women and war veterans) and informal vigilante groups aligned to it such as Chipangano (McGeogor 2013) which for years controlled urban land and informal trading space in Mbare. A bit of history on land-use policy in Zimbabwe may help to set the scene as given below.

To accommodate the expansion of urban areas prior to *jambanja*, the state would purchase appropriate peri-urban farms at market value, process change of use from agriculture to urban and then transfer ownership to urban local authorities (cities, towns) for housing and other urban developments (see Mbiba 2017b, 392). There was intolerance to squatting and illegal land development (Auret 1994; Rakodi 1995; UN-HABITAT 2010); development had to comply with provisions of the Town and Country Planning Act and The Urban Councils Act wherein only the local authority has legal powers to allocate land and approve housing developments. These frameworks for the expansion of urban areas remain legally the same as before 2000 but the practice is different as presented in this paper.

Mbiba (2017b, 377) underlines that ‘... from the state to the personal, *jambanja* was and remains a process of annihilation of the rule of law, as well as the trashing and rejection of norms that guide global, community and personal relations’. Thus, informality in the context of peri-urban Zimbabwe as discussed in this paper is not about aesthetics, quality of development or building materials although these do exist. Instead, the focus is spatial, administrative and political informality. It is about land ownership and illegality in which a variety of ruling ZANU (PF) party state-sanctioned actors convert agricultural state land (which they do not own) to urban

development (mainly housing) and/or with the developments occurring outside provisions of relevant land ownership and town and country planning laws and often constructed on wetlands and land reserved for infrastructure or services. To this extent, it is political, economic and institutional informality (Goodfellow 2016: 2019) of the ruling ZANU (PF) party state manifesting in spatial terms as informal settlements. Developments may be planned, designed and implemented by qualified town planners, architects and engineers (hence the good quality products in Appendix) but all taking place outside the legal provisions of urban governance and land-use frameworks.

As this paper highlights, the ruling party ZANU (PF) is the state. Hence, it is the factional party politics that determine the nature of urban governance and peri-urban developments. The role and presence of neoliberal forces and international capital is very minimal in these processes (Mbiba 2017a). *Jambanja* as suspension of rule of law endures and enables the ruling party state actors in power (formal and informal) to allocate and re-allocate land. At the time of writing this paper, demolitions of elite housing units developed on land illegally allocated by ZANU (PF) aligned youths at Melfort Diamond Park (east of Harare) (see ZANU (PF) 2020) caused political turbulence in the ruling party. These demolitions were supported by government departments and backed by High Court orders.

However, three Cabinet ministers responsible for housing and local government were summoned to the ruling party HQ to explain the situation and to receive directives (ZANU (PF) 2021). It is extraordinary that the ruling party directs government programmes. This illustrates how the absence of rule of law persists in ways that make contemporary peri-urban dynamics in Zimbabwe different from those of its African neighbours. Furthermore, it partly explains why well-intentioned redistributive policies have spawned perverse outcomes in the short term (Mbiba and Huchzermeyer 2002, 114). The next section provides elaboration on these demolitions.

3. The recurrence of demolitions in urban Zimbabwe and self-flagellation of urban planners

The demolition of informal housing and structures is not a new global or local phenomenon (Auret 1994; Van Noorlos, Klaufus, and Steel 2018; United Nations 2005). What is new is the intensity, frequency, agency (Hungwe 2014) visibility and changing dynamics of its triggers and mechanisms of its unfolding in specific contexts. This reflective paper is inspired by the Zimbabwean context of recurring yet predictable demolitions of urban informal housing especially in the peri-urban areas of Harare the capital and primate city¹ and Chitungwiza the dormitory town to the south east of Harare central business district. Even as the world battled the COVID-19 pandemic, urban demolitions continued unabated throughout 2020–2021. In Harare, the local authority unleashed demolition teams in areas like Mbare's Mupedzanhamo close to the city centre² and in Mabvuku and Tafara areas to the east of the city targeting informal business structures (Mwonzora 2021) and houses. Towards year end, Budiriro suburb became the epicentre of these demolitions where 190 illegal houses belonging to Events and Tembwe Housing Cooperative were demolished and at least a thousand residents were affected (The Standard 2020a, 1). Occurring at the peak of the rainy season and with children sitting exams, demolitions left occupants and their property drenched in incessant rains for days until well-wishers and government brought in temporary shelters in the form of tents.³ At the same time then Mayor of Harare Jacob Mafume indicated that up to 32,000 homes built without approvals were set for demolition; this translated to 192,000 people affected assuming average family size of six and as many as 440,000 people if tenants are factored into the equation (The Standard 2020b, 8).⁴

In Zimbabwe, such demolitions are a recurring phenomenon. Without having to go back to the colonial days (pre-1980), examples etched in public memory include the Churu Farm demolitions to the west of Harare City centre (Auret 1994) and the countrywide and globally (in) famous Operation Murambatsvina (OM) of 2005 (UN 2005). More recent demolitions include the Arlington Estates/Farm (Airport Road) demolition of houses erected by Nyikavanhu Cooperative. These

and the ‘COVID-19 demolitions’ of 2020–2021 (Mbare, Chitungwiza, Zimre Park, Bidiro, and Belvedere-Warren Park) saturated social media and generated civil society legal and human rights activists’ outrage. Unlike the OM, most of the cases were targeted and localized. Nonetheless, the Arlington Estates/Farm and COVID-19 demolitions were also different in that they came on the back of protracted legal/court battles in which residents and/or their legal representatives (Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights) had an opportunity to present their cases against City Councils: prior to demolitions, the victims went to court and lost. This is significant given that for OM, officials had proceeded without legal backing or against decisions of the High Court.

Thus unlike OM, recent demolitions were largely legal and occurred with the backing of court orders and with residents notified of the impending actions. Mr Ndabaningi Nick Mangwana, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Information used social media to publicize the impending demolitions. For instance in a Twitter feed at 17:46 on 13 November 2020, @nickmangwana warned:

Expect demolitions of illegal structures, arrests of illegal vendors, land barons, sand and water poachers, money changers, closure of unregistered shops in Harare, Lawlessness is being clamped on.

With the new-year 2021 in its infancy in January, (Chitungwiza Municipality 2021; ZimbabweVoice.com 2021) also made public its intention to demolish 11,000 informal-illegal houses on forty different sites in certain areas under its jurisdiction. The public notices and lists of housing areas to be demolished by Chitungwiza carried the same tone as those made by Harare city in late 2020. Incidentally, there seems to be a link between the targeted areas and those identified in a government commissioned inquiry (GoZ 2013b) which concluded that up to 15, 604 house plots in Chitungwiza and Seke had been allocated illegally by land barons, cooperatives and youth aligned mainly to ZANU (PF) power brokers. Nevertheless, the public notices from municipalities were ignored. A few months before in early October 2020, Chitungwiza Municipality (Town Clerk’s Office) put such notices in the mainstream press (The Herald) and warned those who continued to ignore them.

You are further advised that failure to comply with this order within the prescribed period will render Council to proceed and effect demolitions. It has been the tendency of occupiers to ignore Council orders and, instead, listen to land barons that would have illegally parcelled out the land. Members of the public are advised to desist from buying land from land barons. This (notice) was further followed by an enforcement order issued in terms of Section 32 (b) of the RTCP Act on 14th December 2018. This came into effect on 14th January 2019. N.B. This notice was initially issued out and published in the local press on the 29th October 2018, but no action was taken. Please note, once demolition is effected, council will not incur costs. (The Herald 2020)

However, demolitions did not take place in the coming week as threatened following a legal intervention from the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights. On previous occasions, residents in some locations had used physical force to resist demolition teams (The New Humanitarian 2014). Even court orders are ignored as in the case of Ruwa (covering Solomio Farms) to the east of Harare, where 5000 illegal settlers ignored High Court eviction order served in July 2015 (FinGaz 2017) and were still *in situ* two years later.

But residents of these illegal/informal developments know that ‘an axe’ hangs over their heads. A year before in September 2019, The High Court granted Harare City Council 20 orders to demolish illegal houses erected by Housing Cooperatives in 20 different areas of the city (Chihambakwe Mutizwa and Partners 2019)⁵. In addition to the Court Orders and the advance publicity, what also stood out in the 2020–2021 demolitions was the timing and continued callousness with which they were executed; in the middle of COVID-19 lockdowns, at the peak of the rainy season and leaving children, books and household property in the open for days and nights. Naturally, this solicited what one may call ‘fly-by night’ and ‘celebrity’ humanitarianism; that is, one off humanitarian support by well to do individuals some who seem to be driven by a quest for online status elevation and visibility.

Meanwhile, on the streets of Harare life continued as usual; no protest and no uprising against the government or local authorities. Instead, outrage and activism was mainly in cyberspace where the diaspora has a significant presence. On dedicated WhatsApp groups⁶, built environment professionals engaged in palpable exchanges with many blaming a tyrannical state and poor planning on the part of local authorities. Planners were beside themselves lamenting the failure of the town planning profession to provide adequate housing and advice to policy makers. Scarcity and unaffordability of planned housing land featured as a major cause identified in the cyber-discussions. Indeed, there is merit in the 'planned land scarcity' and 'poor governance' arguments as explanations for why residents resort to illegal/informal housing developments creating scope for demolitions.

However, the raging social media outrage and exchanges and the callousness with which demolitions recur raised an important set of inter-related questions. In the face of these demolitions, why is there no mobilization and activism to ensure that they do not occur in future? Why do residents keep returning to participate in illegal-informal land sales and developments when clearly the risks of demolitions are very high? Moreover, who are these residents? Asking this question about 'who the residents are' may be helpful as a different way (or starting point) to understand informal settlement dynamics, in contrast to the question of who is to blame for the demolitions and why they occur; questions that have preoccupied much of the scholarly, policy and WhatsApp discussions recently.

The mobilization and activism against demolitions could take several forms; from the *remedial* and 'accommodatory' (those that seek to correct policy and practice mistakes or errors of the past) (see Kamete 2013), *compensatory* (those that seek to address victim losses), the *mitigatory* (those that seek to prevent recurrence of demolitions for example through information and public awareness campaigns) and *radical politics* (activism that seeks lasting structural change in social relations of power in urban production, exchange, distribution and consumption). In response to social outrage, government has pronounced willingness to accommodate and regularize some of the illegal developments (GoZ 2020; NewsDay 2020) a contentious issue among planners in the WhatsApp groups.⁷ For the government, given the criminal nature of land allocations by land barons, 'there would be no regularisation without prosecution' (GoZ 2020). To appreciate the dearth of such activism and why residents return to participate in risky informal and illegal land sales and development, a starting point could be to understand who the residents are; in particular to interrogate their portrayal only as 'outcasts' (Mpfu 2012), the poor (Muchadenyika 2017) and 'subaltern' (Bayat 2000) and their social relations with the ruling classes and power in land allocation processes.

4. Who gets illegal peri-urban land? From the poor, the subaltern to informed and aspiring middle classes

It has long been demonstrated that the deepening of global economic neoliberal restructuring has led to the impoverishment of former middle classes (Minujin 1995), increased inequalities and polarization of society. At the bottom of this urban social pile are the subaltern (Bayat 2000, 534). However, even Bayat (2000, 546–547) acknowledges that a significant proportion of those sharing 'poor' landscapes could be considered 'lumpen middle classes' that use informality to amass housing and wealth. Survey data for urban agriculture in the 1990s (Mbiba 1995) revealed that allocation of public open spaces to engage in this activity was done by informal landlords often with connections to officials and policy makers at City Hall. Crucially, the recipients of this land allocation were not recent immigrants but established and knowledgeable residents of average ten years of residence in the city. In a recent study of food growing in Epworth, Toriro (2018, 100–101) has confirmed this enduring dominance of landlords and established residents as opposed to tenants and recent immigrants in urban land allocation processes. The nature of

these allocations needs participants to be inserted into social networks of power that would be inaccessible to recent immigrants.

That the majority of residents 'allocated' housing land in Harare's new illegal peri-urban settlements of Caledonia, Solomia and Saturday Retreat (and by extension Chitungwiza and Seke) were not recent rural-urban migrants is evident in recent studies. According to Mazhindu (2021, 107–109), 40% had moved from the old congested high-density areas of Tafara, Mabvuku and Chitungwiza and Epworth. In Epworth a low-income former informal settlement, 47% of survey respondents had been resident in Harare before they relocated to Ward 7 (the informal recently settled section of Epworth) compared to 35% who reported to have come directly from rural areas and 17% who had come from other parts of Epworth (Muchadenyika 2017, 189). These rural areas of origin are largely the former White commercial farming areas (and not the communal areas) where farm workers were permanently displaced post 2000. These *jambanja* displaced farm workers found refuge in small towns and peri-urban areas of large cities (Mbiba 2017c, 8–11; Kamate 2012; Banana, Chitekwe-Biti, and Walnycki 2016). Migration from communal areas to Zimbabwean urban areas has been relatively muted in the context of industrial collapse since the 1990s (Mbiba 2017c). Instead of migrating to reside in informal slums of Harare, communal area Zimbabweans have migrated to other rural areas where land has been made available since 2000 as well as to South Africa (for young people) where money can be earned from doing petty-trading and casual jobs.

Thus, the largest proportion of plot owners in the informal settlements is largely of urban origin not recent rural-urban migrants. Those who were tenants in the high-density areas (of Harare, Chitungwiza, etc.), saw an opportunity to escape high rental costs (tyranny of rentals) or transitioned from renters to plot owners, house builders and owners in the new peri-urban areas post 2000. In earlier periods of urban demolitions, government ware-housed some of the displaced households in camps (Kamete 2017, 77), notably Porta Farm and Hatcliffe to the west and north of Harare City respectively. Some of these residents found their way to the new post 2000 peri-urban settlements such as Caledonia, Solomia, Hopley and Saturday Retreat (Waterfalls area south of Harare City) (Machakaire 2015).

Furthermore, multiple-home ownership has been observed among peri-urban residents (Hungwe 2014; Mazhindu 2021). Survey data from Mazhindu (2021, 113) observed multiple-home ownership in 37% of respondents for Ruwa-Solomio, 25% for Domboshava and 20% for Caledonia–Eastview area (Mazhindu 2021, 113). Overall, 44% of survey respondents had completed secondary education and 38% were university graduates: in Solomio and Caledonia, the proportion of graduates among respondents was 35% and 27%, respectively (Mazhindu 2021, 106–108). Informal interviews⁸ with residents indicated that some zones in these peri-urban areas (Caledonia and Solomia) were 'reserved' for allocation to civil servants and union members of these groups. This points to a significant presence of residents with middle class or intrinsic middle-class outlook.

The emerging dominance of urban to peri-urban migration is evident elsewhere in Africa (Mercer 2017; Andreasen et al. 2020). Respondents to surveys in Dar es Salaam and Mwanza, Tanzania (Andreasen et al. 2020) revealed that as many as 44% of home builders in informal peri-urban settlements had one or more properties besides the one they were building or occupying. For 26% of the home builders, these additional properties were in the same urban area. In Zimbabwe, the middle class characteristics (and aspirations) of peri-urban homeowners is witnessed in the diverse structures that they construct including expansive bungalows that would be the envy of many anywhere in the world (see Appendix). The sources of income to finance such developments are equally diverse including significant diaspora remittances. Mazhindu (2021, 129) further reports that speculative land deals characterized 70% of transactions in Saturday Retreat and 25% in both Solomio and Caledonia–Eastview and 20% in Domboshava. All this demands that illegal peri-urban home builders and victims of urban demolitions around Harare be seen not as un-informed recent immigrants from rural areas, as destitute poor citizens or 'outcasts' (Mpofu 2012), but as agile, informed, income earning, risk taking actors and long-term

residents of the city, a significant segment of whom are wealth accumulators rather than home seekers. The next section suggests that they are much closer to the centre of power than the 'outcasts' and 'refugees' (Mpofu 2012) surviving as peri-urban squatters.

5. How informal land is allocated: political patronage and social contracts

Illegal peri-urban land allocations in Zimbabwe have been facilitated by 'Cooperatives' and brokers popularly known as land barons (GoZ 2013b, 2015, 2019, 2020). Why land barons and Cooperatives that are at the centre of illegal allocation and sales of public land remain untouched is part of the mystery. Before the fall of President Mugabe in 2017, the barons were untouchable and since then, arrests have been made but no significant convictions. At the time of completing the first draft of this paper, Mr Fredrick Mabamba, a leading baron in Chitungwiza and Caledonia died in Harare Central Remand Prison on 5th March 2021 while awaiting trial (The Herald 2021a, 2021b) for illegal peri-urban land allocations. Since 1999, Mabamba, a former ruling ZANU (PF) party councillor for Ward 25 Chitungwiza and Deputy Mayor, had illegally sold council land pocketing over US\$16 million (The Herald, 2021b). That land barons and Cooperatives are overwhelmingly led by ruling party ZANU (PF) aligned activists and power brokers is a recurring theme in media and research reports and acknowledged in the government commissioned reports (GoZ 2013b, 2015, 2019). This could explain why the President has not made public the exhaustive two year-long inquisitorial report of inquiry led by Retired Supreme Court Judge, Justice Tendai Uchena (GoZ 2019). A summary of The Uchena Report (GoZ 2019, 7–8) found *inter alia* that, informal, unplanned and illegal peri-urban developments were:

... a creation by aspiring and sitting Members of Parliament as a way of mobilising political support; abuse of political office in the allocation and appropriation of urban state land, and use of names of top ruling party leadership to exert influence on Government institutions and processes ... which led to illegal sale of urban state land ... creation of opportunities for land barons and criminals to sell urban state land. Land barons are usually politically connected, powerful, self-proclaimed illegal state land authorities who illegally sold state land in and around urban areas without accounting for the proceeds ...

The report calculated that the illegal land sales deprived government of income worth three (3) billion United States Dollars (GoZ 2019, 6). In the face of all this, that nothing has been done to bring culprits to book indicates that land barons have tentacles reaching to the core of state power in the country – a radical uprising against them would equate to an uprising against the ruling party state. Indeed, in the case of Mabamba cited above, despite the criminal cases hanging over his head, the ruling ZANU (PF) party declared him a Provincial Hero.⁹

The barons recruit and allocate land on condition that the recipients maintain allegiance to the ruling party (*musangano*) and in particular, to assure that, come election time, they not only cast their vote for ZANU (PF) party but mobilize for it as well. It is in this context that land was allocated to youth in the Hopley area (Harare South) with a view to reward and recruit them for their role as foot soldiers of the ruling party. This is the social contract that empowers the recipients – enabling them to access land. It is this ruling party link that gives illegal home builders the audacity to ignore eviction court orders (see e.g. FinGaz 2017, 7). However, the same condition implies that recipients are likely to lose the land and erected structures in the event that the benefactor land baron's power diminishes within the faction riddled ZANU (PF) or when the recipient is perceived as 'dragging their feet' relative to their support for ZANU (PF). Herein lies the empowering –disempowering double bind of the ruling ZANU (PF) party-state patronage system. Fully aware of this double bind, recipients take the risk, to buy and develop land illegally, hoping that they will be the lucky ones to emerge unscathed in the long term.

The risk also takes another dimension in that illegal land allocation and sales (although to a lesser degree) have also been done by opposition party MDC aligned land barons (McGegor 2013). The MDC has political control of the urban local authorities in Zimbabwe since 2000, while ZANU (PF) controls the state. This scenario creates room for dissonance and cut-throat centre-local relations in

which the state intervenes to undermine urban local authorities in favour of ZANU (PF) and blame the MDC for any resultant chaos such as in land allocation (NewZimbabwe 2021). Meanwhile, some MDC politicians controlling local authorities do their best to empower themselves and their associates through illegal land deals. But the key drivers remain ZANU(PF) aligned formations. For instance, Nehanda Radio (2021) investigative journalists exposed how, in areas of Chitungwiza where informal settlers are perceived as surrogates of the MDC councillors that control the municipality, the ruling ZANU (PF) has used the office of Provincial Development Coordinator and ministry of local government to engineer and instruct the demolition of houses. McGegor (2013, 784) and McGregor and Chatiza (2019) have revealed the intricate and often brute mechanisms that ZANU (PF) has employed to undermine MDC-run councils like Harare and Chitungwiza. These include the use of coercive militia such as Chipangano that usurped local council roles to manage Mbare markets and for years pocketed the fees it collected (McGegor 2013) and the demolitions unfolding in 2020–2021. The tussle for power also results in demolitions of illegal houses whose owners are perceived as ‘disposable’ by whoever has the upper hand at any given time. However, pronouncements of impending demolitions are often done for what Zimbabwean now call ‘optics’; i.e. intended to make the public feel that action is on the way when in reality nothing much will happen.

The form of social movements and everyday resistance they can engage in is within the framework of ZANU (PF); an activism of institutionalized informality. When this fails at any moment, the actors do not seek alternatives – there are no alternatives outside ZANU (PF) – but to start all over again within the same framework. There are no viable alternatives and leadership that can promise and offer material rewards outside ZANU (PF). This explains the lack of mobilization against the known land barons and the fact that residents will continue to participate in processes that they know are illegal, fraudulent and risky. In a synthesis of literature on peri-urban informality, Mazhindu (2021, 25) argues that ‘... hapless peri-urban residents find themselves sandwiched between the antagonisms of restrictive and technocratic planning systems on the one hand and on the other, exploitation by alliances of the powerful and well connected at various levels of society’. In contrast and supporting Muchadenyika (2017), the argument in this paper is that the peri-urban residents should not be seen as passive victims but active participants in risky activities whose possible negative outcomes they are fully aware of. However, their activism and capacity to reconfigure power suggested by (Muchadenyika 2017) is circumscribed by and within the ZANU (PF) party-state juggernaut within which the technocratic role of town planning is very limited to that of an instrument rather than a driving force for change. Whether in its formal ‘pure/ideal’ form or the corrupted version that prevails, planning remains a malleable handmaiden of politics.

6. Conclusion: the ‘double bind’ of citizen-ruling party social relations

This paper examined the mystery of demolitions of illegal peri-urban houses in urban Zimbabwe (especially in Harare); given that demolitions recur with detectable frequency and predictably, why there seems to be no activism to bring them to an end and why residents return to illegal land purchases and development when fully aware that such developments are at risk of demolitions. Much of the literature portrays these residents and homeowners as the poor and subaltern, Bayat (2000) who are engaged in insurgent and subaltern urbanism (Roy 2009) which is ‘pathologized’ by authorities (Kamete 2013) and hence the demolitions. However, the paper points to a more complex situation and argues that these dimensions of urbanism have to be understood from the perspectives of social relations between home builders and Zimbabwe’s informalized state that uses land as a mode of distributional governance on one hand while households seek to use land and housing for wealth creation on the other.

Thus the inter-related processes of illegal land allocations and demolitions unfold at the nexus of social contracts around distribution in a context of an informalized ruling ZANU (PF) party-state

and government. Epistemologically, the ruling party-state informality crystallized as *jambanja* - a revolution for economic empowerment with the reclaiming of land as the bridgehead starting in 2000 (Chaumba, Scoones, and Wolmer 2003; Muzondidya 2007; Matondi 2012; Mbiba 2017a, 2017b). Land redistribution and economic empowerment that ZANU (PF) views as Zimbabwe's Third *Chimurenga* (revolution) could not be achieved within the confines of the law - hence the state informality.

The paper has argued that residents are involved in a political struggle to access land for housing, but one that is circumscribed by an omnipresent informalized ruling party ZANU (PF) party-state. Most of the informal settlement homebuilders and residents are well educated and aspiring middle classes who are fully aware that land sales and development led by ZANU (PF) aligned land barons are informal and illegal; they partake in a social contract of empowerment outside the formal law. However, the same process of empowerment is also disempowering; being outside the formal institutions of the law, it is dependent on the whims of the ruling ZANU (PF) party benefactors and the durability of the specific patron/land baron as political power broker in ZANU (PF). When any of this fails, demolitions are inevitable.

Insights in this paper contribute to broader debates of informality and agency of different actors noted by (Banks, Lombard, and Mitlin 2020). The paper acknowledges the agency of low-income groups and the subaltern engaging in acts of self-provision in the land and housing sphere. But so too are the practices of middle classes, working classes, elites and the state acting informally (Roy 2009) to secure political power and wealth accumulation. It is the interplay of these processes, the intersection of interests of these actors that determine the trajectory of informality in any given historical context. *Jambanja* and the informality of the Zimbabwean state since 2000 form the structural underpinnings that circumscribe agency in informal settlements. These details of the Zimbabwe case help to make much clearer the significance of social relations between the illegal homeowners in informal settlements and the state.

Thus the paper underlines that to understand urban demolitions in Zimbabwe and informality more broadly, one needs to go beyond the legalistic and bureaucratic explanations and to bring in politics; a politics that is unique to each context in time and often missing in some recent studies (Mpofu 2012; Mercer 2017; Andreasen et al. 2020). Citizens and formations involved in illegal land allocation and housing in Zimbabwe are directly and indirectly entangled in the ruling party-state politics; the nature of their incorporation determines their room for manoeuvre, the degree of autonomy and capacity to act radically outside and against these party-state structures. The relations constitute a 'double bind', that empowers homeowners but equally erodes their capacity for any activism outside the ruling party state. Future studies should examine how post 2017 (after Mugabe's exit) the double bind constrains the ruling party state from extricating itself from the illegal social relations in the peri-urban land sphere and state informality more broadly.

Notes

1. The Feed ZW (2020) 'The Harare Urban Land Battle Documentary', 30th September 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPjYjINgmPo> (last visited 18th January 2021).
2. 'Harare City Council Demolishes hundreds of illegal market stalls' ZTN, Harare, 18th April 2020'. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKGDkSlj0zs>, last visited 18th January 2020).
3. 'Council Demolishes 190 Houses in Budiriro, At least 190 illegal houses were demolished in Budiriro 5 yesterday with police arresting Caleb Kadye on charges of parcelling out stand on Tembwe Housing Cooperative land about 2km from Budiriro shopping centre. 9th December 2020, ZimPapers Online Harare, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ud_rC7oxHLc (last visited 18th January 2021).
4. 'NewsDay HStvLive (2020) Harare City Council demolished 150 Budiriro Houses, 9th December 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pN8akSDsyTM> (last visited 18th January 2021).
5. With tenants, the average house in Harare has fourteen people.
6. Chihambakwe, Mutizwa and Partners are among the leading law firms in Zimbabwe.
7. 'The Status and Future of Zimbabwe Planning' WhatsApp Group set up in March 2020, initially to discuss the impacts of COVID-19, and administered by Innocent Chirisa, Faculty of Social Sciences University of Zimbabwe and Tazviona Richman Gambe, Faculty of Social Sciences, Great Zimbabwe University.

7. Informality and regularization is the subject of a separate paper and will not be pursued here.
8. Author drive-through informal interviews with residents in 2018.
9. Robson Sharuko, ZBC News, 7th March 2021, Harare.

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Appendix. Dimensions of Illegal Peri-Urban Developments in Harare Metropolitan



Zimre Park Harare, House Demolitions, 12th–13th November 2020





Chitungwiza houses built on wetlands in Zengeza 4 will be demolished. — Picture: Memory Mangombe

Source: The Herald, Harare, 9th October 2020 Online: <https://www.herald.co.zw/chitungwiza-to-demolish-illegal-settlements/> (last visited 1st February 2021).





Houses illegally developed on wetlands in Chitungwiza flooded after heavy rains January 2021. NewZimbabwe, 30th January 2021, Online: <https://www.newzimbabwe.com/heavy-rains-leave-trail-of-disaster-in-chitungwiza/> (last visited 2nd January 2021).