

Gullible Legitimation of Poverty through Prophetism: The Case of Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Prophetism has become a controversial and contested terrain in Zimbabwe, despite some taking it as the solution to Africa's problem of democracy and lack of human development. Prophetism is declared as part of the developmental package. The discourse of Prophetism in Zimbabwe has been invoked and implicated in the power and political dynamics, with it being accused of perpetuating the dominance and subordination of ordinary Zimbabweans by those in power and their access to national resources. The birth of the new crop of prophets in Zimbabwe around the turn of the century was heralded as a new beginning for Zimbabwe, which would see the ushering in of an era of prophets who would stand with the people while guiding them to the promised land of 'milk and honey'. However, with the passage of time, this wave of positivism soon gave way to harsh economic meltdown and poisoned politics which also realised the birthing of 'portfolio or briefcase prophets' whose lifeline or benefits and true allegiance was to political leaders and not the masses or ordinary congregants, while in some cases the state has turned a blind eye on the publicised omission and commission of Prophets' transgressions. This paper makes the case that prophetism in Zimbabwe has legitimised certain political players while delegitimising and silencing both alternative players and the suffering masses.

Keywords: Prophetism, Poverty, Political legitimation, Zimbabwe, Human development

Introduction

Christianity, which is the foundation of the prophets' religion, came to Africa with the Portuguese and Dutch missionaries who came to colonise the continent. The religion brought by the colonialists was used as a political tool to gain the confidence and trust of the locals and then used to manipulate them. In contemporary Zimbabwe, one sees the continuation of this trend by the government of the day. However, they not only use Christian pastors and prophets but also incorporate in-

digenous African churches as well as African Traditional Religion practitioners. Prophets like Amos, Daniel and Isaiah were known to actively participate in the politics of their day. This is an indication of how politics is embodied or centred on religion. Zimbabwean politicians are known for seeking divine assistance, revelation and protection during campaigns. The church itself dabbles in politics, for example, when electing church officials who themselves canvass for votes.

Religion and Politics: The Interface

Tshaka and Senokoane [2016] argue that it is clear that the entrenched idea of the separation between the material and the spiritual is problematic, especially now when the gap between the haves and the have-nots in Zimbabwe has significantly grown. Christians, because they are affected by politics, can and must become involved in politics, thus making the point that politics is unavoidable yet necessary. According to Bridston [1969:116], 'the problem is that the church generally has denied its character as a political institution, has camouflaged its political processes, and has refused to admit the political responsibilities of its leaders.' Like many African countries, the communal way of life

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and the individuals' duty to further the community's common good matter. *Ubuntu* is a clear example of how a particular religious group does not have the exclusive right to ownership of human dignity. *Ubuntu* is the theory of people of Bantu descent whose core idea is that *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which is loosely translated to mean 'a person is a person because of or through others.' For scholars like Mangena [2019] and Metz [2012], a person acquires personhood or humanity only through peers and the community. This conception of dignity with a Sub-Saharan lineage is the view that our communal nature makes us the most important beings in the world. *Ubuntu* argues that our

dignity is constituted by our relationship with others, as argued by Botman [2000], who posits that the dignity of human beings emanates from the networks of relationships with others. *Ubuntu*, therefore, sets certain guidelines emphasising interdependence and community-centred personhood and how individuals ought to treat each other and relate. In other words, the core prescription of *Ubuntu* is treating every person with respect, concern, and friendliness. Only such treatment conforms to the Ubuntu philosophy, leading to personal and communal development. Human beings are created as social beings. It has to be understood that it is through socialisation that we come to-

gether, share and learn from one another. It is also coupled with valuable information about life and the skills needed to live well, and this togetherness can be a powerful tool for promoting human development.

Significantly, we ask the question: What purpose does politics serve? Hulled [1993:13] gives this directive about politics: 'Political governance ... implies deliberations, aspiration for rationality, and subjecting governance by folkways to questioning and criticism'. If the church or Christian minister is not involved in politics, how then do they become part of the mentioned process of deliberations? The problem of

the involvement or non-involvement of church leaders or new age prophets in party politics is further exacerbated by a recent past that has elevated political correctness above sincerity. Political correctness not only plagues the current Zimbabwean society, but because what affects the civil community also affects the Christian community, this problem of political correctness is even more strongly applied in the church through a church order that has not allowed itself to move away from its past.

Prophetic activity is often characterised by either pro-state or anti-state prophecy. Pro-state or centre prophecy aims to protect the image of those in power through legitimising and sanitising state activities, whether these activities benefit the general populace or not. Pro-state prophets use the moral authority they derive from their religious positions to sway public opinion and actions. Anti-state or periphery prophets operate outside the formal institutions of government and are usually pro-majority or the general populace. They expose the supposed evils perpetrated by the system and therefore offer checks and balances on the state. This paper aims to show how religion has been used as a weapon of political gain by politicians. Some Zimbabwean prophets have been known to use religion to advance the political cause for some political parties and individuals, leading to the neglect of their mandate to protect the common good.

Religion and politics have a salient relationship which ought to be understood contextually [Levine 1986; Beyers 2015]. The very nature of the affinity of religion and politics in Africa creates the perception that religion can be manipulated in politics. Since

1980, when Zimbabwe attained its independence, Christian leaders have enjoyed an advantageous relationship with the Zimbabwean government and the ruling party. Chaguta [2018] posits that politicians such as the late President, R. G Mugabe, who despite being Catholic would attend different denomination conferences wearing their different regalia in a bid to garner votes for his party during elections while Nelson Chamisa the leader of the main opposition party in Zimbabwe the Citizens Coalition for Change is an ordained pastor of the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe. Is this not then the use of religion by politicians as a tool for furthering their political agenda? Chitando [2013] argues that religious leaders and political leaders almost always have the same ideologies, which has led to the strengthening of religious leaders' influence on political issues.

With its own challenges, it cannot be denied that the church is still perceived to be one of the most credible institutions. This is because churches are trusted and presented as institutions that are better placed to assist communities in struggling against issues of poverty, among other problems people face. Politics cannot be separated from ethical considerations. Barth [1989:284] makes this point poignantly clear:

“The poor, the socially and economically weak and threatened, will always be the object of the church’s primary and particular concern, and it will always insist on the state’s special responsibility for these weaker members of society.”

It is from such premises that one can conclude that politics cannot be separated from religious con-

siderations. Given the fact that politics has a very intentional role to play in society and is concerned with the good of society before anything else, Zimbabwean prophets tend to align themselves with political leaders and, as a result, have weakened other leaders who do not always support state policies. Some prophets have been given positions in government and have been invited to attend dubious inauguration ceremonies where they sing politicians' praises as true political liberators and often offer prayers for the new leaders. They, in return, condemn opposition politicians as sellouts, conmen, political prostitutes and other derogatory which results in the prophets undermining the true role of the church in fighting for the weak.

Manyeruke [2013] argues that Zimbabwean churches are full of political activists who are part and parcel of political decision-making in Zimbabwe. It cannot be underestimated that what we believe religiously will affect our political beliefs and practices. Zimbabwean politicians are known to visit various church denominations during their campaigns, where they mobilise people to vote for them and their political parties. Churches have been beneficiaries of the Land Reform Program in Zimbabwe, with some individual prophets benefiting directly. Some scholars have argued that these land allocations, which have been under the guise of promotion of self-sustenance, are nothing but luring of positive attitudes towards the government, but most importantly, the ruling party in Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF).

Biblical prophets such as Amos and Nathan participated in the

politics of their day and often legitimised the rulers of their day despite their flaws and injustices that citizens suffered under their rule. Machingura [2012] brings to the fore the argument that Mugabe was propped up by religious leaders who praised and glorified his reign by emphasising his “God given” leadership abilities whilst neglecting to speak about the ills that were inflicted on the ordinary citizens by Mugabe’s party and government. Popular deliverance ministries such as United Family International Church (UFIC), which is led by Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa, pray for political leaders who sometimes will be in the audience during the services. Granted, political leaders also have the right to deliverance and prayers, but the purpose of these ministries ought to be to motivate and give hope to the ordinary

church members who are burdened by socio-economic challenges such as unemployment. Manyeruke and Hamauswa [2013] argue that true prophets need to have the best interests of the people at heart. However, the situation on the ground is different, where Zimbabwe has seen a generation of prophets who are power hungry, fame hungry and fortune hungry, all at the expense of their “flock.” It is the argument of this paper that the church ought to influence governance through challenging unjust social systems by championing democratic processes.

Prophets and some members of the top leadership have benefited politically, socially and economically from politics as a result of their participation in partisan politics. Churches like Forward in Faith Ministries International (FI-

FMI, also known as ZAOGA) and the Zion Christian Church have annually benefited from agricultural inputs, food hampers and monetary benefits from the state. They have also been allocated land through the government’s Land Reform and Resettlement Programme, which the religious have argued has significantly improved their congregants’ lives through the creation of employment and helped improve food security in their communities. However, it is the submission of this paper that these prophets have failed to see the root causes of injustice, corruption and internal conflicts. Many Christians in Zimbabwe have learned the art of survival, while their leaders have chosen silence as their answer and have silently confined the work of salvation of souls.

Political Violence and Elections

According to the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace [2000], political violence is ‘any form of violence that seeks to achieve certain desired political objectives by enhancing the political fortunes of the perpetrator or negating those of the opponent.’ Assault, rape, murder, arson, robbery and theft are some of the forms of political violence. It is difficult for democracy to exist in such environments where political processes are compromised.

The Zimbabwean government has never failed to honour the requirements of its constitution that elections be held every five years. The year 2000 elections were the most critical as they marked a significant shift in voter opinion as a result of the emergence of a worthwhile opposition party, the

Movement for Democratic Change, which threatened to topple the ruling party, ZANU (PF), from power. The ruling party, ZANU (PF), unleashed a political terror campaign whose aim was to crush opposition support. In campaign speeches, ZANU (PF) leaders and candidates seemed to sanction the use of violence and intimidation against political opponents. Then ZANU (PF) Secretary for Information and Publicity, Nathan Shamuyarira, is quoted as saying, ‘the area of violence is an area where ZANU PF has a very strong, long and successful history.’ This was a clear admission of the ruling party’s reliance on coercive and intimidating tactics.

Elections in Zimbabwe are often characterised by claims of violence and human rights violations, which have produced a polarised society where ordinary, innocent people suffer from socio-economic problems. Political parties have been involved in acts of violence in acts of violence in their bid to gain political support. Critics have questioned the role of the church in such a crisis. Can the church afford to “hold its peace” while the people it supposedly ought to serve are living in abject poverty, unemployed and suffering other social ills? Is the church not supposed to bring salvation and deliver the people from anything that prevents them from enjoying life in its fullness [John 10:10]? Is the church only for spiritual freedom and not political, social, economic and ideological freedom?

The Church's Response

The church's role is that of advocating for justice and peace, which form the basis of human rights and dignity in any society. It is the sovereign responsibility of the church leaders to not only uphold the faith, but also to speak out firmly in the face of violence, injustice, among other ills, regardless of who is perpetrating these crimes. Zimbabwean church leaders, especially the "new age" prophets, have failed to act, mobilise their energy and political will to be part of the solution to the Zimbabwean social, economic, political and civil problems. The co-option of church leaders by the ruling ZANU (PF) party can be interpreted as an attempt to stifle the prophetic voice. Prophets like Walter Magaya of Prophetic Healing Deliverance (PHD) Ministries, Emmanuel Makandiwa of United Family International Church (UFIC), and Andrew Wutaunashe of Family of God (FOG) are some of the key centre prophets in Zimbabwe who have remained mum in the face of the growing loss of dignity of the person among the citizens of Zimbabwe. Thinkers such as Lobo [1993] have defended these prophets by arguing that some politicians are so suspicious about religious leaders that the prophets encounter opposition and even threats when they exercise their prophetic function of denouncing injustices and violations of human rights. He argues that some politicians have gone to the extent of advising church leaders to shepherd their flock and not meddle in politics.

Periphery Prophets

Periphery prophets have sought to build a coalition that reflects the multiplicity of their religion as a whole, which they argue provides them with the political legitimacy they need to fight for programs and policies that promote social justice, economic inclusion, human dignity, and the common good. They seek to empower ordinary citizens to hold government accountable and advance what they view as the core principles of the Zimbabwean Constitution.

The Zimbabwean Catholic Bishops' Conference, as cited by the Catholic Commission for Justice [2000] and Peace, was concerned about the growing loss of dignity of the person among Zimbabweans. They argued that 'the Lord God created humanity in his image and gave us dignity above all creatures.' What we witnessed in Zimbabwe is a deprivation of this God-given dignity of the citizens by politicians for their selfish political gain. This is a serious abuse of both political power and fellow human beings. In their

message, the bishops reminded the politicians that everyone has a sovereign right to participate freely in political activities in one's society. The Declaration of Rights, as enshrined in the Zimbabwean constitution, contains various rights and freedoms, the observance, enjoyment and enforcement of which would make Zimbabwe a stable, peaceful and prosperous country.

Banana [1996] argues that the church must continue to be the watchdog of democracy and ensure that no impediments are placed on the path of those Zimbabweans wishing to exercise their constitutional right to vote. Dictatorship can breed discontent, for as long as there exists the possibility that, when the situation demands to change a government by democratic means, the temptation to resort to underhanded methods will always be averted. Therefore, the church has a mandate, by virtue of its mission, to exercise its prophetic voice.



Prophets and Human Development

According to the Human Development Report [2021-2022], human development focuses on the improvement of people's lives, giving people more freedom and opportunities to live lives that they value. In effect, this means developing people's abilities and giving them a chance to use them. Human development entails providing people with opportunities, not insisting that they make use of them. The process of human development should at least create an environment for people, individually and collectively, to develop to their full potential and to have a reasonable chance of leading productive and creative lives which they value.

Politics deals with civil government in a material world. The material and spiritual are not opposed to each other, as the Persians taught. They are together just as the man's body and soul are together. A correct approach to politics involves both the material and spiritual. Much of politics deals with economic matters. The

economic questions are usually the most important ones in political campaigns. Economics has to do with making a living. It deals with man's work, his calling under God. The Christian leader and his or her congregation ought to be extremely interested in politics because the political issues and decisions affect them at the very core of their activity on Earth.

Prophets, it can be argued, should be development-oriented and not conventionally static. To fulfil this role effectively must always have their loyalties with the people and not necessarily the political leadership of the country. They have to take a leading role in defining democratic principles which ensure and encourage freedom, justice, and above all, the human development of the people. Like democracy, the church exists through the commitment and active participation of its members. The church represented by the prophets is therefore a midwife in bringing people together for a common purpose. It is the responsibility of the prophets to ensure that people exercise their rights as citizens who do not live only for a future world but for a present where their capabilities are fully realised.

Africa's economic progress has been affected by corruption, which has destroyed politicians' moral fibres. Prophets are therefore called upon to stand up against corruption in line with Exodus (23:8), which states that '...you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials and subverts the cause of those who are in the right.' Christian leaders should actively fight against corruption by refusing to give or accept bribes from politicians and their surrogates. Prophets need to speak against corruption at all levels, which is understandably not an easy task given that corruption is rampant in Zimbabwe.

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Prophetism and Democracy

Resolutions about the economy, society and beliefs are taken in the political realm. Thus, the non-existence of a Christian in politics implies that a Christian is not part of this policymaking process, and, because what affects the individual in the Christian community also affects the same individual in the civil community, the idea of the Christian from politics is, in fact, outrageous. Makumbe and Compagnon [1995] argue that a successful democracy must be conducted in accordance with specific legal procedures and pre-conditions. Of utmost importance is transparency, where the various rules, regulations and procedures are adhered to throughout the exercise of elections. Elections must be conducted in a peaceful political environment, which means contestants are free to campaign for support, free to express themselves and their own views about their electorate without fear, intimidation or victimisation [Makumbe & Compagnon 1995]. A climate of tolerance and respect among citizens and political parties or even among various functions within a party strengthens democracy and fosters peaceful political competition, while political intolerance achieves the opposite. Elections are the principal means through which citizens can influence their leaders, select them and depose them. Democracy's guiding principle of citizenship involves the right to equal treatment of human beings, especially in the areas of making collective choices, being equally accountable and accessible to all members of the polity.

Concerning the issue of democracy, churches have a role to play, and prophets ought to be the midwives of democracy and the

watchdogs of human rights. The prophets' job is therefore both prophetic and institutional in effecting the gospel message in the world. Otto [2000] postulates that prophets need to courageously and boldly condemn injustice and oppression, whilst at the same time reminding society about their rights to vote, refrain from political violence, corruption, and tolerance. Otto [2000] further posits that the church, more than any other institution, is in a privileged position to reach the heart of the people.

If the prophets, pastors and other church leaders are to make a difference in people's lives, the church has to be open to dialogue with all forces and movements in society without identifying itself with any one of them. The church ought to make it abundantly clear to political players that it can never be an auxiliary force for any political party and owes no one unquestionable political allegiance. Instead, these prophets should be known as independent forces which avoid partisanship while remaining true to their own mission or challenge the world at large in terms of human development, and the justice of the kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus. It is also the role of the prophets and pastors to help build a truly democratic Zimbabwe where they can criticise election rigging, political violence, and hold the government accountable for its actions. The slogan "leave politics to politicians" needs to be banished to history, as it is a denial of democracy and development. Politicians need to realise that when Christian leaders engage in political issues, they are not anti-politicians but will be advocating for the ordinary man's well-being.

Conclusion

A society where people can develop to their full potential and have a reasonable chance of leading productive and creative lives which they value is what every nation should strive for. Human beings are in constant search for free expression of their ideas and integral human development. This desire for development is at the heart of people's struggles, thus the church's crucial role of guiding the people as they fight against social, economic and political injustices. The new age prophets and other church leaders, therefore, ought to create an atmosphere where genuine democracy and human development can flourish. To do this, pastors and prophets need to empower the people to build their societies. If the prophets stand by the people, Zimbabwe will move from a situation of underdevelopment to one of justice, development and genuine freedom of the masses.

A deplorable lack of unity between the different Christian denominations has been exploited by the government and the media. The government occasionally invites centre prophets, pastors, priests and bishops to speak on and support the government's position on behalf of the church, thereby denouncing true Christian voices as being spiritually misguided. This has often been interpreted as an unwillingness by the political

leaders to have independent churches which cannot align with their political objectives. It seems the state does not appreciate the church as a partner in dialogue, asking or questioning their integrity, as evidenced by the vilification of peripheral prophets such as Talent Chiwenga and Pius Ncube of the Catholic Church. Zimbabwean politicians want the church's full support, whether they are right or wrong, or else they vilify the church or leaders as enemies or irrelevant outsiders.

Although the church does not have the blueprint for human development, it can assess the present situation of the people in light of the demands and principles of the kingdom of God.

Although some church leaders have raised their voices against the injustices and poverty the ordinary people are facing in Zimbabwe, their voices would be more audible if the Christian community leadership spoke with one voice. It appears these prophets are not sure what the solutions to the problems bedeviling the country are. The question to ask is, in addition to prayer, what should Christian leaders do in response to gross injustices and disrespect for life and human rights? The normal response of Prophets in the face of dictatorial rule ought to be to stand with the ordinary people.



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