

Land, Political Power, and Violence in Republican Rome and Contemporary Zimbabwe: A Comparative View

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Abstract

This article seeks to undertake a comparative study of the politics of corruption and organized violence in two historically, geographically, and culturally distinct societies, namely the Roman Republic and contemporary Zimbabwe. Based on the assumption that power politics undercut spatial-temporal distinctions, as has also been observed by Finley,² this study extrapolates the Roman Republic's nexus of political power, land and violence into the case of contemporary Zimbabwe. The article frames part of its argument in one aspect of Marx's social theory of production and also Michel Foucault's view of power as not just an abstraction but a force that defines itself in practical situations where it enables individuals to achieve and/or block certain goals. Thus, in both political landscapes, we consider land as one of the crucial sites where power plays out, and in this sense, draw upon the study of the economy of sharing resources in different parts of the world. We also argue that agrarian violence, selfishness and corruption are not products of a specific mode of production *per se*; rather, they are consequences of the breakdown of civic life, and result from prolonged dictatorship.

Keywords: violence, power, corruption, dictatorship.

Introduction

This article demonstrates cases of organized violence and corruption in politics of the Roman Republic and proceeds to extrapolate this scenario to the case of contemporary Zimbabwe. In this sense, the article advances a study of power politics and political violence that cuts across historical epochs and political boundaries by comparing antiquity with present-day manifestations and vice versa. Comparative investigations of a similar nature have been done by Finley (1986: x, 131),³ whose work introduced new concepts to the study of classics derived from his wide familiarity with modern social theory, thus widening scholarly appreciation of antiquity. Finley's study is a multifaceted anthropological approach drawing upon a comparative interrogation of literate, post-primitive, pre-industrial and historical societies based on the thesis that in a post-modern world where national and cultural boundaries are increasingly crossed and redefined, ethnic essentialism seems outdated.⁴

Our basic argument echoes Michel Foucault's view that power is seen in its external visage, at the point where it is in direct and immediate relationship with that we can provisionally call its object, its target, its field of application; that is where it installs itself and produces its real effects.⁵ Force/violence as a form of power is in certain cases at the foundation of the distributive system in societies where there is perceived wealth to be divided. Men and women struggling over control of the surplus of a society (land as the means for producing surplus in the case of Zimbabwe and Rome) will not acquiesce for as long as there is cause for disgruntlement. While people will not resort to armed revolution for trivial gains, when control over the entire surplus of a society is involved, the prospect is more enticing.⁶

Domination over land and political power produced by the exchange relationships within the two societies of Rome and Zimbabwe is viewed to be the main cause of violent political behavior. The comparative approach taken in this article ties in with Widlok's⁷ examination of the economy of sharing in a variety of social and political contexts around the world. Widlok's comparative approach spans a wide range of material from hunter-gatherer ethnography alongside debates and empirical illustrations from globalized society.

We may also note that some academic work has already been done comparing the ancient world and Africa. Mention may be made of Francis Machingura's work⁸ which refers to Mesopotamian, Old Testament, Hellenistic and traditional Shona views of kingship and the New Testament idea of Jesus' Kingship as a prelude to discussion of Mugabe, the president of Zimbabwe (at the time of writing). We may also mention the study of Thompson⁹ which sought to inquire whether "racism" against Black people of the kind seen in colonial Africa existed among the ancient Romans.

In this undertaking we attempt to use a single aspect of Marx's social theory not only as a way of justifying the study of an ancient society and a contemporary society side by side, but also with the aim of seeing certain universal characteristics and trends of human political behavior and their culmination in violence.

Why Ancient Rome and Zimbabwe?

Zimbabwe is embedded in a capitalist world and dependent on commerce and other economic relations with the world. Rome was not similarly pressured by a more powerful corporation-dominated global community, and so one might initially suppose that its economy was not subject to the same pressures of development as that of Zimbabwe. Yet this is true only to a certain extent. The economy of traditional African societies is agriculture-dominated, like that of ancient Rome, and the presence of cities in Africa did not destroy traditional African society immediately or totally; aspects of it carry on in rural areas. If we take further into consideration the traditional resistance to change, and the fact that industrial infrastructure is certainly not as strong in Zimbabwe as it is in the First World, particularly under Zimbabwe's economic pressures, the difference from ancient agrarian society is not so sharp as it might appear initially.¹⁰

If a comparison of Roman politics with Zimbabwean politics sounds forced and unreasonable, one may need to consider for a moment the historical setting of Zimbabwe, a country that has been involved in the 80s in a bitter civil struggle with the accompanying horrors of bloodshed, violence, divided families, destroyed lands, a disrupted society, a ruined economy, massive unemployment of war veterans, and a re-distribution of land.¹¹ And we might ask: why is land still a central factor for Zimbabwe, as for ancient Rome? Why are similar political phenomena taking place in both societies, as will be later indicated? Could they economically and politically have more in common than we suspected?

Consider, firstly, the dynamics of land politics that intensified since the year 2000, and consider how Zimbabwe continues to experience serious economic and social problems as well as redistributive challenges in the spheres of land and the economy. Then consider events during the Roman revolution in general, and post-Actium Rome in particular. Political violence started in Roman politics with the attempted land reform of the Gracchi (133 and 123 BC). One main feature of the history of the last years of the Roman Republic was the use of more or less organized violence in politics, in which bribery and corruption were rife; Caesar's agrarian law was carried *'per vim'*/through violence with the aid of Pompey's veterans; he (Caesar) instituted in 59BC a policy of land reform designed to take away land and property from his political enemies.¹² Earlier on, Marius and Sulla had recruited private armies more loyal to themselves than to the state. They recruited poor and landless citizens by offering them bounties of land upon discharge. Moreover, Augustus' and Antony's veterans engaged in violent confiscations of land in Italy after the battle of Philippi in 42 BC and also after the battle of Actium in 31 BC.

Marx and History: Zimbabwe and Roman Politics

We rely in the conceptual framework for this comparative study on Marx's social theory of production. We are aware that the application of Marx's theory to the history of the Roman Republic causes a problem of historical methodology. However, the theory enables us to read the two societies. We may thence derive, if not a full formal theory, then at least an approach, a habit of thought, a methodology that enables the reading of post-colonial Zimbabwe alongside the Roman Republic.

It should be noted that we are not here attempting to swallow whole the theory of Marxism, but only to look at parts of it that seem to be useful or credible for the cases at hand. Just as one who accepted the Pythagorean Theorem in mathematics as valid would not be expected to adopt Pythagorean mysticism and numerology as a whole, or even necessarily to be broadly "Pythagorean" in their philosophy, so one who finds useful material in Marx is not thereby committed to an uncritical or quasi-religious adherence to Marxist ideology. Similarly, one who finds even a part of Marxist ideas applicable to a situation should not be afraid of, nevertheless, dissenting from Marx where prudence or the evidence requires it, or nuancing their agreement with what Marx points out.

Marx writes: "In all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. It is a general illumination which bathes all the other colors and modifies their particularity. It is the particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it."¹³

This is an example of an area where critical acceptance of Marx's pronouncements may be warranted.

On the one hand, it is true that there are forms of economic production which predominate in particular societies, and it is part of Marx's merit to recognise that economics is not artificially separate from society, but rather the economist must take into account aspects of the social process other than "those aspects which could be treated unambiguously as economic."¹⁴ And this of course applies to us as non-economists who do not simply ignore those aspects of life that are economic but realize that our field of study may be affected by them. Marx referred to Asiatic, Ancient, Feudal and Bourgeois modes of production, as well as looking forward to a future communist revolution in which there would be no more productive relations of a constraining type.¹⁵ Without holding ourselves bound to follow Marx's exact typology, we may appreciate the insight that different modes of production predominate in different societies.

On the other hand, one might ask whether all societies absolutely rely on one form of production, or whether the rule of predominance of one or the other mode of production in a society might be a "by-and-large truth" rather than an absolute rule. For instance, could industrial farming and subsistence farming coexist in an African society? And would this not imply the coexistence of different economic modes of production, rather than just one kind of economy in Africa? With this in mind we can modify our attitude to Marx so that we can admit exceptions in real life to what he lays down, without thereby denying that he has raised valid points. We can look for dominant and socially influential modes of production in society, without necessarily, for ideological reasons, ignoring the possibility of multiple coexisting modes of production.

Marx talks of forms of society in which one kind of production predominates. With respect to pastoral peoples, certain forms of tillage occur.¹⁶ Konstan¹⁷ explains how, where settled agriculture predominates, a landed-property character is possessed even by industry and the forms of property corresponding to it; either industry is completely dependent on landed property, as among the earlier Romans, or, as in the Middle Ages, the organization of the land is imitated in an urban context. So agriculture basically dominates industry. In bourgeois society, by contrast, industry absorbs agriculture and capital becomes dominant.¹⁸ Konstan¹⁹ comments that, "In the terms in which Marx presents the series of forms of society or production, there is no great obstacle to seeing them as both hierarchically and historically ordered in complexity and power."

Lekas²⁰ sees in Marx's general theory a linear development of the forces of production within a given society, and these forces come ultimately into conflict with the prevailing form of economic and social relations. In the social production of their life, people, according to Marx, enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces.²¹

A non-Marxist might question whether the economic relations into which people enter are wholly independent of their will, or whether economic relations independent of the will of later generations of people might be the voluntary creation of earlier generations for which they should be held accountable.

This theoretically could be relevant in the case of economic inequalities created by colonists of a country and inherited post-colonially as a legacy. The question could also be asked whether post-colonials might be conscientised to exert voluntary control over economic states of affairs that have hitherto been assumed to be involuntary “facts of life”. Nevertheless, we may appreciate Marx’s point that society is influenced and conditioned by existing modes of production that have an economic influence even in what might not to the layperson seem a particularly “economic” issue. To what extent, for instance, might differences in social behavior be a reflection of the fact that different classes cannot access the same property equally, but in practice must live in separate neighborhoods where language and customs develop separately?

The violent land struggles that began in 2000 in Zimbabwe were a war fought by the colonized against the colonizers (the white race) in order to redress, as they saw it, an enduring colonial land imbalance between the Black majority and white minority commercial farmers who were supported by Western imperialism.²² The Zimbabweans argued that Britain and the rest of the Western world were adamantly opposed to land redistribution, in order to protect the wealth of their kith and kin in Zimbabwe to the disadvantage of Black people. The land question is seen in this article to be the central point around which violent political activity oscillates. In a way, the battle in Zimbabwean politics is mirrored by Marx’s theory as explained above, and as applied to a society where agriculture is dominant, as in traditional rural Africa. The Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front, ZANU (PF), has a slogan which goes: “Land is the Economy and the Economy is Land.”²³ It captures the significance of land in the discourse of politics in Zimbabwe.

We may at this point indicate that the idea of land as central to economics is not absent from traditional Western thought. The prominent physiocrat Francois Quesnay sought to indicate in his “Tableau Economique” how the fate of the economy was regulated by productivity in agriculture and how its surplus was diffused throughout the system in a network of transactions.²⁴ Later Adam Smith, while differing from the physiocrat school, nevertheless emphasized as they did that non-agricultural output depended ultimately on the availability of foodstuffs and raw materials needed as a support for industrial expansion.²⁵

Ancient History in Comparative Politics

We agree that the study of Roman history involves the attempt to understand cultures of far-off times of which our knowledge is somewhat incomplete. What we know about the Roman period in question would not allow us as moderns to blend comfortably into their culture.

And despite this, we claim as our heritage the right and duty to preserve and explore for posterity what the ancients experienced as part and parcel of the human condition. So the intellectual and practical value of this study hinges on the following considerations. According to Moyo,²⁶ “Human beings, by their very nature, tend to be so confined to the vicissitudes of the present such that they pay precious little attention to the past and the future in order to better understand the ‘here and now.’”

We admit that the great problems of historical inquiry derive from the antitheses of time and perpetual change.²⁷ Hence, our task seems particularly challenging. One of the dominant questions relates to the possibility of utilizing material from different time periods and geographical spaces. In order to respond to this, let us think of two consecutive historical epochs taken out of the uninterrupted sequence of the ages.²⁸ There are two very compelling questions which, for want of clarity, may be asked thus, following the precedent of Bloch.²⁹ Firstly, to what extent does the connection which the flow of time sets between the two periods predominate, or fail to predominate, over the differences born out of that same flow? And secondly, should our knowledge of the earlier period be considered indispensable or superfluous for the understanding of the latter? Or vice-versa? Furthermore, must we believe that, because the past does not entirely account for the present (or vice-versa), it is utterly useless for its interpretation?³⁰

Our argument supposes that true understanding of reality generally by humans is not possible without a certain range of comparison. The only necessary condition for the comparison to work is that it must be based upon different but related realities.³¹ It is in the present conditions and realities of contemporary Zimbabwe’s agrarian crisis that we have managed to perceive the vibrancy of human life that a great effort of the imagination can restore to the old Roman texts, which basically touch on the human condition.

In the words of Bloch:³²

“It is always by borrowing from our daily experiences and by shading with new tints that we derive the elements which help us to restore the past.”

The problem of violence in politics is ultimately a human problem, and the mental equipment and emotional patterns of men and women both ancient and modern have not radically changed. Roman history is in a position to make a meaningful contribution to modern sociological studies by restoring a sense of historical perspective and discouraging an obsession with the present, as if the present were anything more than a fleeting moment in the process of human and cosmic evolution.

So, Roman history, we argue, to some extent presupposes a common humanity, an underlying resemblance between the ancients and the moderns to a sufficient degree that, with appropriate explanation of the context, the modern researcher may approximate the response of the ancient Romans to the goods and evils of the human condition, and identify with what they have expressed in the literary and other evidence that they have left behind. We may recall the saying of Terence: “*Homo sum: ac nihil humanum alienum a me puto.*”³³ This should surely be the watchword for the study of ancient history as a humanistic endeavour: “I am a human, and I deem nothing human alien to me.”

The *Res Publica* in the First Century BC and Contemporary Zimbabwe: Towards a Conceptualization of the Ideas of *Res Publica* and *Officium*

Rome was under republican government at a certain stage of its history. Contemporary Zimbabwe also makes a claim to the name “republic”. What are the ideas that should inform our understanding of republic politics? *Res publica*, a Latin expression which may be translated as “republic”, and is the source of the English word, has multiple meanings. Sometimes it means the Roman state itself; sometimes, the constitution of the state, or its organs; sometimes, the underlying society; sometimes, the freedom implicit in the exercise of free speech, and the free choice of *amici* (friends) and *inimici* (enemies), and of policy to be advocated.³⁴ In first century BC the *res publica* was failing to cope with its problems. A variety of explanations have been offered by modern writers, but for Cicero, a contemporary politician, the fault lay in the greed, ambition and corruption of politicians.³⁵

Res Publica was the Romans’ usual name for their state. The word also literally means ‘public business of the people.’ A “people” may be understood as “a union of a number of men, acknowledging each other’s common rights, and pursuing in common their advantage or interest.”³⁶ The Roman philosophy of state business was one entrenched in a strong belief in the common wealth. Zimbabwe emerged from the liberation struggle in 1980 with a similar philosophy. Everything, including the land, belonged to the majority of Zimbabweans. We may mention slogans like, “*Pamberi nekugutsa ruzhinji!*” (Forward with the satisfying of the multitude!), and, “*Ivhu kuvanhu!*” (Land for the people!), and, “*Ivhu inhaka yedu tose vatema!*” (The land is the inheritance of all of us as blacks!) Such philosophy, soon after Independence, ceased to be practiced. Corruption, violence, hatred and divided families are what characterize Zimbabwe political landscape. Politicians are bent on building their personal empires at the expense of the common wealth.

Having looked at values in a Zimbabwean context, we now turn to consideration of values in a Roman context. As far as personal virtues are concerned, the Romans believed that *fides* (trust) was an important quality in a man’s character. In Cicero’s day, moreover, there were some, Cicero himself among them, who had begun to understand that government involved collective concern by the governing classes for the welfare of the governed.³⁷

Recognizing and acknowledging the common rights of others involved renouncing arbitrary or personal rule, or rule by a small group of men, what the Romans called *factio*; for this arbitrary rule they had a wide range of derogatory words, *regnum* and *dominatio* being two of the favourite.³⁸ The idea of the *Res Publica* meant that all citizens had a right to participate in the political life - not to participate equally, but to at least to participate.³⁹

In the *Res Publica*, a person's position was governed by their contributions to the state. In early times this meant contributions in money to the treasury, and in personal service in the army, but in the first century BC, the Roman citizens had not paid any tribute for three generations, and military service was the preliminary to a political career.⁴⁰ It is interesting to note that, in both Zimbabwe and the Roman Republic, land, grain, and war credentials are the main indices of power in political activity. The Gracchan land reforms instituted in 133BC and 123 BC created a nexus linking the land, the army and the commander in Rome. Soldiers no longer became dependent on the state for land grants, but rather depended on their commander. This is amply demonstrated by the role played by war veterans in land policy at Rome; Julius Caesar assigned *ager publicus* (public land) in Italy for distribution to Pompey's veterans). This was opposed in the *Comitia Tributa* (tribunician assembly), but Caesar got his way through organized violence.⁴¹ Again after the defeat of Cassius, Brutus and Caesar's other assassins at Philippi in 42BC, the triumvirate was faced with the problem of their bloated armies. Some one hundred thousand veterans retired, from the armies of Octavian and Anthony had to be pensioned off and settled somewhere. They, unwilling to be settled at the frontiers of the Empire, demanded land in Italy, leading to the confiscations which exacerbated the already vast political and social unrest in Italy.⁴²

In Zimbabwe, as in Rome, war veterans have taken land through organised violence. Their allegiance to the ruling elite can best be described as a union of people bound together by a common history and experience as soldiers. Such a union in most cases has caused confiscations and the appropriation of land and properties of other citizens for the benefit of demobilised soldiers.

Such political actions, as practiced in Zimbabwe are incompatible with the Roman ideal of the *res publica* and the constitutional functions of what the Romans called *officium* (duty). The political landscape of Zimbabwe has become prone to violence and anarchy because the true ideals and values of the *res publica* and *officium* have not been adhered to fully. The word *res publica* is linked to the term *publicum*, referring to the public purse or public revenues.⁴³ Part of the *res publica* ideal therefore would refer to the use of the public purse to benefit the masses. Zimbabwean society is lacking in this area since, although the government does profess interest in social welfare in the area of land reform and indigenisation, nevertheless we are not a welfare state.

We do not have a dole or access to welfare comparable to what exists in America. Although ancient Rome is proverbially associated with the “bread and circuses” bestowed on the multitude (even though this may be spoken of in terms of contempt), in Zimbabwe there are poor people who might appreciate some bread and circuses for all we know, yet there are no formal arrangements by the state to give the unemployed access to the “bread and circuses” by means of welfare entitlement.

As far as *officium* is concerned, this implies attention to obligation or duty.⁴⁴ In a modern context an attempt to approximate the ideal of *officium* would imply that politicians should adhere to their obligation to respect and promote democratic rights. In Africa this ideal has not always been followed. Kaulemu⁴⁵ says:

“On the whole, liberation organisations which have come into power have tended to work as if they did not need to transform themselves into governments...In their scheme of things...opposition parties are seen as enemies to be fought and eliminated even though their constitutional right to exist is theoretically recognised...When the population supports the opposition, this is regarded by former liberation movements as betrayal [*sic*] of the liberation struggle. This is clearly demonstrated in Zimbabwe, where the ruling ZANU PF government considers any support for the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) as treason on the part of the electorate.”

There was chivalry in the Roman Republic for as long as the Republican constitution was adhered to; but turmoil and anarchy occurred as a result of usurpations motivated by ambition, greed, poverty and other ills. Similar turmoil has taken hold of Zimbabwe.

The Nature of Violence in the Roman Republic and Zimbabwe

In this section, we will look at violent activity in Rome and Zimbabwe. Kalyvas⁴⁶ has noted that various definitions of violence have been proposed. Violence can be physical or go beyond physical harm; violence can aim to preserve the social order or can be directed at destroying it. Kalyvas in the work cited⁴⁷ concentrates on violence understood as deliberate infliction of harm on non-combatants or civilians. He also indicates that violence is not restricted to homicide but can be broader than this.⁴⁸ For the purposes of this article we may understand violence along Kalyvas’ lines as deliberate infliction of harm, and our interest is not restricted to homicide. We shall be in this section singling out for attention on eight particular forms of physical violence. As far as the element of “civilians” or “non-combatants” is concerned, we will not be looking at full-blown warfare, but in both Rome and Zimbabwe the phenomenon of war veterans is of interest to us; so we are not restricting our consideration of violence to those who lack a military background.

The nature of violence in the two societies of Rome and Zimbabwe exhibits certain similar traits and patterns. In this section - with close reference to Kelly⁴⁹ - we illustrate the way violence was committed by comparing common methods of violent political expression.

The Roman Republican laws on violence treated as offences various precisely defined categories of violent acts, mainly of the sort typical of urban crowd violence (especially that of a political nature).⁵⁰ In this section - with close reference to Kelly⁵¹ - We illustrate the way violence was acted out by comparing common methods of violent political expression.⁵² It must be said that the evidence for the substantive contents of the Republican *leges de vi* (laws on force) is not ideal.⁵³ Eight forms of violent political expression in particular are given below, adapted from Kelly,⁵⁴ whose work is also the source of the textual references to Cicero and other authors provided.⁵⁵ They give a possible picture of the kinds of acts of political violence carried out in the second and first centuries BC:

- (1) Preparing bands of men for violent purposes.
- (2) Carrying weapons. The prohibition of these was a provision probably limited to public places, or a precise list of public places (Cic. *Cat.* 1.15; cf. *Dig.* 48.6.3.1; 48.6.10 pr.; Paulus *Sent.* 5.26.3).
- (3) Making or preparing attacks on magistrates and their houses. Sall. 2.3. Attacks on the *princeps senatus* and possibly all senators or consulars are included in this (Cic. *Catil.* 1.15).
- (4) Occupying or besieging key places or buildings of a public nature, including the comitia, the curia, the forum, and temples (Cic. *Sest.* 75-6; *Parad.* 31).
- (5) Making attacks on courts and those involved in the administration of justice (Cic. *Cat.* 1.32; cf. Cic. *Sul.* 15, 71; cf. *Dig.* 48.6.10 pr).
- (6) Preparing or lighting fires, a provision perhaps limited to the incineration of public buildings, or the lighting of fires in seditious or riotous contexts.
- (7) Besieging the senate or physically attacking it in some other way.
- (8) Assaulting ambassadors (Cic. *Cael.* 23, 51; cf. *Dig.* 48.6.7; *Bas.* 60.18.7).

Under each of these headings similar phenomena can be alluded to in a Zimbabwean context:

- 1) Youths have been mobilized by politicians from both ZANU PF and MDC (the Movement for Democratic Change, ZANU (PF)'s opposition) to carry out acts of violence in several townships in Harare and other towns. In fact crowd violence is used in Zimbabwe as a political tool.

- 2) There is always a show of force in Zimbabwe each time political temperatures rise. This happens especially just before, during, and after elections. Gangs of youths armed with sticks, stones patrol the streets singing and chanting party slogans.
- 3) The word “magistrate” in the case of Roman politics is a designation that refers to those individuals who hold political office. They could be *aediles*, *praetores*, *censores* etc, to use their Latin titles. Politicians from across the political divide in contemporary Zimbabwe have fallen victim to violence at some point in their political careers owing to the volatility of the current political situation.
- 4) On many occasions Mbare Township and surrounding areas are turned into “war zones” and are therefore no-go areas when political temperatures rise in Zimbabwe.
- 5) Such attacks in Zimbabwe come from the State media which viciously attack personalities in various offices who air a different opinion from the State. Cases of magistrates who operate in smaller towns who have been beaten or forced to flee from their work stations for delivering “wrong judgments” have been reported in the private press.⁵⁶
- 6) The bombing of *Daily News* offices in January 2001 and numerous incidences of petrol bombing around the country fit this category. Many houses were torched in rural communities around Zimbabwe before, during and after the June 2008 Presidential election rerun. These arson attacks are/were well organized. The attacks are well documented with pictures of devastated homes.⁵⁷
- 7) Youths alleged to be of ZANU (PF) invaded Parliament on the 23rd of July 2011 and beat up members of parliament and journalists in the presence of police officers.⁵⁸ Movement for Democratic Change politicians have on several occasions besieged parliament by heckling, singing, dancing and denouncing their opponents in a riotous fashion. In most cases proceedings had to be postponed. President of Senate (at the time of writing) Edna Madzongwe more than once was forced to adjourn senate in 2010. Opposition politicians have been arrested just outside Parliament in a violent manner.
- 8) Ambassadors from America and Britain in Zimbabwe have been treated in deplorable ways by demonstrating and rampaging youths.⁵⁹

Reforms that have to do with land tenure have caused violence in both Zimbabwe and the Roman Republic. The *ager publicus* (public land) was land specific to the Roman Republic; it was land owned by the state, which could be made available in various ways to Roman citizens.⁶⁰ This land was monopolized by the elite, which led to the impoverishment of the small farmer. When one connects the *ager publicus* to population growth and proletarianization, its importance in the political, social and economic sphere of the Roman Republic becomes central.

For example, the Gracchi recognized that it was impossible to allow the land distributed to impoverished citizens to remain *ager publicus*; simply giving them access to this land would not sufficiently protect them from the developments which had caused them to become proletarians in the first place.⁶¹ Therefore, the legislation of the Gracchi took a giant step in the privatization of the *ager publicus*, by giving extensive rights of possession to both new settlers and old occupiers of public land. The privatization of public land may therefore be considered a direct result of the growing competition for land.⁶² It must be noted that the violence that the Gracchan land reform policy begot was unprecedented in Roman politics.⁶³

In Zimbabwe, many attested acts of politically motivated violence roughly correspond to some of the eight categories attested earlier. The nature of land seizures conducted by the state in Zimbabwe conforms to very ancient ways and methods.⁶⁴ At a time when rulers in Africa are at the receiving end, facing riots from their people for not giving them land, the Zimbabwean state ran riot, seizing and assigning land to its veterans and the landless. In first century Rome, private possessions were normally secured by law, but this was endangered when much private land was taken away at the initiative of the state.⁶⁵

Explaining the phenomenon of Violence

In this section, we try to offer a historical explanation for violence in Zimbabwean politics. We begin with a brief account of the political history of the country. This will help the reader acquire the perspective and contextual feel needed in order to focus on the subsequent discussion. Part of Zimbabwe's historical baggage includes 90 years of sustained minority white domination over the indigenous African majority under successive British settler colonial regimes.⁶⁶ The Rhodesian state system dates back to the establishment of alien European rule in September 1890 and, "from its inception, the overriding imperative was the consolidation of the colonialist hegemony and its attendant infrastructures of control."⁶⁷ The white minority government of Ian Smith's Rhodesia Front was dedicated to the indefinite prolongation of the subjection of one race by another. Colonial Zimbabwe was a bifurcated state. It is interesting to note that the struggle for arable land between a minority white Rhodesians government (colonizers) and the locals mirrors the struggle between the Romans (colonizers) and other Italians. In Rome, non-Roman Italians also felt discriminated against in politics, as they had to engage in civil disobedience to press for citizenship and land rights, something that even caused the Social War (90–88 BC). Individuals such as Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus (133BC and 123BC respectively), emerged armed with a populist articulation of the land crisis, dividing the Roman body politic in the process as they sought to gain the support of landless Italians and urban dwellers. It was during the Gracchan era that a notable episode of violence in Roman politics started. The cause of the violence could be explained in terms of the envisaged land redistribution exercise which was opposed violently by large estate owners who also happened to have been the power behind the Roman political machinery.

In Rhodesia, white and black people stood in opposition to each other in a contest for power. Race was the basis on which valued resources were authoritatively allocated and denied. Power, and all that was associated with it, gravitated toward the white oligarchy.⁶⁸ Before its political independence in 1980 after a bitter and bloody armed liberation struggle, the country never knew democracy except in a limited and exclusivist sense.⁶⁹

Upon attainment of Independence, everyone hoped that things would change for the better in Zimbabwe, but it was not to be. When a party has triumphed in violence and seized control of the State, it would be plain folly to regard the new government as a collection of amiable and virtuous characters, as revolutions demand and produce sterner qualities.⁷⁰

According to Masipula Sithole,⁷¹ the liberation struggle left a significant mark on Zimbabwe's political culture. The *commandist* nature of mobilization and politicization under clandestine circumstances gave rise to the politics of intimidation and fear.⁷² Opponents were viewed in warlike terms, as enemies, and therefore as illegitimate authorities. But it must be remembered that the war of liberation was fought to address imbalances in politics and also, most importantly, to address the land question.

The issue of land has a religious dimension attached to it. President Mugabe many times quotes the Bible to argue that God created Zimbabweans and gave them the land and all the resources contained therein. In one of his famous and bold speeches at a United Nations meeting in New York in 2008, President Mugabe in his speech quoted the first part the Lord's Prayer in the Latin language as follows: "*Pater noster qui es in caelis...*" (Our Father who art in heaven...). In this prayer, he was pleading with God to help Zimbabwe, whose suffering was in his view the result of meddling in Zimbabwean affairs by Britain, the European Union and America. This demonstrates how the idea of God is sometimes smuggled into political argument. Mugabe's discourse also hinges on the argument that the land is a sacred inheritance bequeathed upon Zimbabweans by the ancestors.⁷³ Even the late former Vice President Muzenda once stated at a rally in Gutu, "*Zviro kwazvo Mwari ngavandidzivise ndirege kutengesa nhaka yamadzibaba edu.*" (Indeed, may God protect me that I may refrain from selling the inheritance of our fathers.)

During the liberation struggle, songs pregnant with such ideas were sung. One such song goes: "*Zvinhu zvose ndezva Mbuya Nehanda, haaha ndezva Mbuya Nehanda...*" (All things belong to Mbuya Nehanda, oh-oh, they belong to Mbuya Nehanda.) (Mbuya Nehanda was a female spiritual leader during the 1896-7 uprisings against the rule of the British South Africa Company.) During the days of student activism when it was still vibrant, University of Zimbabwe students used to flood the streets singing this song as a way of violently protesting against poor payouts and living conditions.⁷⁴

Violence therefore has been justified in Zimbabwe on the basis that people must defend the land of their ancestors and that which God has given them. It is interesting to note that war veterans in Zimbabwe have been at the forefront of this war to defend the land from “white imperialists” and their “stooges” (opposition parties) who contest in elections to effect change of government.

The “liberators’ have been resolute and imbued with the philosophy of violence as way of life for defending the land. Yet lately things seem to be changing, as war veterans have broken ranks with Mugabe. The year 2016 has witnessed veterans of the war of liberation not only condemning the violence that was perpetrated by the state against the citizens who were demonstrating against hunger, joblessness, poverty and police brutality, but also accusing their leader and patron, Mugabe, of dictatorial tendencies and violence against the citizens of Zimbabwe.⁷⁵ They wrote thus:⁷⁶

We ... condemn the use of excessive force by the state against the citizens who were peacefully exercising their right to demonstrate against poor governance. We demand that those who exceeded the call of duty be held accountable in terms of the constitution of Zimbabwe. We further demand that the State and all its actors respect, promote, protect and uphold our Constitution.

The Roman revolution produced characters whose acts of violence and exercise of naked power provides interesting parallels. The rule of Augustus, for example, brought manifold blessings to Rome, Italy and the provinces, albeit with a price tag. The new dispensation, or *novus status*, was the work of fraud and bloodshed, based upon the seizure of power and redistribution of land and property by a revolutionary leader.⁷⁷

In spite of the level of education acquired by politicians in the ruling ZANU (PF) government, their behavior, politically, is mainly influenced by socio-political forces partly captured in Marx’s thinking as mentioned earlier. The political history and the social and political environment in Zimbabwe promote a kind of politics similar to what obtained in Rome. This environment is one in which, as in Rome, land, grain, war credentials and religious considerations are the main indices of power in political activity. For politics in Zimbabwe to develop to levels such as those obtaining in modern democracies in the first world countries, Zimbabwe must first undergo a political evolution. This evolution must imply an abandonment of uncritical reverence for the traditional *paterfamilias* (father figure) and the associated *patria potestas* (authority of the father). This kind of *potestas* (authority) concentrates power in the hands of a father figure. The way African people venerate the idea of the “father” carries religious and in some cases superstitious connotations.

Those in power are at times viewed as father-figures, and in this context, cannot be contested or challenged. People are also becoming entrenched in this kind of thinking through the print and electronic media which channel such propaganda.⁷⁸ The challenge is that modern politics demands the opening up of political space, and also requires the ideas of democracy and of the holding of free and fair elections. This is not consistent with African traditional politics, which is largely patriarchal. As a result, ancient and modern politics are on a collision course.

The tradition is also characterized by the belief in divine right. It has become an open secret that Mugabe is regarded as the anointed of God, sent to rule Zimbabwe for as long as he lives. Some individuals in ZANU (PF) and some members of the Christian community even equate him with the biblical Moses who was sent to liberate the children of Israel. Such speeches have become common at rallies. As a result, President Mugabe gains a lofty and divinized status in the minds of some religious and superstitious citizens. We must mention that some Zimbabweans are deeply superstitious, as were many of the ancient Romans and Greeks. At certain stages of their political development the Romans and the Greeks treated their rulers as gods. Roman rulers and politicians made use of public religious rituals to support their own positions and to increase social stability. In Zimbabwe, politicians from both ZANU (PF) and MDC have appeared at church gatherings and addressed congregations. Mugabe and Joyce Mujuru, who was Vice-President in 2011, have done so at Apostolic Church meetings in Marange in Mutare.⁷⁹ This is done to consolidate power by way of enhancing their image as pious leaders who fear God, albeit with a political motive.

In Rome, the advent of Christianity brought a powerful religious hierarchy devoted to the service of one God, and separate from the emperor's civil and military servants. Its officials had created an organization with aims that could be independent of the state and which valued conformity to the 'City of God' above the patriotism of the state as a worldly power.⁸⁰ Ideas of rulership based on the will of the gods were challenged. We may note also that when ancient Greece developed the *polis* system, ideas of democracy found ways to inform political activity and political office.

Conclusion

We may conclude that Roman history offers an array of precedents for political behaviour to challenge our understanding. To read Roman politics is inevitably to question the “norms” of political behavior, both ancient and modern. The Zimbabwe and Roman cases illuminate each other. If the Greeks and the Romans fought among themselves as they experienced political transition, it should not be strange to explain Zimbabwean circumstances using their example, because Classics as a discipline is concerned with whole cultures, and the whole range of our responses to those cultures. The violence in rural Zimbabwe, whose society is largely an agrarian/peasant one, also shows the significant moments of human life in such an agrarian environment, and likewise the main phases and aspects of political behaviour. Such an environment has come as a result of the rapid decline of the economy.⁸¹ As a result, and under such circumstances, people in Zimbabwe began to lead their lives in accordance with random impulses. In this environment of severe hunger, starvation and poverty, politics of the stomach⁸² became inevitable. In such an environment politics of ideas are set aside for the pursuit of fraud and violence.

We have shown through a comparative approach the dialectics between land, religion, and violence in politics in the two cases. Violence cannot be explained adequately in terms of forces of production. A ramification of factors to do with land (redistributive challenges), religion and the collapse of civic virtues (including respect for democratic rights and recognition of freedom) have been seen to play a part in the matrix of power politics.

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⁵² It needs to be stated though that in an earlier publication of these research findings (Mlambo, O. B., “Force and Fraud in Politics in the Roman Republic and Contemporary Zimbabwe,” in *Prayers and Players: Religion and Politics in Zimbabwe*, edited by E. Chitando (Harare: Sapes Books, 2013), pp. 211 - 226), a typesetting mishap led to the omission of a footnote reference to

the said author, a *faux pas* that not only tampered with the logical flow of the argument but also with its scientific accuracy.

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⁷⁶ Ibid. p. 7.

⁷⁷ Syme, op. cit.

⁷⁸ On the state media songs were played which heaped praise on President Mugabe as ‘Father’. Such songs as “*Baba Mugabe, muri nhume yakatumwa kuzosunungura Zimbabwe*” (Father Mugabe, you are a messenger sent to free Zimbabwe) and many others confirm hegemonic patriarchy at play in Zimbabwean politics.

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