

Zimbabwe Council of Churches: A Conduit for Centering the Far-Left and the Far-Right Political Ideologies in Zimbabwe



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ABSTRACT

Since 2000, Zimbabwe's political landscape has been divided into two extreme ends represented by the conservatives and those advocating for democracy. Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), whose approach is grounded in Marxist theory, used colonial rhetoric to keep the country in the hands of the minority. The party's hegemonic approach labels everyone differing with their ideology as enemies of sovereignty and puppets of the Western world. In contrast, opposition parties advocate for democracy, reformation of the electoral system and the rule of law. This research typifies ZANU-PF as the far-right while the Movement for Democratic Change (1999-2018) and Citizens Coalition for Change (2022-2023) are identified with the far-left. This qualitative research aimed to argue that, in a conflictive nation divided between diverse ideologies, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) has a theological and historical mandate that qualifies it as a conduit to centre the repelling political standpoints. The paper presents the opportunities and challenges faced by ZCC in attempting to centre the two rival groups. It concludes by encouraging ZCC to stand on its principles of neutrality and justice against all odds, as this middle path is a panacea to centering the diverse political voices in Zimbabwe. This study contributes significantly to scholarship as it demonstrates how the church remains a neutral space in the contested political discourse, particularly in Zimbabwe. While political parties fight to control the state and its resources, the church's vision remains as a torchbearer for people's hope. The ZCC vision statement of a strong Christian ecumenical fellowship for a united, peaceful, just, and prosperous nation, where all citizens experience holistic salvation, mandates all churches to have visions and live by them to be effective.

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INTRODUCTION

The Zimbabwean political landscape underwent a significant shift in its narrative from a one-party state to a multiparty structure in 1999. This paradigm was marked by the establishment of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) as the first powerful opposition party.¹ In 2000, the political playground started to be defined by two extreme ends: autocracy and democracy. The MDC, led by Morgan Richard

¹ Vimbai Chaimba Kwashirai, "The Movement for Democratic Change Was Number One Enemy in 2000," in *Election Violence in Zimbabwe: Human Rights, Politics and Power* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2023), 128–58.

Tsvangirai, was identified with a democratic agenda. In contrast, ZANU-PF maintained its liberative, egoistic, and autocratic stance in the name of preserving Zimbabwe's sovereignty.² The political landscape continued to be hostile between ZANU-PF and the opposition parties, particularly the MDC and other parties with similar political agendas, such as the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC).³

In this paper, the two rival political ideologies will be epitomised by the far-right, signifying ZANU-PF, and the far-left, representing the political views of the selected MDC parties and CCC, who oppose ZANU-PF, as expounded in footnote one. In using the far-left and far-right theory, this paper aims to argue that, regardless of the ZCC's, multiple challenges exist, including failing to be prophetic,⁴ Speaking truth to deaf powers, engaging in intra-church competition with other ecumenical bodies for political space, and facing suspicion of being a regime change agent by ZANU-PF, the ecumenical movement has a mandate to centre the leftist and the rightist. The paper emphasises that the ZCC remains the centrist force that should flex itself not as a centre-left wing supporting the weak only or the centre-right as a puppet of the regime, but as a centre pivot, which is the neutral space of a conduit that brings together the two extreme ideologies in the context of the political toxicity in Zimbabwe.

This paper employs a desk research methodology to describe the far-left and the far-right political spectrum. The elaboration of far-left and far-right will be followed by linking the two political ideologies to the Zimbabwean political gamut. The ZCC's attempts to bring together the far-left and the far-right will be explored. The paper will also challenge ZCC as a third space of the far-left and the far-right, to remain prophetic, not a privilege of the centre-right or centre-left, which functions at the mercy of the far-right or the empathy of the far-left, respectively. Moreover, it argues that ZCC should remain prophetic and make Zimbabwe a safe space for both the powerful and the powerless. The organisation will also be reminded that they are the force to push the country from the periphery of the human indignity of the far-left and the margins of the lawlessness of the far-right, whose intentions are always individualistic and selfish.

Unpacking the Far-Left and Far-Right Political Spectrum

In the political landscape, the term "left" refers to individuals and groups with liberal views and support for progressive reforms, particularly those seeking greater social and economic equality.⁵ The opposite of leftism represents conservative views. These individuals are content to preserve the status quo, as they aim to restore traditional systems and prevent changes that could dislodge them from power and are often referred to as the far-right or rightists.⁶ The word far-right thus stands for those who are considered to have extreme revolutionary views, such as those who ride on socialism, authoritarianism, totalitarianism, and nepotism.

According to Norberto Bobbio, the left-right metaphor originated in the French National Assembly on May 5, 1789, at the opening of the Estates General in Versailles.⁷ The far-right was first used to describe the supporters of the regime and religion, namely the nobles and influential religious leaders, who sat to the right. At the same time, those supporting the revolution were the common people and ordinary clergy, seated to the left.⁸ The divisions were intended to bring order to the Assembly by "avoiding quarrels and obscenities that had previously enjoyed free rein in the opposing camp."⁹ For Bobbio, the phrases "far-left" and "far-right" were used to represent a spatial duo in the political system.¹⁰ Given the above discussion, the left-right political spectrum can also be described as a structure for classifying political positions, parties, systems, and ideologies that concentrates on social hierarchy and

² Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "Dynamics of the Zimbabwe Crisis in the 21st Century," *African Journal on Conflict Resolution* 3, no. 1 (2003): 99–134.

³ Gift Masengwe and Bekithemba Dube, "CCCism Versus ZANU-PFism: Religious Response of the Citizens Coalition for Change to the ZANU-PF," in *Regime, Religion and the Consolidation of ZANU-PFism in Zimbabwe: When Religion Becomes a Threat to Democracy* (Springer, 2023), 185–99.

⁴ Jimmy Dube, "The Zimbabwe Council of Churches and the Prophetic Mission of the Church," *The Zimbabwe Council of Churches and Development in Zimbabwe*, 2020, 197–205.

⁵ Dictionary.com, "Why Do 'Left' and 'Right' Mean Liberal and Conservative?," December 24, 2024, <https://www.dictionary.com/e/left/right/>.

⁶ Dictionary.com, "Why Do 'Left' and 'Right' Mean Liberal and Conservative?,"

⁷ Norberto Bobbio, *Left, and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).

⁸ Bobbio, *Left, and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction*.

⁹ Geoffrey M. Hodgson, *Wrong Turnings: How the Left Got Lost* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

¹⁰ Bobbio, *Left, and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction*.

social equality.¹¹ The left refers to the ideology of equality, while the right represents the dogma of inequality.¹² This point was buttressed by Lipset, who suggested that the rightist part is a party consistently aligned with the interests of the powerful social class. In contrast, the leftists stand for those on the margins of society, while the rightists stand for those who are part of the established social order.¹³ The rightists are the conservatives who protect the ingrained privileges, powers, and prerogatives. At the same time, leftists represent the opposite, challenging the established privileges, powers, and prerogatives.¹⁴

Moreover, the right is the aristocracy and is always in the position of the privileged in terms of birth, association, and wealth, while the left always fights for equal opportunities.¹⁵ Bobbio categorically stated that an object must either be on the left or the right and cannot be both.¹⁶ From this explanation, the phrase “left-right” emphasises the realm that every political party has as its specific manifesto, whether autocratic or democratic, thereby leaving no room for neutrality. Desmond Tutu challenged the neutral political position in his analogy of a mouse and an elephant. Tutu contends that “If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.”¹⁷ Although Tutu gave the analogy about the state of inequality in the South African apartheid system, the expression compels everyone to take a side, either to the left or to the right, depending on the political conviction of the individual.

From the beginning of the twentieth century, left and right were used in the United States of America. The terms were similarly linked and connected with certain political philosophies used to define nationalities’ political opinions, thereby replacing the terms “reactionary” and “red.”¹⁸ Left and right were initially applied by the rivals of the United States’ political system as derogatory terms. However, later on, the left was translated to represent the Democrats, which at the time meant supporting the status quo, and those on the right often called themselves the Conservatives.¹⁹

Unpacking Far-left and Far-right in the Zimbabwean Political Context

In discussing the far-left and far-right ideologies, the country’s political landscape is shaped by the philosophies represented by the established political parties. In Zimbabwe’s political landscape, the author aims to categorise the country’s political parties by the philosophies they represent. The far-right represents ZANU-PF’s political views; it favours the privileged and the powerful, as it is a conservative party of the minority rich. This ideology also represents a Marxist philosophy, which has the propensity to favour the elite few.²⁰ Before the Lancaster House Conference, at the 1979 conference, which sought to end the war in Zimbabwe, Mugabe addressed the people’s concerns that he would establish a communist state.²¹ This philosophy excluded religion in the newly independent Zimbabwe in 1980. The country was defined as a secular state, exemplifying the religious freedom of all nationalities.²² After independence, ZANU-PF maintained its Marxist philosophy but was also ready to collaborate with the church. The party used its “competitive authoritarian regime campaigns to remain in power through coercion, electoral manipulation, violence, and other illegal tactics”²³

¹¹ Bobbio, *Left, and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction*.

¹² Bobbio, *Left, and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction*.

¹³ Seymour Martin Lipset and Political Man, “The Social Bases of Politics,” *Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press*, 1960.

¹⁴ Lipset and Man, “The Social Bases of Politics.”

¹⁵ Peter McPhee, *The French Revolution, 1789–1799* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁶ Marcel Gauchet, “The Redefinition of Right and Left,” *Le Débat* 192, no. 5 (2016): 35–46.

¹⁷ Younge Gray, “Archbishop Desmond Tutu: The Secrets of a Peacemaker,” 2009,

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/may/23/interview-desmond-tutu>.

¹⁸ Gauchet, “The Redefinition of Right and Left.”

¹⁹ Gauchet, “The Redefinition of Right and Left.”

²⁰ Christine Sylvester, “Zimbabwe’s 1985 Elections: A Search for National Mythology,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 24, no. 2 (1986): 229–55.

²¹ Munetsi Ruzivo, “The Zimbabwe Council of Churches, Politics and Development from 1980 to 2015,” *The Zimbabwe Council of Churches and Development in Zimbabwe*, 2020, 13–36.

²² Ruzivo, “The Zimbabwe Council of Churches, Politics and Development from 1980 to 2015.”

²³ McDonald Lewanika, “Campaigning, Coercion, and Clientelism: ZANU-PF’s Strategies in Zimbabwe’s Presidential Elections, 2008–13” (London School of Economics and Political Science, 2019); Richard Saunders, “Zimbabwe: Liberation Nationalism—Old and Born-Again,” *Review of African Political Economy* 38, no. 127 (2011): 123–34.

From 1980, ZANU-PF received support from the churches, human rights organisations, and media fraternity. This trust was lost in 2000 through a constitutional referendum by a coalition of the MDC and civil society, thereby making a paradigm shift in Zimbabwean politics. ZANU-PF lost the election for the first time since independence. The party had no defined strategy to move forward in the context. On one hand, the country was on a nosedive. On the other hand, the MDC had arisen as a hope for many Zimbabweans and was promising to win the 2000 parliamentary elections. To maintain its grip on power, ZANU-PF responded by unleashing a series of ferocious and unorthodox means that included the banning of mass demonstrations, which they thought were platforms used by the MDC to gain popular support. In 2000, ZANU-PF made different draconian policies, such as the Public Order and Security Act (POSA), aiming to silence the population and remain in power at all costs. Furthermore, the regime “militarised the form of electoral authoritarianism to remain in power.”²⁴

“In the 2000 elections, MDC won 57 out of the 120 seats.”²⁵ ZANU-PF concluded that the MDC was their worst opposition in post-independent Zimbabwe. In response, ZANU-PF supporters, through the support of the party, invaded White commercial farms, accusing them of being the agents of the regime change supporting the MDC Party. Company attacks and the turning of rural areas into prohibited zones for the Non-Governmental Organisations and the opposition party followed these clandestine, ruthless and brutal farm invasions.²⁶ The years 2000–2004, were marked by extreme ferocity, violence, murder, torture, and rape by ZANU-PF supporters.²⁷ The party also responded to its election loss through brutality meant to intensify the party’s conservative, far-right position, to remain in power at all costs. It cannot be disputed that, as a liberation party, ZANU-PF saw no force that would dislodge it from power; as such, the far-rightist autocratic rule and ruthlessness were the only means to terrorise the political space and make the country a war zone.

In 2008, Mugabe lost the Presidential elections conducted on March 29. In response to the disgraceful loss, Mugabe weaponised the country and threatened war if he lost the rerun election on June 27, 2008. His far-right conservatism was evident when he warned that.

It will never happen that this land, which we fought for, should be taken by the MDC so that they can give it back to our former oppressors. This country was won by the barrel of a gun, and should we let it go at the stroke of a pen? Should one write an X, and then the country goes just like that?²⁸

The formation of the MDC party in 1999 introduced a far-left ideology, as it emerged from the struggles of the suffering masses.²⁹ The MDC was formed riding on the weaknesses of ZANU-PF. The civil society and labour movement that initially supported ZANU-PF abandoned the party for a new movement with a promising future.³⁰ Most of the leaders of MDC were drawn from the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, which was the strongest labour party in the country.³¹ Moreover, the party drew its support from the suffering populace, which was predominantly the majority.³²

Upon Morgan Tsvangirai’s death on February 14, 2018, the party experienced a leadership crisis between Thokozani Khupe, the official vice president, and Nelson Chamisa, whom Morgan Tsvangirai

²⁴ Eldred V. Masunungure and Jabulise, M. Shumba, *Exorcising the Spectre of Electoral Authoritarianism in Zimbabwe’s Political Transition*, *Zimbabwe: Mired in Transition* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2014).

²⁵ Artwell Nhemachena and Tapiwa Victor Warikandwa, *From African Peer Review Mechanisms to African Queer Review Mechanisms?: Robert Gabriel Mugabe, Empire and the Decolonisation of African Orifices* (Langaa RPCIG, 2019).

²⁶ Nhemachena and Warikandwa, *From African Peer Review Mechanisms to African Queer Review Mechanisms?: Robert Gabriel Mugabe, Empire and the Decolonisation of African Orifices*.

²⁷ Nhemachena and Warikandwa, *From African Peer Review Mechanisms to African Queer Review Mechanisms?: Robert Gabriel Mugabe, Empire and the Decolonisation of African Orifices*.

²⁸ Aljazeera., “Mugabe Warns of War If Defeated,” 2008.

²⁹ Peter Alexander, “Zimbabwean Workers, the MDC & the 2000 Election,” *Review of African Political Economy* 27, no. 85 (2000): 385–406.

³⁰ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “Dynamics of the Zimbabwe Crisis in the 21st Century.”

³¹ Saunders, “Zimbabwe: Liberation Nationalism—Old and Born-Again.”

³² Bright Thulani, Chimedza, “An Annotated Examination of the Strategies That Were Used by MDC In Combating Competitive Authoritarianism in Zimbabwe, 1999-2018” (Midlands State University, 2022), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2008/6/13/mugabe-warns-of-war-if-defeated>.

had appointed on the pretext that Khupe had abandoned the party.³³ In 2018, Khupe led the MDC-Tsvangirai, and Chamisa led the MDC Alliance, a coalition of smaller parties, including Professor Welshman Ncube's MDC formation, Tendai Biti's People's Democratic Party, Agrippa Mutambara's Zimbabwe People First, and Jacob Ngarivhume's Transform Zimbabwe. It is also worth noting that Chamisa did not form the MDC Alliance; instead, it was formed under the leadership of Morgan Tsvangirai before his death, to dislodge ZANU-PF in the 2018 parliamentary and presidential elections.³⁴ The party promised to be the strongest contender to ZANU-PF, and given the timeframe for the elections, the MDC Alliance chose Chamisa as its leader due to his charisma, which was needed in the short time leading up to the polls scheduled for July 30, 2018.

The MDC Alliance remained the party of choice for the people, surpassing the popularity of the former MDC led by Thokozani Khupe.³⁵ After another clash with Douglas Mwonozora, who had inherited the party through the courts, Chamisa later formed the Citizen Coalition for Change in January 2022, but abandoned it in 2023, accusing ZANU-PF intelligence of infiltrating the party.³⁶ Citizen Coalition for Change had the DNA of the MDC because Chamisa had been with the party in its early stages. The socio-economic hardships of Zimbabwe gave the MDC leverage to garner support and survive the brutal attacks on its members by ZANU-PF.³⁷ This was also true of the rebranding of the MDC Alliance and the Citizen Coalition for Change, which continued to promote a leftist philosophy. The dynamics of the leftist and rightist extremes, therefore, call for a centrist ideology whose goals align with those of the ZCC.

Brief Background of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches

The background, work, identity, and mission of the ZCC were researched by Ezra Chitando and a team of other scholars, who dedicated a book to the organisation in 2020 titled *Zimbabwe Council of Churches and Development in Zimbabwe*.³⁸ In this book, the authors grapple with the ZCC's response to politics and development, praxis theology, the ethical reconstruction of Zimbabwe, church-related hospitals and healthcare provision, church women's organisations responding to HIV and AIDS, the significance of church-related universities in the rebuilding of Zimbabwe, women's empowerment, the prophetic mission of the church, and the theology of enough.³⁹ This paper will not focus on the general historiography of the organisation, but rather on its role in Zimbabwe's political life.

According to Ruzivo, since its formation, ZCC has consistently thrived in developing the country and stood as the watchdog of political justice in the country.⁴⁰ Although the organisation has remained steadfast in Zimbabwe's political affairs since independence, there have been both conflicts and good relationships between the church and the government at different periods of their partnership.⁴¹ Ruzivo argues that the relationship between the church and state varied at times. However, the ZCC, later the RCC, remained the primary regulator of Zimbabwe's political affairs.⁴² During the colonial era, the ZCC consistently spoke out against the colonial government. The organisation remained prophetic, speaking from the voices of the oppressed; however, the political tempest of Zimbabwe "muted" the organisation.⁴³ as claimed by Jimmy Dube, this "mute" can be attributed to several factors that will be discussed about the challenges and opportunities of ZCC as a centrist conduit.

³³ The Standard, "MDC Alliance: An Oasis or a Mirage?," August 13, 2017, <https://www.thestandard.co.zw/2017/08/13/mdc-alliance-oasis-mirage/>.

³⁴ Gibbs Dube, "Zimbabwe Opposition Launches MDC Alliance Ahead of 2018 General Elections," 2017, <https://www.voazimbabwe.com/a/zimbabwe-mdc-alliance-formed/3974172.html>.

³⁵ Alex Magaisa, "Big Saturday Read: MDC Alliance-An Oasis or a Mirage," 2017, <https://bigsr.africa/bsr-mdc-alliance-e2-80-93-an-oasis-or-a-mirage/>.

³⁶ Pindula, "MDC Alliance," January 12, 2025.

³⁷ Lucky Asuelime and Blessing Simura, "The Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and the Changing Geo-Political Landscape in Zimbabwe," in *Selected Themes in African Political Studies: Political Conflict and Stability* (Springer, 2014), 69–81.

³⁸ Ezra Chitando, *The Zimbabwe Council of Churches and Development in Zimbabwe* (Springer, 2020).

³⁹ Chitando, *The Zimbabwe Council of Churches and Development in Zimbabwe*.

⁴⁰ Ruzivo, "The Zimbabwe Council of Churches, Politics and Development."

⁴¹ Ruzivo, "The Zimbabwe Council of Churches, Politics and Development."

⁴² Ruzivo, "The Zimbabwe Council of Churches, Politics and Development."

⁴³ Dube, "The Zimbabwe Council of Churches and the Prophetic Mission of the Church."

Zimbabwe Council of Churches: A Conduit for Centering the Leftist and Rightist

Although some scholars agree that most political parties are divided between the far-left and the far-right, there is also another group in the middle, known as the centrists.⁴⁴ The centrists are constitutionalists who sit at the centre, holding a neutral position not aligned with either left- or right-wing ideologies.^{45,46} The centrist ideology represents the moderate and independent political spectrum. In this paper, the centrists will be represented by the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), whose mission is to “enhance the self-supporting capacity of vulnerable people and the empowerment and renewal of member churches so that they are a sustainable and transforming Christian presence in Zimbabwe.”⁴⁷

ZCC was established in 1964 by African church leaders, mainly from Protestant denominations, as a platform to address the social justice issues affecting the country during the colonial era.⁴⁸ Second, to defuse the pigmentation conflict between the coloniser and the colonised, where the former enjoyed the privileges of the coloniser. Third, ZCC arose as a counter-organisation of the Southern Rhodesian Christian Conference (SRCC), an extension of the colonisers.⁴⁹ Since SRCC was an appendage of the government, they obviously could not bite the hand that fed them. This collusion between the white colonisers and missionaries gave rise to the formation of the Rhodesia Christian Council, which later evolved into the Zimbabwe Council of Churches after the country’s independence in 1980.⁵⁰ The Council arose as a voice for the voiceless and a mouthpiece for the downtrodden.⁵¹

ZCC represents the adage of “unity in necessary things, freedom in doubtful things, and charity in all things.”⁵² It focuses on ecumenism, humanitarian intervention and civic engagement.⁵³ It is a fellowship of thirty-one-member churches and para-church organisations.⁵⁴ The ecclesial organisation remains one of the strongest ecumenical bodies in Zimbabwe. As a prophetic voice, the ZCC responds to political intolerance, gender-based violence, and economic inequality, using interventions grounded in constitutionalism, human dignity, and theological values for all.⁵⁵

ZCC’s mission centres on reconciling various political ideologies and criticising some intentional motives aimed at suppressing people with low incomes during the colonial era. For example, the Council condemned the Unilateral Declaration of Independence of 1965, which was meant to separate Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, from the international community.⁵⁶ In addition, in the late 1970s, Rev. Andrew Ndhlela attended the Lancaster House negotiations in Geneva as Vice President of the Rhodesia Christian Council, providing chaplaincy services to all political parties.⁵⁷ The church’s involvement in the Lancaster talks gave hope to different churches in Rhodesia.⁵⁸ The Rhodesia Christian Council was taking the neutral role of reconciling the Rhodesian Front, led by Ian Smith, which had a far-right ideology, against ZANU-PF, which was representing the far-left. “During the Lancaster trip, Ndhlela remained connected with the liberation fighters (guerrillas). He encouraged them not to use force during

⁴⁴ Gauchet, “Right and Left”. In *Realms of Memory: Conflicts and Divisions*. ”

⁴⁵ Gauchet, “Right and Left”. In *Realms of Memory: Conflicts and Divisions*. ”

⁴⁶ Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*.

⁴⁷ Ruzivo, “The Zimbabwe Council of Churches, Politics and Development.”

⁴⁸ Dube, “The Zimbabwe Council of Churches and the Prophetic Mission of the Church”; Ruzivo, “The Zimbabwe Council of Churches, Politics and Development.”

⁴⁹ Canisius Mwandayi and Theresa Mugwidi, “Quo Vadis the Catholic Church and the Zimbabwe Council of Churches? Exploring the ‘Mine Is Right’ Dilemmas in the Path to Christian Unity in Zimbabwe,” *The Zimbabwe Council of Churches and Development in Zimbabwe*, 2020, 51–64.

⁵⁰ Mwandayi and Mugwidi, “Quo Vadis the Catholic Church and the Zimbabwe Council of Churches? Exploring the ‘Mine Is Right’ Dilemmas in the Path to Christian Unity in Zimbabwe.”

⁵¹ Paul Gundani, *Changing Patterns of Authority and Leadership: Developments in the Roman Catholic Church in Zimbabwe after Vatican II 1965-1985* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 2001).

⁵² Chitando, *The Zimbabwe Council of Churches and Development in Zimbabwe*.

⁵³ Chitando, *The Zimbabwe Council of Churches and Development in Zimbabwe*.

⁵⁴ Chitando *The Zimbabwe Council of Churches and Development in Zimbabwe*.

⁵⁵ Ruzivo, “The Zimbabwe Council of Churches, Politics and Development.”

⁵⁶ Chengetai J Zvobgo, “Church and State in Rhodesia: From the Unilateral Declaration of Independence to the Pearce Commission, 1965–72,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 31, no. 2 (2005): 381–402.

⁵⁷ Norman H. Murdoch, *Christian Warfare in Rhodesia-Zimbabwe The Salvation Army and African Liberation, 1891–1991* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2015).

⁵⁸ Martin Mujinga, “Ministry in the Tempest: A Reconstruction of the Life, Work, and Legacy of Rev. Andrew. Ndhlela of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesasticae* 50, no. 3 (2024): 14–pages.

the war of liberation.”⁵⁹ He also offered pastoral oversight to the Europeans.⁶⁰ His ability to bring the two rivals together to represent the church is what ZCC can still ride on, regardless of the intensely adverse relationships of the far-right and the far-left. It is this long-standing position of centrism that the ZCC still hold irrespective of the Zimbabwean political tempest.⁶¹

The mandate of the ZCC to centre the far-right and far-left political ideologies is also justified by the organisation’s conviction that “pervasive partisan leaders must always be approached and held accountable to their system of government.”⁶² As a centrist, ZCC has a moral obligation to address the socioeconomic, political, and cultural issues that facilitate the growth and fulfilment of citizens.⁶³ This involvement is achieved by taking a central role in challenging the rightists to prioritise justice and fairness, while also encouraging the leftists to remain on the democratic agenda.

In preparation for Zimbabwe’s 2023 General Election, the ZCC championed a campaign dubbed #IPrayIVote, which was circulated via WhatsApp and other social media platforms as an awareness campaign for the forthcoming plebiscite.⁶⁴ In launching the #IPrayIVote campaign, ZCC believed it was the church’s role to encourage and educate people to vote, as well as promote a peaceful electoral process. The #IPrayIVote campaign was rooted in four themes: election observation, electorate mobilisation, agenda setting, and post-election envisioning. The campaign also educated citizens, informed them, and provided updates on contesting candidates.⁶⁵ Part of voter education included advising citizens on the different party symbols and their candidates in the upcoming election, as well as encouraging citizens to pray and register to vote. ZCC taught that those who win should celebrate responsibly, while those who lose should accept the defeat gracefully.

The #IPrayIVote campaign can be argued to have drawn its inspiration from John Wesley, who also advised his followers to vote responsibly. As early as 1774, Wesley reminded his followers of the centrist role of the church during elections as the country was experiencing tension between the leftists and rightists of his time. He mentioned that, “On October 6, 1774, I met those of our society who had votes in the ensuing election, and advised them: (1) To vote, without fee or reward, for the person they judged most worthy, (2) To speak no evil of the person they voted against, and (3) To take care their spirits were not sharpened against those who voted on the other side.”⁶⁶

The ZCC’s role of prayer was evident in one of the prayers by Kahala Cannon, who was the Acting Executive for the Africa Office of the Global Relations Minister, when she was praying for the Zimbabwean elections. She said:

... We pray for a “free and fair” environment where candidates can campaign, and our siblings in Zimbabwe can exercise their rights and amplify their voices through their votes. We also pray for the galvanisation of young adults to participate in the process of choosing the leadership they want. Moreover, we pray for leaders who have a heart for your people and their plights, so that they can serve present generations and lay the groundwork for a brighter future for generations to come.⁶⁷

The above prayer, cited by ZCC partners, presents the impact of #IPrayIVote beyond the boundaries of the ecumenical movement’s scope. The prayer also demonstrates the central role and

⁵⁹ Lloyd T. Nyarota, *Religious Leaders in National Political Conflicts: Bishop Abel Tendekayi Muzorewa and the National Struggle against Colonial Rule in Zimbabwe* (Eugene Oregon: WIPF & Stock, 2013).

⁶⁰ Albert Mosley, *Rhodesia Becomes Zimbabwe and the Programme to Combat Racism (British Methodism and African Nationalism in Rhodesia (1965-1980))* (2007, 2007).

⁶¹ Mujinga, “Ministry in the Tempest: A Reconstruction of the Life, Work, and Legacy of Rev. Andrew. Ndhlela of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe.”

⁶² David Kaulemu, “Church Responses To The Crisis In Zimbabwe,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 8, no. 1 (January 2010): 47–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570271003707853>.

⁶³ Ashton Murwira and Charity Manyeruke, “Church-Politics Nexus: An Analysis of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) and Political Engagement,” *The Zimbabwe Council of Churches and Development in Zimbabwe*, 2020, 95–108.

⁶⁴ Global Ministries, “I Pray, I Vote Campaign of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches,” 2022, <https://www.globalministries.org/i-pray-i-vote-campaign-of-the-zimbabwe-council-of-churches/>.

⁶⁵ Global Ministries, “I Pray, I Vote Campaign of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches.”

⁶⁶ John Wesley, “The Journal of John Wesley,” October 6, 1774, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/664222-october-6-1774-i-met-those-of-our-society-who>.

⁶⁷ Zimbabwe Council of Churches, *I Pray I Vote*, 2022. <https://www.globalministries.org/i-pray-i-vote-campaign-of-the-zimbabwe-council-of-churches/>.

neutral space of ZCC as a centrist force responsible for giving people the freedom to choose leaders of their choice, to pray for the elections, and to choose accountable leaders. ZCC has remained a central voice throughout its life. A case in point is that in 2022, the Gweru Local Ecumenical Fellowship (LEF AMC-PC) ZCC compiled a document titled the Gweru Ecumenical Election Covenant to set the standard expected for the March 2022 elections. They urged the aspiring candidates to work towards improving the people's standards of living.⁶⁸ ZCC through the Gweru Local Ecumenical Fellowship also emphasised the need for leaders who can liberate people from poverty, joblessness, poor service delivery and an ever-decreasing standard of living.⁶⁹ Furthermore, they implored political parties to shun vote-buying antics and encouraged the people to vote for the leaders they preferred. They further condemned all forms of violence, including intimidation, issuing of threats and surveillance.⁷⁰ It is evident from the grassroots of the ZCC that the organisation is not only centrist at the national level, but it is the system that propels the centrist agenda of the organisation as the bride of Christ on earth. This point justifies Chitando's assertion that the organisation conducts its prophetic mandate through advocacy at local, regional, and national levels by building the capacity of churches and communities.⁷¹

Opportunities of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches as a Conduit to Centre the left-right political antagonism in Zimbabwe

The first opportunity the ZCC is using to centre the far-left and the far-right is its vision statement. As discussed earlier, ZCC was founded on the principles of a just and equitable society. This is well articulated in their vision statement, which is: "a strong Christian ecumenical fellowship for a united, peaceful, just, and prosperous nation, where all citizens experience holistic salvation."⁷² This vision positions the ecumenical board as a conduit of unity, wishing peace to everyone and a just society where everyone is treated as a human being whose rights are respected. Furthermore, the vision envisages a nation with citizens who experience holistic salvation. The Bible Hub defines holistic salvation as a biblical concept that incorporates the comprehensive nature of addressing the spiritual, physical, emotional, and social dimensions of human existence. In this definition, holistic salvation reflects the belief that God's redemptive work through Jesus Christ is not limited to the spiritual realm but extends to all aspects of life, restoring the whole person and creation. In pursuing its vision to centre the leftists and the rightists, ZCC will be riding on the proper course of its mission as the centre-pivot that should not be taken or confused for either centre-left supporting the weak or centre-right dining with Caesar.

The second opportunity is its historical foundation. As argued earlier, the Rhodesia Council of Churches has always taken a centre and neutral stance in reconciling the far-left and the far-right. During the liberation struggle, ZANU-PF represented the far-left as a black majority party. However, it shifted from the far-left to the extreme far-right after independence as a party of the minority who labelled themselves as the liberation war heroes. Yet, every Zimbabwean took part in the country's independence in different ways. During this period, ZCC embraced the antagonists who were defined by pigmentation and their far-left and far-right in this context are all Zimbabweans who should find each other through the church. Whereas the leftists push for democracy, their agenda is also drawn from their aspiration of being the next government, which makes the far-right suspicious of their motives. That being as it may, the far-right unequivocally rejects this, pushing for democracy as it would imply pushing themselves out of power. This gives the ZCC an edge in its centring endeavours. However, it can also be argued that although the same suspicion ZANU-PF has with the far-left, it is the same mistrust that they have with the Church, labelling it as centre-left. ZCC's mission enhances the self-supporting capacity of vulnerable people and the empowerment and renewal of member churches for a sustainable and transforming Christian presence in Zimbabwe and gives them a cutting-edge neutral space.⁷³

The third advantage of ZCC is its status as one of the biggest ecumenical foundations with a long history of not only mission work, but also social responsibility. Most government officials in Zimbabwe were educated at mission schools. The principles instilled in the lives of these political leaders made them

⁶⁸ Global Ministries, "I Pray, I Vote Campaign of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches."

⁶⁹ Global Ministries, "Zimbabwe Church Leaders Call for Good Leadership in the Upcoming By-Elections," 2022.

⁷⁰ Global Ministries, "Zimbabwe Church Leaders Call for Good Leadership in the Upcoming By-Elections."

⁷¹ Chitando, *Zimbabwe Counc. Churches Dev. Zimbabwe*.

⁷² Ruzivo, "The Zimbabwe Council of Churches, Politics and Development."

⁷³ Ruzivo, "The Zimbabwe Council of Churches, Politics and Development."

respect the church that educated them and treated them when they were sick. The church remains a government partner in grooming responsible citizens, unlike some newer religious movements that often exploit people through miracle money, miracle oil, miracle handkerchiefs, and miracle healing cards, among other memorabilia.

Fourth, the church is the bride of Christ, and its eschatological and missional role should not be confused with supporting weaker political parties. Jesus' manifesto in Luke 4:16-20 spells out that the mission of the church is to bring good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for the captives, recover sight for the blind, set the oppressed free and proclaim the Lord's favour. This manifesto for ZCC is holistic salvation. Standing on the mandate, it is unfair to label the ecumenical organisation as partisan. Yet, it is the mandate of ZCC to centre the autocratic and democratic parties as its divine mission and call.

Challenges of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches to fulfil its role as a Conduit to Centre the left-right political antagonism in Zimbabwe

Although ZCC has obligations, a mandate, and a responsibility to centre the two extreme political ideologies, it is also important to understand that the ecumenical movement faces challenges that cause scholars such as Jimmy Dube to label it as mute and toothless.⁷⁴ The first challenge is the arm-twisting of ZCC by politicians. For example, during the time of the liberation struggle, Black ministers labelled the Black ecumenical movement as traitors. When in Geneva, Rev Prof. Canaan Banana was told that the Rhodesia Christian Council, which Rev Andrew Ndhlela represented from his church- the Methodist Church, was moving lethargically because it was not sure what policy of religion the new regime would pursue. Banana explained why he was angry at the RCC's slow response to the government's programme of reconstruction. Upon his return, he chided the RCC for its wait-and-see attitude and for not moving with the changing times. According to Banana, the ZCC had not repented of its sin of backing the wrong horse, namely, Abel Muzorewa's party. Such hijacking of the church by the ruling power, and unfortunately by clergy in secular power, was uncalled for. Having analysed how the same ruling party finally rejected these clerics, Martin Mujinga regarded this sidelining of the clerics as religion being used as a riding horse of politics. This mounting of the church as a riding horse explains how the far-right use, misuse, and abuse the church for their selfish motives.

The tendencies of righting the church did not end in the liberation struggle. Nevertheless, Robert Mugabe, who became the first president of independent Zimbabwe, also made concerted efforts to distance the church from far-right ideology. In this regard, he labelled the missionary churches that formed the ZCC as sellouts with a regime agenda. Mugabe secularised the church by appointing his people who spoke peace when there was violence.⁷⁵ The far-right created parachurches and pseudo-ecumenical organisations, such as the Zimbabwe Council of Indigenous Churches, which serves as a counter to the ZCC. The alignment of the ZCC with leftists and a spy of the colonisers did not end with the priests of Mugabe, including Obediah Musindo, Madzibaba (Prophet) Godfrey Nzira, and Lawrence Katsiru, among others. Still, President Mnangagwa inherited it after the "2017 coup" that removed Mugabe from office.⁷⁶ The confrontational activities of the rightist ecumenical movement were evident at one of the Community breakfast meetings organised by the Southern Africa Development Community, where President Mnangagwa's court priest, Apostle Andrew Wutawashe, the leader of the Zimbabwe Council of Indigenous Churches, delusively said:

There is neither hunger nor joblessness in Zimbabwe. Zimbabweans are often perceived as being overly reliant on handouts, but they are also known for their ability to complain. Millions of Zimbabweans living in the Diaspora are not there to look for jobs, but rather to impart their knowledge and skills to other countries.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Dube, "The Zimbabwe Council of Churches and the Prophetic Mission of the Church."

⁷⁵ Martin Mujinga, "Religio-Political Convergence: A Mugabe-Istic Tactic to Secularize Ecclesiastical Authority in Zimbabwe," in *Politics and Religion in Zimbabwe* (Routledge, 2020), 49–62.

⁷⁶ Blessing-Miles Tendi, "The Motivations and Dynamics of Zimbabwe's 2017 Military Coup," *African Affairs* 119, no. 474 (January 24, 2020): 39–67, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adz024>.

⁷⁷ Masvingo Mirror, "X," n.d., <https://x.com/TheMirrorMsv/status/1817196752400777439?prefetchTimestamp=1736792894165&mx=2>

These statements present a relationship between Jeremiah and Hananiah (Jer.28) or confrontations between Amos and Amaziah (Amos 7:10-14), where the latter represented the court priest who brought good news to the king amidst chaos. This is the message that gives the far-right hope, even in the context of hopelessness. Wutawashe uttered his ill-informed statement when the government sent a request to the World Food Programme for the assistance of more than six million people in need of food in a country with over 85% unemployment.⁷⁸

In the context of the above scenario, ZCC finds itself positioned to the centre-left, presenting itself as an advocate for the less privileged, which is also a goal of the far-left. Given this purported centre-left position of ZCC, the far-right reluctantly listens to their prophetic utterances. Whenever ZCC publishes a Pastoral Letter, they are labelled as the spokespersons of the far-left because the far-right priest will ensure that their masters believe such claims, thereby being rewarded with farms and vehicles from the political party. Ruzivo dedicated a bigger part of his publication to analysing the contents of the Pastoral Letters issued by the ZCC. For example, in August 2001, the ZCC wrote a pastoral letter addressing the sociopolitical environment of land, law and order, presidential elections, the constitution, and HIV/AIDS. The ZCC advised the nation of the anarchy and brutality happening in the country and how they were supposed to be addressed.

The Pastoral Letters stressed the implication of brutality, torture, abductions, and rape all being done violently.⁷⁹ Moreover, ZCC challenged the ruling party to devise measures that would ensure the nation experienced free and fair elections in a peaceful environment. This Pastoral Letter was written when the Movement for Democratic Change, led by Tsvangirai, participated in its first election and won many seats. ZANU-PF was consolidating its power, and to achieve this, it employed brutality and all forms of abuse to instil fear among the people. This is a case in point where the far-left and the ZCC sing from the same hymnbook, and the far-right deliberately consoles itself by labelling the church as an agent of regime changes, resulting in ignoring all the church's efforts to create a just and peaceful society. When the ZCC proposed the Sabbath rest for elections, the first person to comment from ZANU-PF was Energy Mutodi, the Deputy Minister of Information and Broadcasting Services at the time. Mutodi wrote on his X formerly Twitter handle saying:

Churches' calls for a national sabbath for trust and confidence were based on visions from the devil. Every nation has mad people, and we have our own Kenneth Mtata.⁸⁰ And his bunch of false prophets. The Bible says all leaders come from God and for a purpose, but because of his lack of faith, the hypocrite sees visions from the devil and proclaims them as if they were from God.⁸¹

It is argued that the survival of the far-right in maintaining its status quo comes from secularising religion, which was common during biblical times. The Old Testament kings preferred those prophets who prophesied peace for them and hated those who brought a contrary message, even if it came from God, who had enthroned them. This is a replica of what ZCC is going through. Citing Rev. Wilfred Dimingo, "The Zimbabwean sociopolitical environment is understood from two angles: those who say we have arrived and this is our place to stay, and those who say we have not yet arrived, we must continue to move to arrive."⁸² These feelings of arriving by the rightists and not yet arriving by the leftists create a nation that is both stationary and on the move to an occupied territory whose citizens use all force to remain domiciled in the borrowed space. ZCC has a central role to call the rightists who are saying we have arrived to move backwards towards where the majority are, and also advise the leftists to reduce speed so that they both move in slow motion towards the centre for negotiations. The ecumenical

⁷⁸ Masvingo Mirror, "X."

⁷⁹ Ruzivo, "The Zimbabwe Council of Churches, Politics and Development,"

⁸⁰ Kenneth Mtata was the General Secretary of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches. ZCC also took the role of being Secretariat of the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations. His attack was a way of isolating him from the voices of the church to silence him and later silence the voice of the Church.

⁸¹ ZimEye, "Mnangagwa Rejects Sabbath Call by the Church, Calls It "Traacherous," ZimEye, 2019,

<https://www.zimeye.net/2019/10/20/mnangagwa-rejects-sabbath-call-by-the-church-calls-it-treacherous/>; Mujinga, "Ministry in the Tempest: A Reconstruction of the Life, Work, and Legacy of Rev. Andrew. Ndhlela of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe."

⁸² Revd Wilfred Dimingo is the General Secretary of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches. See Wilfred Dimingo, "Interview with Martin Mujinga (Harare, Zimbabwe). January 3, 2025.

organisation needs to continue to act on the principles of justice, and the biblical narratives of God's action toward the unjust leaders will be relived. This stance is only fruitful if ZCC remains the mouthpiece of the people and not an extension of either the leftist or the rightist.

Discussion Summary

The Zimbabwean political framework has a long history of antagonism that worsened in the second millennium. This hostility of the far-right and the far-left of seeing each other as unreconciled enemies ("ne-nemies") is brought by the need to cling to power through unorthodox means and thinking that elections are a democratic way to get power, respectively. These two ideologies have nursed an unreconcilable relationship where the Zimbabwe Council of Churches stands as an arbitrator to reconcile the two adverse philosophies. The paper argued that ZANU-PF and the progressive opposition parties need to come to the round table chaired by the ZCC to find a way to work together for the good of Zimbabwe. ZANU-PF, whose Marxist theory pushes the colonial past rhetoric to keep the country in the hands of the minority and yet uses these methods of injustice to survive, has nothing to do with the majority who languish in poverty. From one angle, the party's hegemonic approach labels everyone differing with their ideology as enemies of sovereignty and puppets of the Western world. This extremism is dangerous for a people's government. The paper also pointed out that, whereas the selected opposition parties advocate for democracy, reformation of the electoral system and the rule of law, it is important to push that with an objective agenda of not just wanting to be in power.

CONCLUSION

The paper has revealed that, in a conflictive nation divided between diverse ideologies, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches has a theological and historical mandate that qualifies it as a conduit to centre the repelling political standpoints as such labelling the ecumenical board as either centre-left pushing the regime change agenda or centre-right fronting the agenda of the regime is not only unfortunate but confusing as the church is not a political party but a mouth of the dump. The paper has demonstrated that it is not easy for the ZCC to be the pivot, yet it is also possible to be the pinnacle of both leftism and rightism. These possibilities were discussed in the opportunities and challenges faced by the Council in discharging its prophetic role or centering the far-left and the far-right. ZCC also encourages the ecumenical organisation to stand on its principles of neutrality and justice against all odds, as this middle path is the answer to centering the diverse political voices in Zimbabwe.

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