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Southall, Roger

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Review Article

History, Tyranny, and Democracy in Zimbabwe

Roger Southall

Michael Bratton (2014), *Power Politics in Zimbabwe*, Scottsville, Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, ISBN 9781869143114, 280 pp.

David Coltart (2016), *The Struggle Continues: 50 Years of Tyranny in Zimbabwe*, Auckland Park: Jacana Media, ISBN 9781431423187, 646 pp.

Keywords: Zimbabwe, political history, power and rule, social opposition/political opposition, political theory

Roger Southall is a professor emeritus from the Department of Sociology, University of the Witwatersrand, and a research associate in Political Studies at the University of Cape Town. He is the author of *Liberation Movements in Power: Party and State in Southern Africa* (James Currey; University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2013). His most recent book is *The New Black Middle Class in South Africa* (Jacana; James Currey, 2016).

E-mail: <Roger.Southall@wits.ac.za>

Presently, Zimbabwe is very much out of the news. The 2013 elections have come and gone; the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) has reasserted its hold on state power; the economy is getting worse and worse; and the world continues to await the displacement or death of the country's nonagenarian president, Robert Mugabe. In a word, it's pretty much business as usual, except in so far as the climaxing of competing tragedies in such countries as South Sudan and Burundi now render Zimbabwe an African sideshow. True, there is considerable interest in the intra-ZANU-PF power struggles around the presidential succession, but generally the global perspective on Zimbabwe is one of resignation. In essence, this contribution argues that

external interventions to change Zimbabwe's course have been miserably ineffective. Accordingly, a democratic solution to the country's travails is pretty much a non-starter, and the best that can be hoped for is a not-too-violent political transition to a post-Mugabe order. If Zimbabweans want a democracy, they must be left to create it for themselves.

The two books reviewed here throw much light on why this policy position – which I take to be that of the Western and even some African elites – has come about. They are very different books. David Coltart's volume uses autobiography to explore the bitter disappointments of Zimbabwean history. In contrast, Michael Bratton's book explains the Zimbabwean impasse by drawing upon the literature on power sharing and institutional change. They will almost certainly be able to engage rather different audiences. Coltart's account will have more popular appeal, while Bratton's will draw more academic attention. Furthermore, whilst Coltart – sustained by his Christian faith – remains (perversely?) optimistic about the future of Zimbabwe, Bratton's realist approach is considerably gloomier. Even so, despite their differences, these contributions complement each other nicely. Both are consumed by key questions: How can Zimbabwe grapple with its history and resolve its apparently intractable conflicts? What prospect is there for some sort of transitional justice? Is there any realistic chance of transitioning to democracy? There is no originality in these questions. They are of concern to all those who have an abiding interest in Zimbabwe. However, both books add considerably to the richness of debate. After a brief review of their content, I will discuss how they address these issues.

Bratton: The Dynamics of Power Politics

Bratton “analyzes the resilience of authoritarian rule in Zimbabwe through the lenses of power politics and elite political settlements” (10). By capturing the state, leaders have been able to entrench lasting arrangements to exercise power, never hesitating to use violence and defy the rule of law. “Power politics” he borrows from the realist tradition of international relations, “which views states as locked in blunt competition to achieve self-defined national interests in the absence of overarching external authority” (7), choosing to apply it to the domestic rather than the international arena. While Thomas Hobbes might well protest that Mugabe's particular conceit is that he embodies the sovereign, Bratton eschews any such emphasis upon a “big man,” providing an alternative emphasis on the broader civilian–military elite coalition which surrounds the president (235). So even when, at critical junctures, such sovereign elites feel com-

pelled by circumstance to enter into more inclusive pacts with rivals, they do their best to undermine these pacts and to return to the *status quo ante*.

Beyond his explanation of power politics, Bratton organises the book into four parts. First, distinguishing between “power capture,” “power sharing,” and “power division,” he provides overviews of the different political settlements which have defined Zimbabwean politics. The colonial political settlement, which favoured a small white minority, went through different iterations: rule by the British South Africa Company; settler rule under authority delegated from Westminster; settler rebellion; and, finally, the Lancaster House independence settlement, whereby Britain brokered a compromise between the settler regime and African liberation movements, granting majority rule in return for guarantees of property and economic continuity. However, under this settlement (1980), ZANU-PF’s drive for exclusive power saw it waging ethnocidal war against its internal rival, Joshua Nkomo’s Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU), and violently cajoling the latter into collapsing itself into the ruling party in 1987. Subsequently, in the wake of escalating economic and political crises, ZANU-PF was to be bundled into a power-sharing arrangement with a new rival, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), in 2008. Bratton characterises these settlements as “elite pacts” rather than “social contracts,” with elite interests continuously predominating. All of them have been built upon “manipulation of the law, economic exclusion, political intimidation, covert operations, and [...] physical violence” (7).

In Part 2, Bratton goes beyond other accounts of the post-2008 period by placing the MDC–ZANU-PF coalition in a cross-national, African context. Power sharing between rival elites was implemented relatively successfully to end settler rule in South Africa and civil war in Sierra Leone. However, it was far less successful in Kenya. Although it brought a momentary halt to violence following the disputed presidential elections of 2007, it enabled a president (Kibaki) to retain power despite having possibly lost the election. Indeed, the coalition period failed to address the deep structural domination long enjoyed by the Kikuyu elite (118). Bratton concludes that whereas in South Africa and Sierra Leone political adversaries saw advantages in resolving differences by talking rather than fighting, in Kenya, and as he goes on to detail, in Zimbabwe, power sharing was used by incumbent elites to regroup and recapture the state.

In Part 3, Bratton turns to fundamental reforms that he considers necessary for countries to resolve intractable domestic conflicts. In the Zimbabwean case, he refers to constitution making, election management, security sector reform, and transitional justice. The first three of

these have already received considerable attention, there being wide consensus that for Zimbabwe to make progress towards democracy, it needs a fully inclusive constitutional settlement, it needs elections to be independently managed, and it needs civilian control to be asserted over the military. How to achieve these worthy ends is a more difficult matter, and Bratton's commentaries (for instance, that the best hope for professionalisation of the military lies simply in the passing of the generation which fought the liberation war) are as sensible as any. Most valuable, however, is his discussion of the need and prospects for transitional justice, to which I turn in more detail below.

His concluding Part 4 attempts to reflect upon the implications of the Zimbabwean case for theory about power sharing and institutional change for policymakers, and not least, the Zimbabwean people. He had the advantage of writing after the 2013 election, when although ZANU-PF undoubtedly engaged in its customary chicanery, it nonetheless won a renewed mandate, despite popular awareness of its past oppressions. In the 2013 election, Bratton suggests, many people voted for ZANU-PF simply because they feared that its rejection would result in a renewal of political violence and conflict (244). In turn, he holds out little hope that leadership succession within the ruling party will lead to a more liberal social compact. Until that time, "the people of Zimbabwe will likely opt for social peace and stability, rather than transitional justice or even democratic liberty" (245).

Coltart: The Struggle against Tyranny

Coltart's volume is prefaced by an impressive number of endorsements by the great and the good. The one I like the most was penned by David Blair, chief foreign correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*, who describes Coltart's book as "an extended love letter to Zimbabwe," citing the author's introductory comments, where he writes of Zimbabwe's "mountains, rivers, savannah plains, teak forests, rich soils, abundant water," and so on, along with "some of the most literate, hardworking, and kindest people on the planet." Although he acknowledges that Zimbabwe's history has been tumultuous, he is nonetheless "more than ever enthralled by this great nation." What Zimbabwe needs, he argues, is democracy – "a new birth of freedom in which government of the people, by the people, and for the people is cherished" (xiv). This is obviously endearing stuff. Yet it also embodies an acute contradiction: How did "the kindest people on the planet" give rise to such a brutally authoritarian post-independence re-

gime? It is this contradiction that Coltart seeks to unravel, albeit in a manner more personal and less analytical than Bratton.

Coltart's outline of Zimbabwe's historical trajectory, tracing the country's movement from racial to liberation-movement authoritarianism is not original in itself. It has been traced many times before. However, what is original is the extensive detail and insider knowledge of many events and processes. For a start, Coltart's account is utterly compelling, even for those already soaked in Zimbabwean history. In particular, he has rendered a major service by providing details of disappearances, arrests, incarcerations, cases of torture, persecutions, prosecutions – and, too often, murders – of numerous victims of the regime. Such evils are of course valuably aggregated by civil society organisations such as Amnesty International, but Coltart refers to the individuals involved, for many of whom he served as a lawyer. For the families of such victims as much as the victims themselves, it is important to have their names inscribed into history. Further, in telling these individual stories, Coltart weaves a fascinating account of how a relatively small number of individuals – lawyers, activists, pastors, liberal whites and Africans alike, and so on – worked to expose and counter regime oppression. Lawyers will be gratified that even in situations where the law, judges, and the courts had been largely suborned by the state, legal processes could sometimes result in unexpectedly favourable outcomes. They will be less impressed, however, by the need for even distinguished lawyers like Coltart and other opponents of the regime who defend individuals in the courts to take extreme measures to preserve their personal safety, ranging from the wearing of bulletproof jackets to the necessity of packed suitcases in case of arrest, along with the importance of “safe houses” for the protection of their families. This account joins others (e.g. Todd 2007) in reminding us very forcibly of the immense courage it has taken to oppose vicious repression in Zimbabwe. In Coltart's case, he could easily have emigrated – but rather than take the easy route out, he deliberately gave up his British citizenship, thereby making it more difficult for the regime to expel him.

Any attempt to summarise Coltart's account would be foolhardy, so I will simply focus upon three aspects of it which I feel are of particular value. The first is that it contributes to the growing literature (such as Godwin 1996) on “white Rhodesia.” Coltart is searingly honest in his account of how, as a politically callow youth, he opted to do his national service rather than flee. Ian Smith's government had decreed that, upon turning 18, all boys should do their service immediately after school (previously they had been allowed to attend university first). Despite the

strong reservations of his parents, who opposed Smith and wanted their son to avoid the draft, Coltart took the view of the white majority that it was cowardly not to defend the country in the face of a “communist” threat. For Coltart, therefore, “national service was a necessary evil to secure a smooth, gradual transition to majority rule rather than a revolution” (53).

Coltart signed up for the police for three years, and he describes his involvement in anti-guerrilla activities in detail. Yet it was while he was with the police that he began to change. As a totally inexperienced officer, he found himself heavily dependent upon black subordinates, who were more competent than he was. Over time, too, he was to become increasingly disillusioned by the methods used to combat “terrorists,” (although he equally deplored the brutalities of the other side). Ultimately, this led to his leaving the police early and heading for undergraduate studies in law at the University of Cape Town (UCT). There he mixed initially with other conservative “Rhodies” before a Damascene conversion to active (as opposed to nominal) Christianity and community work in the Crossroads squatter camp, along with exposure to UCT liberalism, brought about a transformation in his views. Following the 1980 election, Coltart committed to returning to a new, more inclusive Zimbabwe. It was there, as a fully fledged lawyer, that he was to become drawn into the networks of activists, including that of former prime minister Garfield Todd and his daughter Judith, which emerged in defence of human rights as the Mugabe regime cranked up its assaults upon its opponents.

Fast-forward to the early 2000s, and there is valuable material on the early development of the MDC, which Coltart joined only after he had been invited to become its secretary for legal affairs. Soon he was heavily involved in both the MDC’s call for a “no” vote in the 2000 referendum on ZANU-PF’s proposed new constitution and the MDC’s subsequent campaign in the 2000 elections, the latter conducted amidst a reign of terror by ZANU-PF. Standing as the MDC candidate in his home town of Bulawayo, Coltart was elected to parliament by a sweeping majority. Overall, however, with many of its supporters (notably in rural areas) subjected to extreme violence, the MDC was denied victory. So it was that Coltart became caught up in the maelstrom of opposition politics, much of it concerning how parliamentary, media, and legal campaigning should relate to mass action. This was to involve him in all sorts of legal tangles with ZANU-PF. It also brought him and the MDC up against unwelcome regional realities, such as South Africa’s and the SADC’s backing of the result of the 2005 election, in which once again

ZANU-PF had trashed virtually all of the SADC's own electoral guidelines. "History had come full circle. Just as the Nationalists had allowed the RF to frustrate the democratic will of the people, the ANC was doing the same for ZANU-PF" (419).

Of particular interest is Coltart's account of how the MDC began to unravel into rival factions in the wake of that election. Increasingly, there were youth members of the MDC who wanted to return fire with fire, and were impatient that the party's involvement in parliamentary processes had changed nothing. While Coltart insisted that it was the MDC's commitment to non-violence which had consistently distinguished it from ZANU-PF, party leader Morgan Tsvangirai was more equivocal. Subsequently, latent tensions became overt when the party split around whether to participate in the 2005 Senate elections (the Senate having been arbitrarily reinvented after prior abolition in 1989). Despite vigorous efforts by Coltart to broker a peace, the breach was confirmed in January 2006, when the MDC broke into two factions, one (the majority) led by Tsvangirai (MDC-T), the other by Gibson Sibanda, who was soon replaced by Arthur Mutambara (MDC-M). Initially undecided on which faction to join, Coltart's mind was made up by revelations made to him that MDC operatives were being trained in South Africa. Although it was not clear whether the training was defensive or offensive, weapons were clearly involved. Apart from his own personal commitment to non-violence, he regarded this as likely to invite an even harder crackdown by ZANU-PF on its opponents (440–441).

The division of the MDC was to chronically weaken the opposition starting in the 2008 parliamentary elections. Although together the two MDCs won a majority (MDC-T [99] + MDC-M [10] v. ZANU-PF [97]), the divide caused them to lose the Senate and denied them a larger majority in the Assembly. Nor did it help them in the presidential election when the MDC-M opted to back ZANU-PF rebel Simba Makoni (8.3 per cent) rather than Tsvangirai (47.9 per cent), this – if the official results are to be believed (which actually they are not!) – depriving the latter of an absolute majority over Mugabe, forcing him under the electoral rules into a run-off election. Coltart confirms that security personnel thereupon resorted to extreme levels of violence to keep Mugabe in power, which ultimately forced Tsvangirai to pull out of the campaign to protect the safety of his supporters (476–477).

There is much detail provided about the formation of the power-sharing coalition, although little that is new. However, what is fascinating is Coltart's description of his time in office as the MDC-M's nominee to head the Ministry of Education. His account of how he managed to

restore the schools system to something resembling functionality has its own interest, but for most, the real value will lie in his description of the workings of the coalition. How ZANU-PF ministers were clearly in awe of Mugabe; how senior civil servants undermined MDC ministers; how too many MDC ministers became seduced by the spoils of office; and how Coltart perceived distinctions between hardline ZANU-PF ministers, who were cynically exploiting the Government of National Unity (GNU), and “moderates” (led by Vice President Joice Mujuru), with whom he could work. Ultimately, of course, this was to no avail, for as the 2013 election was looming, it became clear that ZANU-PF was intent on manipulating the electoral process – something it achieved with resounding success.

Two further points: First, Coltart’s account gives copious detail of his continuous travels overseas, his easy access to high foreign quarters, and the numerous linkages that existed between civil society organisations and with foreign funders. Although this exposed ZANU-PF’s opponents to accusations of imperialism, it speaks to the importance of external support for civil society where political space is being closed down. Second, a cruel criticism which may be made of Coltart is that he paints himself as Tarzan in Africa. Let us concede that he is not immodest! However, the more important point is that we need far more, not fewer, memoirs by holders of high offices in Africa. Penning autobiographies is the staple activity of retired politicians in the West. In Africa, too few retire, and even fewer write, leaving gaping holes in African history (see Tsvangirai 2011 for a relevant exception).

Zimbabwean History: Have Opportunities Been Missed?

There is a case for counter-factual history if it points to how, at critical junctures, choices were made which altered a country’s long term historical trajectory. In the case of Zimbabwe, these two books pose the question of whether things might have been different had the liberal openings under Garfield Todd in the 1950s not occurred and had the coalition government after 2008 not been displaced.

Coltart admits to Garfield Todd, prime minister from 1953 to 1958, being one of his heroes. His vision had been one of “a moderate, tolerant, and democratic Zimbabwe” (359). As prime minister he had introduced major reforms aimed at improving the education of the black majority and made progress towards extending political rights to blacks. However, such moves lost him the confidence of his cabinet, and he was

forced out of office. Todd was “hardly a liberal in the Western sense,” yet nonetheless, “he was also a visionary and a man way ahead of his time” (13).

There can be no quarrel with the view that Todd – who was to play an honourable role in protesting human rights abuses under both Smith and Mugabe – deserves all the plaudits he gets. But did his ousting in 1958 really change the course of history? To be fair, Coltart does not explicitly say so, but his yearning that history might have worked out differently if Todd’s rule had been allowed to run its course is very evident: “greater liberty and economic development might have been achieved had war been avoided” (597). Along those lines, he sees strong continuities between settler and liberation-movement rule: “Rhodes begat Smith and Smith begat Mugabe” (599). Ultimately, therefore, Coltart’s regrets about missed opportunities give way to realism, and an appreciation of the racially polarising dynamics of settler rule (14–19).¹

Bratton gives short shrift to any idea of a lost liberal moment in settler politics. Indeed, he quotes Colin Leys’ 1959 assessment that the dependence of the settler community upon its control of the state for its presence in the country “precluded the possibility that the power would be voluntarily shared with the rest of the population” (41). Colonial domination, Bratton insists, started and ended with political violence, the short-lived “internal settlement,” headed by Abel Muzorewa (1978–1980), constituting nothing more than a last ditch attempt by settlers to rule through conservative black agents (34). Subsequently, although the Lancaster House settlement was politically inclusive, it was externally driven, lacked local buy-in, and failed to overcome the racial divide. Furthermore, ZANU-PF was to establish its hegemony and hence readily appropriate the authoritarian legacy of the colonial state.

Coltart has no doubts that the decision by the two MDCs to enter the coalition government with ZANU-PF following the 2008 elections was the right thing to do. Given a collapsed economy, hyperinflation and the alarming breakout of a cholera epidemic, Zimbabwe was “in more danger than ever of becoming a failed state” (485). Although heavy political wrangling left ZANU-PF in control of all the coercive ministries

1 The argument that white Rhodesia’s “last chance” was lost in 1958 is pursued at length by Holderness (1985), one of Todd’s MPs. His account offers a valuable reminder that some Rhodesian whites were genuinely liberally inclined. However, it is ultimately unconvincing, if only because Todd would never have become prime minister to kick-start the liberal moment had not his predecessor, Roy Welensky, moved “upstairs” to become prime minister of the new Central African Federation.

(Defence, Security, and Justice), Bratton contends that no option remained but to execute the Global Political Agreement (GPA) that had been agreed upon in September 2008, despite Mugabe having unilaterally breached many of its key provisions. Coltart was wary of working with ZANU-PF ministers when they had been responsible for so much suffering, but there were no other “peaceful, non-violent” alternatives at hand. The constructive work which he was subsequently enabled to do at the Ministry of Education leaves him convinced that participation in the GNU was “the right thing to do” (485). Yet when he subsequently lost his seat at the next election, his dominant emotion was relief (577). Intra-MDC squabbling and brazen trampling over the coalition agreement by ZANU-PF had allowed disillusion to set in. When, subsequently (after the 2013 election), Mugabe dismissed Joice Mujuru, “any hope that the moderates would prevail within ZANU-PF was dashed” (585), and Zimbabwe’s prospects looked as grim as ever.

Bratton concurs that the MDCs had little option unless they were prepared to return to the wilderness of opposition politics. Offering a careful analysis of the intense pressures placed upon both the MDCs and ZANU-PF by the SADC and the AU, he points out the very different incentives on offer. To the MDCs, second prize though it was, the coalition offered a foot in the door to state power and the possibility of further political reform. For ZANU-PF, it promised an easing of diplomatic isolation and an inflow of resources to arrest the country’s economic free fall. Above all, however, “the GNU bought time to circle the wagons, restock the treasury (and the armory), and prepare to recapture state power” (138). He also notes the critical fact that the settlement was a *political* deal which failed to assert civilian control over the military. Consequently, ZANU-PF entered the coalition period with a reserved domain of power: the security complex, impenetrable to reformers, which was “dead set against any transition to democracy or the rule of law” (139). They would prove “military spoilers” who, enjoying direct access to plentiful diamond revenues, exerted a veto over political reform. Consequently, whereas the colonial political settlement had been “durable but illegitimate,” the GNU was, in the mind of its most powerful participants, only an interim arrangement (141).

It may be argued that Bratton is a beneficiary of hindsight while Coltart and his MDC colleagues had to grapple with what actions to take when confronted by hugely circumscribed options. In essence, as argued elsewhere (for example, Southall 2013), the MDC was between a rock and a hard place, and would probably have drawn extensive retrospective criticism if it had *not* entered the coalition. Nonetheless, for all that Col-

Coltart remains convinced that the MDCs were correct to join the coalition, he also provides ample evidence that they failed to maximise even their limited opportunities. Rivalry between leading personalities allowed ZANU-PF to stoke division between the two MDCs, blunting their effectiveness. This led ultimately to their competing against each other in the 2013 election (always particularly damaging to minority parties under first-past-the-post electoral systems). Coltart suggests that had the two MDCs been able to come to some agreement, then the logical option – given ZANU-PF’s blatant manipulation of the electoral regulations – would have been to withdraw from the election, thereby compelling the SADC to hold ZANU-PF to account. As it was, their failure to agree meant that neither could withdraw from the election for fear of giving the other credibility (571). In short, if this was a lost opportunity, the MDCs were significantly to blame.

Tackling Tyranny: Dealing with the Past for a Better Future

There is surprisingly little literature on transitional justice in Zimbabwe, despite the fact that, under the terms of the GPA, the GNU established the Organ for National Healing, Reconciliation, and Integration (see Benyera 2014; Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Benyera 2015; Ngwenya and Harris 2015). Perhaps this is because, however great the need for a serious national conversation about such issues, there is simultaneously a recognition that the time is not ripe for any such debate to lead to meaningful measures. In essence, there is popular as well as academic recognition that power politics has always prevailed in Zimbabwe and continues to do so. Bratton labels this “A History of Impunity,” with both colonial and postcolonial regimes granting sweeping amnesties to human rights abusers (218). Yet this does not mean that the need to have such a conversation goes away; for this reason, the contributions of both Coltart and Bratton are to be warmly welcomed.

Coltart identifies the cult of war pursued by both colonial and post-colonial regimes as having poisoned Zimbabwe’s entire society. In Zimbabwe, he argues, many political protagonists are continuing to fight the liberation war, as if independence never happened. The wounds of that struggle have continued to fester, and while this does not justify the gross abuses of human rights which have taken place since 1980, it may help to explain them. “Until we have some process to enable us all to come to terms with our past, our past will continue to haunt us” (596). While there will be those who contest his view that the war of the 1970s

was avoidable, there will be much wider agreement that the tragedy of contemporary Zimbabwe violence “has become an acceptable means of resolving domestic political problems” (597). Unfortunately, however, having highlighted the problem, save for asserting the need for the nation to come to terms with its past if democracy and development are to be achieved, he offers little indication of how it might be tackled.

By contrast, Bratton provides us with chapter and verse of how sweeping amnesties have been provided to those who have committed atrocities by both the colonial and postcolonial regimes. This approach was confirmed by the Lancaster House settlement, which pardoned combatants from both sides of the independence war, effectively pre-empting prosecutions or any official process to document the truth. Although justified as a means to achieve national reconciliation, this allowed for no moral reckoning, and denied justice to victims and survivors of human rights abuses. With many perpetrators of violence in the war taking up positions in the new government, including the security forces, the cycle of impunity was reinforced. Most notoriously, a Commission of Inquiry into the Matabeleland Disturbances (the “Gukurahundi”) – which was established under international pressure – issued a report that was never published, and the government never made any acknowledgement of its culpability, not to mention offering any redress. This is the way it has been, with political violence becoming systematically deployed as an instrument of government, notably during elections, while perpetrators have no fear of prosecution but every expectation of impunity.

Is there any way out of this cycle? Bratton provides us with an exemplary overview of the dilemmas of transitional justice (the trade-offs between morality and politics) and the mechanisms which have been used internationally and in Africa to achieve it (prosecutions, truth commissions, amnesty, and mixed models). However, he comes to the conclusion – citing how the institutions established under the GNU to promote national reconciliation and human rights were stymied by lack of resources and clear mandates – that there is little immediate prospect of securing prosecutions or establishing a functional truth commission. Although he hails the important work done by Zimbabwean NGOs in providing relief to victims and gathering evidence against perpetrators of violence for further use, he asserts that “the political reality of militarized authoritarianism in Zimbabwe means some measure of transitional justice may have to be denied or at least deferred” (227). Interestingly, he cites survey data demonstrating that while consistent majorities of respondents wanted violators to be punished, and supporters of the country’s democratic movement vigorously oppose any suggestion of a fur-

ther blanket amnesty, generally Zimbabweans are realists. While the old guard of power politicians remains in place, they opt for peace over justice (226–227). Transitional justice must therefore await democracy. But, realistically, what are the prospects for democracy?

Democracy: Damned or Delayed?

Coltart agrees with Bratton that Zimbabweans, having borne the brunt of war and violence, have pragmatically opted for peace rather than confrontation. Support for war and violence has “never gained traction among the vast majority of Zimbabweans” (notwithstanding, apparently, those in the MDC whose desire to return ZANU-PF fire with fire so dismayed Coltart during the mid-2000s). For Coltart, therefore, non-violent struggle would seem to represent not just a moral imperative but politically and pragmatically the only viable way to challenge ZANU-PF. Furthermore, rather than awaiting another messiah (whether a Tsvangirai or a Mujuru), Zimbabweans will need to place policy and principle ahead of personality if they wish to see a democratic dawn (600–601).

We should concede that some hope of utopia is necessary if political activism is to be sustained in seemingly impossible situations. But what are the realistic prospects of making progress towards democracy? Bratton provides some concluding thoughts that are simultaneously trite, in that they are so obvious, and profound, in that Zimbabwean democrats will only ignore them at their cost. (We may add that they are easier said than done). Reflecting on the “decisive defeat” of the opposition in 2013, Bratton urges the MDC or successor political parties to realise that political cohabitation with an entrenched incumbent will only undermine opposition leaderships; there is need for ongoing party organisation, especially in rural areas; opposition parties cannot afford factionalism, and smaller parties should coalesce; even if external parties initiate a power-sharing agreement, they will not push hard for political reform if they do not feel the opposition is able to provide political order and stability. For their part, civil society organisations need to put down further roots into society, especially outside urban areas if they are to offer education and hope that counters ZANU-PF hegemony. Finally, he says, “the future of the country lies in the hands of the long-suffering people of Zimbabwe” (244).

If the bad news is that the 2013 election indicated the Zimbabwean people felt the opposition parties had failed them, the good news is that they have given ample indication in the past – above all, at the time of

the 2008 election – that they are prepared to mobilise behind popular movements for change when they believe the moment is opportune.

Coltart's valedictory call (601) is that the struggle for democracy continues. Bratton concurs, but convincingly argues that victory is far from certain, and that even if attainable, is likely to be much delayed.

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