

Zimbabwe's consolidation as a gatekeeper state¹

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Abstract

Cooper's gatekeeper state theory provides a powerful way to read recent Zimbabwean politics, but the country also challenges his assumptions about both the elite-led nature of gatekeeping, and deterministic assumptions about its direct emergence from colonialism. Drawing on ordinary Zimbabweans' perspectives I make two arguments. First, I show how consolidation of Zimbabwe's 'gate' has been shaped by events and contingent reactions to them since 1980, complicating Cooper's focus on the immanence of colonial structures. Second, I show how consolidation has been achieved through popular ideas of and engagement with the outside world. This has been done in reaction to the increasing solidity and narrowness of the gate – in the ways Zimbabweans themselves work around it – but also in a shift in the ways Zimbabwean people think about the legitimacy of gatekeeping.

Key words: Zimbabwe; Gatekeeper State; Frederick Cooper; legitimacy; citizens

Introduction

Cooper's gatekeeper state, published in 2002, is a compelling way to describe how post-colonial African governments have supported themselves by tapping resource flows in and out of the country at the border, port or 'gate' where they are easier to control.² Mechanisms of the gate include exchange rate controls, taxation on exports and imports, and encouraging external investment and aid. Cooper explains how gatekeeping is historically rooted in European colonial approaches which saw African territories as revenue sources, and used access to the gate as a form of control. He shows how its continuation since independence has narrowed political and economic pluralism in many African countries, as state elites promote sectors that rely on the movement of resources through the gate, and then monopolise the gate to generate rents and to resource the patrimonial networks that keep them in control.

The power of Cooper's analysis lies in his creation of a vivid metaphor to explain a complex set of political and economic relationships, and in the way he roots a general explanation of African politics within the historical context of colonialism. It is both simple and rich in historical detail, focusing on African-European relationships as key to understanding how African states use the outside world to survive.

However, his approach can be criticised for a concentration on institutional formations and elite perspectives; and for an overly deterministic interpretation of the influence of the colonial era. He hints at variety in the degree to which gatekeeping activities are tolerated or viewed as legitimate – a variety that helps explain when they are not – but does little to assess popular conceptions of gatekeeper state mechanisms, or indeed to show how these shape and reinforce them. Instead, his historical approach tends towards a generalised understanding of how gatekeeping stems from colonial logics and institutions

² Cooper, *Africa since 1940*.

In this article I take up Dorman's argument that Zimbabwe is an example of a gatekeeper state,³ but show that it is one largely because of shifts that have occurred since independence, both to institutions and in popular reactions to them. I make two substantial arguments. First, I show how consolidation of Zimbabwe's 'gate' has been shaped by events and reactions to them since 1980, and particularly since the late 1990s. These have led to a hardening of the idea of a firmly-controlled gate and a narrowing of the institutions of the gate. I challenge Cooper's focus on the immanence of colonial structures. While some of the structures and logics that lay the groundwork for the development of the gatekeeper state can be traced to the colonial period, most of its consolidation has occurred since independence particularly in the crisis years since 2000. Moreover, this consolidation has largely been to do with the challenge to, or overthrowing of, colonial institutional arrangements and attitudes.

Second, I show how consolidation has been achieved through popular ideas of and engagement with the outside world. This is done in reaction to the increasing solidity and narrowness of the gate – in the ways Zimbabweans themselves work around it – but also in a shift in the ways Zimbabwean people think about the role of their state and its international relations.⁴ The consolidation of the gatekeeper state is thus not merely an elite-driven phenomenon but achieved in the ways ordinary people have reshaped their conceptions of legitimate state behaviour, specifically in how elites use rents generated through international relationships to resource domestic clients. I argue that citizens' expectations and norms have increasingly contributed to the reproduction of the gatekeeper state.

The discussion raises questions about legitimacy. In Zimbabwe, these concern not only how the state uses the gate in order to generate spoils, but what it does with them. State legitimacy depends on an ability to mobilise resources gained through gatekeeping from wider world. This could be just as much a historical

³ Dorman, *Understanding Zimbabwe*

⁴ Gallagher, *Zimbabwe's International Relations*.

co-creation of Africans and Europeans, but it is arguably deeper – both in terms of its reach into society, and into Zimbabweans’ sense of identity and place in the world – than Cooper’s analysis suggests.

Other scholars have framed African statehood around questions of popular legitimacy – notably Ekeh’s ‘primordial public’,⁵ Schatzberg’s father-leader,⁶ Bayart’s ‘politics of the belly’,⁷ and Chabal and Daloz’s ‘instrumentalisation of disorder’.⁸ These show in a variety of ways how elite behaviours are shaped within generally held normative expectations, and thus challenge the idea that African statehood floats free of popular engagement and legitimation. Cooper’s focus on elites can appear less rooted in African societies, yet his account of the gatekeeper state is a useful corrective to the tendency in these accounts to essentialise culture as a determining factor of political behaviour. His careful historical analysis explores the ways in which events, in particular colonialism, have shaped African statehood. ‘Gatekeeper states are thus not “African” institutions, nor are the “European” impositions; they emerged out of a peculiar Euro-African history’.⁹

My analysis here aims to tread a path between these two approaches – to take popular expectations and normative framings as an essential part of state formation and legitimacy, but to borrow both Cooper’s careful empirically-rooted approach, and his framing of statehood within wider international relationships. In doing this, I argue that Cooper’s theory is a powerful way of understanding recent Zimbabwean politics – that gatekeeping has not been weakened by modern trends such as globalisation, the activities of the BRICS or the advent of new communications technology. In fact Zimbabwe, which I suggest is not historically a classic gatekeeper state, has evolved to become one.

⁵ Ekeh, ‘Colonialism and the two publics’.

⁶ Schatzberg, *Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa*.

⁷ Bayart, *The State in Africa*.

⁸ Chabal and Daloz, *Africa Works*.

⁹ Cooper, *Africa since 1940*, p160.

The main part of the article is based on research in Zimbabwe between 2011 and 2014, spanning the middle of the Government of National Unity (the GNU, inaugurated after violent and disputed elections in 2008, and comprising principally of Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF and Morgan Tsvangirai's MDC-T) through to ZANU-PF's victory at the 2013 elections. This period was arguably one of relative political plurality, and also of uncertainty, ending in a return to the dominance of ZANU-PF. Following a period of acute crisis,¹⁰ this 'breathing space' has, I argue, helped cement Zimbabwe as a gatekeeper state.

The research involved interviews and focus groups with members of residents' associations, trade unions, political parties churches and schools. I interviewed those running the organisations, and over time was able to engage with those they worked with. My interviewees therefore comprised politically and socially active people as well as less politically engaged people from their communities. Two groups were based in the capital Harare; one in Chitungwiza, a large dormitory city some 30 km south of Harare; three in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second city, with connections into the surrounding dormitory towns; and two in rural areas (Matabeleland South and Mashonaland Central). These groups were selected to reflect as wide a range of opinion as possible, which tend to differ across rural/urban and regional divides.

As a British academic, it is easier to interview those critical of the regime than those who support it.¹¹ Many NGOs tend to be sympathetic to the opposition parties, however two of the groups I worked with were pro-ZANU-PF, and

¹⁰ Raftopoulos and Mlambo, *Becoming Zimbabwe*.

¹¹ Interviews were substantially shaped by my identity as a white British woman. At times this led to tendencies to talk up the benefits of the relationship with Britain, and at others led to direct verbal attacks on me as a representative of one of the countries that was punishing Zimbabwe through sanctions. I have discussed elsewhere the effects of my position in relation to the findings of this project. See Gallagher, 'Interviews as catastrophic encounters'.

helped me to interview people more sympathetic to the ruling party. Most urban residents tended to support opposition parties, while many rural residents I spoke to, particularly in Mashonaland Central, expressed strong pro-ZANU-PF views. One finding that helped shape my analysis was the way formerly sharp differences seemed to dissolve over the GNU period. While the majority of voters in Ndebele-dominated Matabeleland and those in urban areas have tended to be most critical of ZANU-PF, this became much less the case in 2013. Rural voters, who have tended to be more supportive of the government, were less likely to have changed their position.

I interviewed more than 200 people over five visits and interviews were open-ended. I asked people to tell me about their lives, the history of Zimbabwe and its relationships with other parts of the world. Some interviews were one-to-one, and others in groups of up to 16. I have not used people's names or identified the groups involved.

The early roots of a peculiar gatekeeper state

Cooper addresses Zimbabwe specifically in his discussion of the gatekeeper state, but skates over its rather unusual colonial legacies and its transition to a 'crony capitalism'.¹² Moreover, his analysis, published in 2002, does not encompass the dramatic changes that have further transformed the country since the land invasions began in 2000. Part of my job in this section is to argue

¹² At independence in 1980, Cooper argues, the country had more economic options than most, 'a balance of agricultural, mineral, and industrial possibilities' (2002: 138). However this was dissipated in a few years: 'Zimbabwe's elite has been Africanized by the kind of crony capitalism typical of gatekeeper states: the state does little to encourage an autonomous, African business class, but uses its own strategic location to provide opportunities to clients. The poor remain poor, and much of Zimbabwe's population remains in the badly eroded, badly supplied rural areas.' (Ibid)

that Zimbabwe did not begin life as a gatekeeper state, and to show how it began to evolve into one as economic and political crisis took hold from the 2000s.

Zimbabwe does not conform to Cooper's model, largely because of the way its white population has shaped its history.¹³ Unlike many British colonies in Africa, Rhodesia was substantially affected by the white people who arrived from South Africa and England and settled down to farm.¹⁴ For the black majority population, Britain was not far away – physically or in the imagination – but embodied by the white farmer who changed the landscape, becoming landowner and employer as well as administrator. In a small country like Zimbabwe, the effect of these settlers was enormous, and many Zimbabweans still argue that their entire way of life and culture were shaped by 'Britain'.¹⁵

Zimbabwe in the early years was not a classic gatekeeper state. As Cooper himself points out, Zimbabwe began with a fairly well-diversified economy, thanks in part to the UDI years during which a more complex and diversified

¹³ In some ways the logics of the gatekeeper state looked similar to other parts of colonised Africa: connections with Britain were strong, and this was reflected in trade patterns throughout the first half of the 20th century (Mtisi, Nyakudya and Barnes, 2009a). The white farmers provided powerful sources of patronage and control through their monopoly over land, employment and the resources of the gate. But despite these ties, gatekeeping did not produce the narrowing effects seen in other parts of Africa. Many white farmers were deeply committed to their new country (Pilososof, 2012). Wealth was often not repatriated but reinvested into Rhodesia; the state was developed through the investment made by this increasingly wealthy class. As a result Rhodesia's infrastructure – its roads, railway, banking system, post office – and the hold of legal-bureaucratic systems, took root in ways not seen in much of the rest of the continent.

¹⁴ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 'Mapping cultural and colonial encounters'; Schmidt, *Colonialism and violence in Zimbabwe*.

¹⁵ Gallagher, *Zimbabwe's International Relations*.

economy was developed.¹⁶ The ZANU-PF government largely left economic control in the hands of white farmers and business. In those early years, Zimbabwe was more like a rational-bureaucratic state than many post-colonial African countries, with reasonably strong and widespread buy-in to existing state structures and procedures, and low levels of corruption. It had a relatively substantial formal sector, which was regularly taxed. Alongside a relatively strong manufacturing sector, Zimbabwe's 'gate' was put to good use: agricultural exports were healthy, and aid flowed in. However, resources were used to extend state services for the black population, most notably in education and healthcare,¹⁷ rather than simply to service patronage networks in classic gatekeeping style.

A heavier reliance on gatekeeping did begin to become more important as Zimbabwe's economy declined, and in particular when the invasions of white farms began in 2000, led by a group of war veterans who were aggrieved about the slow pace of land reform. Although the government was taken off-guard, it quickly moved to support and add weight to a populist stand-off with the still rich and privileged white farmers, tying its stance into an increasingly bitter row it was waging against the British government which had refused to fund compensation for land redistribution in 1997.¹⁸ The effect of this was a double-repudiation of Britain inside Zimbabwe: the violent expulsion of white farmers, the embodiment of Britain inside Zimbabwe, and the violent rejection of Western influence. Mamdani has controversially called this the moment of true Zimbabwean independence, comparing it to Idi Amin's expulsion of Uganda's Asian population.¹⁹

¹⁶ After the Universal Declaration of Independence (UDI) in 1965 sanctions and international disapproval led to a burgeoning of Rhodesia's manufacturing sector (Mtisi, Nyakudya and Barnes, 2009b).

¹⁷ Muzondidya, 'From Buoyancy to Crisis'; Herbst, *State Politics in Zimbabwe*.

¹⁸ Tendi, 'The origins and functions of demonisation'

¹⁹ Mamdani, 'Lessons from Zimbabwe'.

In terms of gatekeeping, these shifts had profound implications. First, the removal of white farmers from the land, the resulting exodus of large numbers of them and the emasculation of those that remained, had the effect of solidifying and narrowing the gate in popular imagination. Now the gate more clearly separated Zimbabwe from Britain and the wider world: it sat on Zimbabwe's borders rather than ambiguously diffused throughout its territory in the presence of white 'British' farmers. This idea was heavily reinforced by Mugabe's vitriolic standoff with the British government, in which he depicted British ministers as vindictive and subversive agents in the destruction of Zimbabwean freedom and engaged in an attempt to re-colonise the country.²⁰ He was able to tie Western support for the increasingly popular MDC into this narrative. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni has pointed out, Mugabe's rhetoric described and then externalised divisions within Zimbabwe, projecting internal dichotomies by creating an 'us' and 'them' that sat either side of Zimbabwe's borders instead of within them.²¹

Second, this movement enabled the government to strengthen its material grip on the gate. The narrowed economy that was created and the redistribution of land to government supporters reinforced narrow patron-client networks and concentrated power. Ideologically, too, the government cut affective ties to Britain as a way to draw on the real grievances of colonial racism to shore up political support within an increasingly competitive political environment. Anti-Western rhetoric was effective during election campaigns.²²

Third, and contrary to points one and two, the alienation of Britain and the West more broadly created potential problems for well-run gatekeeping. Sanctions from the EU and the US meant that aid was diverted away from the state (although aid continued directly to NGOs), while declining confidence caused

²⁰ Tendi, 'The origins and functions of demonisation'

²¹ Ndlovu-Gatsheni 'Making sense of Mugabeism'.

²² Tendi, *Making History in Mugabe's Zimbabwe*; Chan and Gallagher, *Why Mugabe Won*.

investment and tourism to shrivel up. Mugabe was going substantially against the grain by repudiating Western support, apparently eschewing the logics of extraversion.²³ Instead of at least paying lip-service to the reforms usually demanded by Western donors in return for financial support, as Bayart argues the majority of African political leaders have done, Mugabe decided to explicitly refuse them. He began to use his rejection of Western political and economic ideas as a way to prove his anti-colonial credentials, rather than treating the West as a source of rents. This was a risk. A Zimbabwe cut off from parts of the world that had, since independence, formed an important source of support for its political and economic wellbeing did not seem viable, and indeed, as I outline later, this was of great concern to many ordinary Zimbabweans. However, Mugabe moved to secure the support of new patrons in the form of the Chinese government and private investors, particularly after the rise in gold prices and the discovery of diamonds in the east of the country in Marange. These ensured the survival of a more narrowly-shaped, classic gatekeeper state, now with a non-European international partner.

A series of contingencies thus provides the underpinning to Zimbabwe's consolidation as a gatekeeper state. Land invasions, the vitriolic arguments with the British government, the arrival of the Chinese and the exploitation of mineral resources did not form part of an overarching strategy, but they were well-handled by an astute Zimbabwean government.

However, this consolidation has not been driven just by elites. Gradually many Zimbabweans have come to adapt themselves to its logics. In the rest of the article I trace how this has come about through three steps. The first concerns the ways that citizens view state viability in terms of international relationships. This stems from the perception of the importance of the relationship with Britain as the former colonial power, and as such was connected to how Zimbabweans understand themselves and their state as 'British' in character. However, gradually this view shifted to a more general principle through two further steps:

²³ Bayart, 'Africa in the World'.

the widespread realisation of the practical importance of the gate for individuals who were driven to directly seek support beyond the gate; and a final acceptance of the state's monopoly on the gate. I trace these steps over the next three sections.

Popular views on ZANU-PF's unpopular gatekeeping

In discussing their government's performance, the Zimbabweans I interviewed made clear connections between international relationships, economic performance and state-viability. Government critics and government supporters expressed similar views in slightly different ways: bad relations with Britain and the West undermine wider Zimbabwean well-being. The difference concerned whether it was Mugabe or the British who were to blame for the breakdown. However the espousal of the Chinese as a replacement was generally suspect. Government critics in particular felt that Chinese patronage would work purely for the benefit of the elites, but supporters also expressed unease about their government's 'strange' new partner.

In reappropriating land and repudiating British neo-colonial aspirations, Mugabe cut loose from the old colonial power and expelled its local embodiment, the white farmer. The gate was closed to Britain. This was both empowering and troubling. It was empowering in the Mamdani sense, because it represented a confident national assertiveness, a moment of 'real' independence. But it was troubling because many Zimbabweans felt that it denied them the external material and moral support that were essential for wellbeing on practical and emotional levels.

Many Zimbabweans who oppose the ruling ZANU-PF party feel a strong attachment to an idealised Britain, particularly in light of their bad experiences at the hands of the post-colonial state.²⁴ What is perhaps more surprising is the

²⁴ Gallagher, 'Good state/bad state'.

way in which even ZANU-PF supporters raise concerns about spoiling the link between their country and the former colonial power. People talk in terms of the 'umbilical cord' between the countries, of Britain as 'part of our culture', and the fact that 'most of the infrastructure and the fibre of our economy is from that country'.²⁵ Those opposed to the regime can argue that the British are, 'very good to the people of Zimbabwe... [wanting] to make Zimbabwe good as before', and 'God-fearing people, sympathetic to other people's predicaments and wanting to help those in need'.²⁶ There is a sense of fear that Mugabe, in repudiating the British, is spitefully cutting off their access to a more sympathetic source of support. But Mugabe supporters can become angry at the ways in which Britain has 'abandoned' them, tried to 'kill the child coming from the womb'.²⁷ One residents' association chairman told me: 'if the colonial power moves out and there are sanctions, factories close down and people lose jobs – families close down...These are the problems, because of the closure of companies. Something has been removed.'²⁸ This man would not have criticised Mugabe for this withdrawal; but his comment highlights the importance he attaches to the relationship for Zimbabwe's economic health, a view common among government supporters and critics alike.

Mugabe's stance was seen by many as bad gatekeeping – a failure to use the gate effectively to generate support – because of the deep anxiety that Zimbabweans remain materially dependent on Britain. One trade union activist told me: 'We cannot divorce ourselves from the rest of the world. We do not have the expertise to process our diamonds, to mine our gold. Tourism is vital – we want tourists. What good will it do if Zimbabwe is in isolation?'²⁹

²⁵ Chitungwiza resident, 28 Aug 2011; trade union members, 1 Sept 2011; Bulawayo resident, 28 May 2012

²⁶ Mbare resident, 2 Sept 2011; Chitungwiza resident, 4 Sept 2011

²⁷ ZANU-PF supporter, Bulawayo, 30 May 2012

²⁸ Civil Society activist, Bulawayo, 30 May 2012.

²⁹ Trade union activist, Harare, 31 Aug 2011

Others framed the argument in terms of Mugabe being naughty or childish. His irrational anger was preventing access to help to get out of the problems he had created, to spoil an important relationship. Two non-politically active people, one from Chitungwiza near Harare and the other from Old Pumula near Bulawayo made the point in a similar way:

The president speaks badly about the British. He's wrong. Just imagine, he speaks badly about the person who can help us out of our problems. I am embarrassed.³⁰

The president is always blaspheming and criticising the distant countries. He is doing something wrong. These people can also help you but he doesn't consider that. He thinks he can do it all for himself. He will never.³¹

The important thread that runs through this anxiety is the idea of shutting the gate altogether, leaving Zimbabwe without international partners and sources of support. Mugabe's patriotic nationalism was an assertion that Zimbabwe didn't need this anymore: but Zimbabweans were not so sure, seeing external support as economically essential. The widespread scepticism I found, particularly in urban areas, reflects low trust in the government following electoral violence, the bulldozing of illegal homes in poor urban areas in Operation Murambatsvina, and the dire economic conditions produced by hyper-inflation.³² In this situation, many felt that the government had wilfully closed the gate to prevent Britain and other Western countries from helping them. Mugabe was the problem: he was blocking the gate. Another Chitungwiza resident summed up this idea: 'Britain would like to help Zimbabwe, but there is one element that stops them, it is only

³⁰ Chitungwiza resident, 28 Aug 2011

³¹ Old Pumula resident, 30 May 2012

³² Sachikonye, *When a State turns on its citizens*.

Mugabe... I know you are by the door, but you cannot come in because of that one element.’³³

When the government reached out to China as an alternative source of external resources, there was almost universal scorn. I found this amongst Mugabe’s supporters and critics, rural and urban alike, who used virtually identical terms to criticise the Chinese. As one Bulawayo-based civil society leader said:

The Chinese? We are fed up of them. They are hated by the people here because they are Mugabe’s allies and they are looting gold and destroying the environment. They have been given mines so people view them with suspicion... They don’t care about the politics and governance unlike the UK and US that would put democracy as a condition of aid and this is why they are popular with African dictators. People ... are suspicious too. They don’t trust the quality. ‘Best before 24 hours.’ They bring cheap things and then they exploit pure gold in exchange for cheap, poor quality things.³⁴

The Chinese are criticised because they don’t invest in people, but are ‘just looting’ mineral resources. They use the country as a dumping place for cheap goods reducing Zimbabweans to ‘consumers only’³⁵

This account is one of a narrower gatekeeper relationship. The government’s new international partners appear alien and disconnected from ordinary Zimbabweans. The benefits accrued focus more narrowly on state elites – the government ministers and senior military officials who have shares in the mining and luxury tourism concerns that the Chinese are engaging in – and on the Chinese themselves who dump sub-standard goods and remove profit without putting long-term investment into training, employment and the

³³ Chitungwiza resident 4 September 2011

³⁴ Civil society activist, Bulawayo, 12 May, 2012

³⁵ Trade union activist, Bulawayo, 28 May 2012; Old Pumula resident, 30 May 2012; Trade union representative, Harare, 5 Sept 2011

wellbeing of ordinary Zimbabweans. As one MDC activist put it: 'China is another friend of the government. If a country is friends with the government they cannot be friends with the people of Zimbabwe.'³⁶

Zimbabweans from across the political spectrum are strongly convinced of the importance of the outside world, and view the state's use of the gate as central to their wellbeing. For many, this is more than just a material wellbeing, as it is tied up with their identity – one commonly-made point is that Mugabe too suffers through his repudiation of Britain, that he 'yearns for a relationship with Britain that is free of animosity and pettiness', and 'believes the British can actually come and repair him, can give him new political life'.³⁷ Much of the criticism of the government's gatekeeping is therefore not that the gate is unimportant, but that it is being misused. Wider and deeper interests and identity are excluded, and the divisions between state and society are deepened through the skewing of the distribution of spoils.

The personalised gate

As Zimbabwe has become more difficult to live in, with unemployment high and food scarce, people have come to rely directly on other countries for goods and services or for work. Hundreds of thousands of Zimbabweans have left the country, many moving within the region to South Africa, Botswana and Mozambique; others to Europe and the US.³⁸ From abroad, these migrants help keep family going back at home: 'Everyone is relying on money sent from relatives in England.'³⁹ Those that remain travel frequently: 'Botswana and South Africa... have become our lifeline – people go there to trade and bring food

³⁶ Chitungwiza resident, 28 Aug 2011

³⁷ Civil society activist, Harare, 30 August 2011

³⁸ Crush and Tevera, *Zimbabwe's Exodus*, p3)

³⁹ Trade union activist, Harare, 31 August 2011

back.’⁴⁰ And others find safety abroad during times of political violence. I interviewed many MDC activists who left for South Africa during the post-election violence in 2005 and 2008, sitting it out there until the situation calmed down.

Thus the outside world became in the 2000s more heavily and directly essential for private family or individual survival. The state, which many still believe should provide for them, was preoccupied. As one respondent put it: ‘The president is like a father, but this one has kicked all his children out.’⁴¹ In particular, the young are leaving, causing concern among the old left behind. A group of religious leaders from Matabeleland, a region historically neglected by the state, described this problem: ‘People don’t think there is any solution for them yet, in the medium-term. In this region most people are no longer staying in this country. The young people want to go out – they have surrendered.’⁴² Many disappear. The suspicion is that they have failed to make good. Others are able to help support their families, like this trade union organiser who hadn’t received her salary for more than two years: ‘I’ve got a sister in the Netherlands and two daughters in Cape Town: that’s how I keep going... I’m like a useless mother to my own children.’⁴³

Part of the stress people describe stems from the perception of a deficit created at the gate by the crisis situation. Zimbabwe no longer pulls resources in through its gate as much as it loses them – in qualified people whose efforts abroad lead to a trickle of resources back. The country is hollowed-out, supported by exported, external scaffolding. Moreover, the scaffolding is an individualised support system, reaching into the country to hold up families and homes. It

⁴⁰ Chitungwiza resident, 28 August 2011

⁴¹ Chitungwiza resident, 28 August 2011

⁴² Religious leaders, Bulawayo, 29 May 2012

⁴³ Trade union organiser, Bulawayo, 28 May 2012

further fragments a brittle society. This point was made by a civil society organiser in Bulawayo, Matabeleland's capital:⁴⁴

When Matabeleland failed to develop, a lot of people felt unappreciated here. You had fatherless children who had no birth certificate so they could not participate in national life. So instead of going into form one, people went to South Africa where they were welcome. From every home you had at least one person going to South Africa... In Matabeleland's rural areas, the roads are so bad, schools are so far apart, cleaning so neglected. Everything that has to be attended to by the government is so bad. Only our private homes are strong.⁴⁵

For individuals there is therefore a sense of dependence on the outside world that they must organise for themselves because the government is not pursuing it effectively in the national interest. Most Zimbabweans are necessarily focused on the world beyond Zimbabwe and what comes from it, and this means attention is focused on the gate. But the only way to make this work is to engage in a constant negotiation and battle with the state's gatekeepers. Smuggling and evasion become important skills as Zimbabweans attempt to avoid state control of the gate. A group of informal workers who between them travel regularly to South Africa, Zambia, Dubai, Britain, Tanzania and Japan, described the difficulties they faced.

⁴⁴ The region as a whole has experienced state neglect more deeply and for much longer than the rest of the country. Many of those interviewed pointed out that it has only been in recent years that those living in other parts of the country have begun to experience similar problems. They argue that their experiences, deeper and of longer duration, are now coming to be felt throughout the rest of Zimbabwe.

⁴⁵ Civil society organiser, Bulawayo, 28 May 2012

Zimbabweans are very, very enterprising. We get [capital] from friends and family. Then we pay back and get some money to go back again. We can't get access to cash at the bank.

I've been going to South Africa to buy blankets, DVDs and televisions but it's becoming increasingly difficult. Duty has increased.

Most people join together, like four or five people going to Japan, but only one will go. Some cooperate, one goes and comes back, with shoes, clothing, food, maybe furniture.

The major problem is how to get goods into Zimbabwe. The police will come and get everything because I don't have permission to sell.

Along with the Zimra Control [the tax authority] who can take all your property.

Every effort is being stifled. You try to go out, you try to buy and sell here. It's stifling. But [you] can't sit back at home.⁴⁶

The restrictions imposed at the gate are seen as an attempt by the state to prevent survival. Sitting at home doing nothing has meant potential starvation – particularly in 2008 when hyper-inflation had destroyed the value of the currency and left the shops empty. And so this becomes a struggle between enterprising individuals trying to keep their families alive and a predatory state that seeks to restrict, confiscate and deprive. The gate has thus been a means through which many people find safety and resources, and also the way in which family members have been lost. The dramatic exodus through the gate in recent years has further hollowed out Zimbabwe, leaving its interior depleted and fragile, supported by some of its most vigorous members' activities beyond it. In these circumstances, the gate becomes a vital means of private support.

⁴⁶ Informal workers focus group, Harare, 6 Sept 2011

The state in these circumstances appears at best an irrelevance, and at worst an impediment to people's wellbeing. Rather than provide the 'multiple roots' and 'alternative models for changes' as Cooper suggests of the creative and diverse international relationships created by Africans at every level,⁴⁷ they reinforce the sense of a chasm between the state and people, each using its international connections for survival and self-enrichment.

The state wins monopoly of the gate

The period of 2008-2013, the years of the GNU, were critical for the consolidation of Zimbabwe as a gatekeeper state. Referred to as a 'transitional period'⁴⁸ it brought a measure of stability after several years of crisis, yet felt to many like a time of suspension. Although at the time it appeared that a full transition to democracy under a new constitution and a victory for the MDC was possible, the 2013 elections confirmed the hegemony of ZANU-PF and the logics of a narrowed gatekeeper state.⁴⁹ This period further solidified the gatekeeper state through the growth of popular acceptance of state control over it. This was realised over the GNU period as people were increasingly tied into state patronage networks, through both coercion and the promise of opportunities.

There are two parts to this. The first concerns the ways in which Mugabe managed to win people over to his depiction of the West as the enemy of

⁴⁷ Cooper, *Africa since 1940*, p185)

⁴⁸ Masunungure and Shumba, *Zimbabwe*

⁴⁹ Despite the rigging and manipulation practised in 2013 by ZANU-PF, much of the analysis views this as not decisive, pointing rather to important shifts in the political affiliations and priorities of Zimbabweans over the GNU period. See work by Booyesen (2014); Dube & Makaya (2013); Gallagher (2015b); LeBas (2014); Ncube (2013); Raftopoulos (2013); Southall (2013); Tendi (2013); Zamchiya (2013) and Chan & Gallagher (2017).

Zimbabwe. This created (and perhaps echoed) a growing detachment of Zimbabweans from their faith in Britain, both in terms of the ideology of a rational-bureaucratic state that it represented and which many had once aspired to; and as a sympathetic and potential saviour. Loosening these connections left Mugabe much more firmly in charge of the agenda for how to make international relationships work for Zimbabwe. The second was the widespread disappointment in the MDC's record in office, which undermined faith in their 'alternative' approach to managing the state.

The juxtaposition of the West against Zimbabwe was articulated during the 2013 election campaign – as it had been in earlier ones. Mugabe in particular managed to make Western sanctions an important issue during the campaign, pointing to them as the main cause of economic decline. This issue became very effective: even MDC-loyalists who had supported their party's encouragement of sanctions, began to waiver. This debate is reflected in a discussion between MDC activists in Bulawayo, three months after the election:

We might think sanctions are not affecting the country [but] ZANU-PF is talking about sanctions every day. If companies close they say it's sanctions... In the opposition, they have been supporting sanctions but they are not going to win the election if they support sanctions. People believe that now. But we are just defending the sanctions.

The effects of sanctions are debatable, but people end up believing it. The media says it, Mugabe says it, even some African countries are saying it. It's a mobilizing tool for ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe and to other African allies.

The only effect of sanctions has been to draw Mugabe closer to his people.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ MDC activists, Bulawayo, 9 November 2013

The MDC's loss of popular resonance during the GNU is critical here. In the run-up to 2008 the party achieved substantial support by offering a clear-cut alternative to a discredited ZANU-PF. The MDC-Tsvangirai had established itself as the antithesis of ZANU-PF, a representation of an ideal Western-style regime during a period when politics was highly polarised.⁵¹ However, the period of power-sharing badly eroded both the perception of difference between the parties,⁵² and the credibility of the MDC's alternative politics.⁵³ Corruption among MDC MPs, perceptions of arrogance, Tsvangirai's colourful love-life, all eroded confidence in the party.

The party's association with white farmers (many of whom had supported it from the start) and reluctance to condemn Western sanctions became liabilities. One MDC activist described the change: 'It was good in the old days to associate with white men. Mugabe has made it difficult, made people understand that to be a black man is important. If we come to the people and speak in English, they tell us off.'⁵⁴

According to political activists and voters, the reasons for this can be traced to the perception that the MDC's programme didn't offer anything very tangible. The experiences of the MDC in government showed that human rights and democracy were ephemeral luxuries. Particularly problematic was the feeling that the MDC did not have the inclination or capacity to fulfil people's material needs. An important feature of its attraction for voters was its Western connections – as one rural voter put it, 'people thought investors would come into the country'⁵⁵ – but the Western backers had not come through. Speaking of the MDC's failure to exploit Western patronage, one Bulawayo voter said: 'The

⁵¹ LeBas, *From Protest to Parties*.

⁵² LeBas, 'The perils of power-sharing'.

⁵³ Gallagher, 'The battle for Zimbabwe'.

⁵⁴ MDC activist Bulawayo, 9 November 2013

⁵⁵ Head teacher, Mashonaland Central, 14 November 2013

MDC said they had keys, but they didn't get anything.⁵⁶ Neither had they made good use of their time in government. A rural voter in Matabeleland South said: 'These MDC guys went to government and came out poor.'⁵⁷

During this period, and particularly in the run-up to polling in 2013, ZANU-PF worked hard to ensure that resources were distributed throughout the country. Particularly in areas which the party had once written off (most notably the Ndebele-dominated Matabeleland), huge attempts were made to woo voters with presents and promises, backed up substantially by the party's policies of continued land redistribution and share ownership. Gift-giving was highlighted as important in poor rural areas. An NGO worker explained its effect: 'Considering the campaigns that they were holding, it was obvious that they would win. If you come and promise or donate things immediately before the election, these people will support.'⁵⁸

It was particularly persuasive in Matabeleland, as a group of MDC activists reported:

During election time it was a free-for-all. Politicians gave out rice and promised [people] areas to build their houses. The appeal of ZANU-PF was direct and immediate.

I asked a man why did you vote for ZANU-PF? He [told me that] they brought food, community share ownership – this for them is development. The MDC talks devolution.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ ZANU-PF activist 11 November 2013

⁵⁷ Rural residents, Motobo, Matabeleland South, 10 November 2013

⁵⁸ NGO employee, Mashonaland Central, 14 November 2013

⁵⁹ MDC activists, Bulawayo, 9 November 2013

An important shift had taken place – even in Matabeleland which has been staunchly anti-ZANU-PF since the Gukurahundi massacres in the 1980s.⁶⁰ The parties were now being judged on their capacity to deliver resources, and there was an expectation that they would use foreign patronage or access to state resources in order to do this. By the time of the 2013 election campaign, ZANU-PF's distribution of resources – actual and promised – were seen as a sign that they were prepared to do this, while the MDC was not.

Briain Raftopoulos has argued that ZANU-PF has entrenched itself by developing a complex and effective set of patronage networks that provide coercive impetus as well as the prospect of access to wealth, and these are now widely spread.⁶¹ These networks operate powerfully throughout the informal and mining sectors. For the poorest, the only way to secure a trading stand, or access a mining job is through local ZANU-PF patronage, making alternative affiliation unviable. Land redistribution has tied large numbers of small farmers into these networks, which are administered through local headmen loyal to the ruling party, and the new share ownership scheme appears to offer further opportunities for those who join the ZANU-PF movement.

The head of a development agency who works with new small-scale farmers explained the effects this has had in the rural areas: 'From the small farmer's perspective, there has been an improvement. If you look at the assets people have been able to acquire... I know friends who owned six, seven, eight tonne trucks. They would go and collect crops to take to market, but they are no longer

⁶⁰ One suggestion as to why this dramatic shift was so evident in Matabeleland was the idea held by many voters that the MDC – which represented the region and was now in government – was 'in power' during the GNU and thus responsible for the continuing problems of the country. In ZANU-PF strongholds, such as Mashonaland Central, there was a stronger tendency to see the MDC as still in opposition (Gallagher, 2017).

⁶¹ Raftopoulos, 'The 2013 elections in Zimbabwe'.

profitable. A lot of farmers have bought their own small trucks so they can take their own and their neighbours' crops.'⁶²

The patronage networks extended into the urban middle- and aspiring- classes, many of which had formerly been staunch supporters of the MDC. With the erosion of the formal sector, and the growth of opportunities for business interests that aligned themselves with ZANU-PF, many middle-class voters have been able to profit effectively from the shifting regime. A businessman told me:

The problem for the MDC is that the middle class grew very well under the GNU. My brother did very well – he bought two houses... He used to be a strong MDC man. Now he is ZANU-PF. He sees many opportunities from the indiginisation programme and being part of ZANU-PF... My brother would like to farm. All the big guys have farms. Mugabe's rhetoric on land and race really resonated with Zimbabweans. It means a lot to them... For guys like my brother, the MDC doesn't seem to offer very much.⁶³

Gatekeeping makes sense as long as the spoils are widely distributed, and many people felt they were, at least in the 2013 election year. Even as widely suspect an international partner as China was acceptable under these terms. I found notably less concern about the Chinese relationship in 2013. The MDC's failure in government was interpreted less as being about the compromises it made in power, than about the realisation that it didn't understand this logic of how to use the gate properly. Reflective members of civil society – and many MDC-supporters – realised that their political, social and economic system had undergone an important change. As one civil society leader put it: 'The patronage

⁶² Head of a Development Agency, Mashonaland Central, 14 November 2013

⁶³ Harare-based businessman, interviewed in Bulawayo, 9 November 2013

approach really worked for ZANU-PF to give them numbers.’⁶⁴ Another said: ‘The real story is about how ZANU-PF met the needs of people.’⁶⁵

Conclusion

This article has described the consolidation of Zimbabwe as a gatekeeper state. It has done so by looking at the ways in which the country’s external relationships, and the dramatic ways these have changed in recent years, have been understood and to an extent produced by its citizens.

Zimbabwe’s gate has been consolidated through a narrowing and concentration of its focus, enabling a tighter state control; but also through its broadening appeal. For elites, it is an effective way for them to entrench themselves – as Cooper suggests. But it makes sense to ordinary people too. Zimbabweans have become increasingly pragmatic about the endurance of their political elites. Gatekeeping makes sense as a way to harvest resources from the outside world. Many have come to see this on a personal level, and now also view their own government operation within the same logic. They are less romantic about the need for an affective relationship with the wider world, marking the worth of international relationships in more quantifiable ways and less optimistic about more diffused engagement with the wider world through the gate, or the alternatives offered by legal-bureaucratic systems.

As an idea, the gate is extremely powerful. It pulls Zimbabwean elites and population together, pitting them against the wider world, now more clearly separated. The gate marks the separation, and encapsulates the character of the relationship between the inside and the outside.

⁶⁴ Civil society activist, Bulawayo, 11 November 2013

⁶⁵ Bulawayo-based civil society activist, interviewed in Harare, 13 November 2013

The Zimbabwe case study highlights tells us some new things about the gatekeeper state. One is about its evolution, which here is more complex and contingent than Cooper appears to allow for, and the other is about the role it plays in cementing or eroding state-society relations. Both of these speak to the issue of legitimacy, and highlight Cooper's neglect of the importance of the colonial legacy as ideational or emotional as well as institutional or material. My argument is not that the external world has become more important to Zimbabwe, but that the idea of how this works has become much more narrowly focused. Ordinary Zimbabweans who would have seen their relationship with the West as complex, involving an emotional attachment, tied up with their sense of identity, and far less dichotomised between the outside and the inside, have increasingly come to adopt the concept of the gate as narrower, concentrated more clearly in the hands of the state, confined largely to material benefits, and tied more firmly into a narrower conception of how the resources generated are distributed. If the gatekeeper state was less of a reality for Zimbabweans at independence, it has become one since, and, I would argue, this has occurred because it makes sense to both elites and the wider population.

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