

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Zimbabwe student movement: Love-hate relationship with government?

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to trace the development of student unionism in Zimbabwe. On the basis of a discussion of the nature of the university, the article argues that because the university environment tolerates and promotes academic freedom and liberal values, it provides an environment conducive to critical thought and oppositional politics, while the university quite often itself becomes the target for student attack. Student representation during the pre-independence period in Zimbabwe sought to engage the institution in its effort to re-order society at a time of racial struggle and class conflict. After independence, student representation was in support of government efforts to create a better Zimbabwe and to consolidate the gains of independence. However, after the first decade of independence, the relationship between students and government soured due to students' opposition to the one-party system as well as the University of Zimbabwe Amendment Bill, among other issues. This article thus documents and analyses the relationship between students and government with reference to three periods and two key moments: the 1973 protests against racial discrimination in the pre-independence phase and the post-1990 developments in Zimbabwean national and university politics.

Keywords

Higher education; student unionism; student activism; national politics; Zimbabwe.

Introduction

Zimbabwe attained independence on 18 April 1980 after a protracted armed struggle. This article discusses three important phases of the development of student representation and unionism in Zimbabwe. The first is that students were an important part of the pre-independence nationalist struggle in Zimbabwe. Through the University of Rhodesia and Nyasaland Students' Representative Council (SRC), students belonged to the

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intelligentsia, which assisted in mobilising and disseminating information on the struggle. During the 1970s when the liberation war was being waged from outside the country and when most political leaders had gone into exile, the student unions filled the vacuum. Other social groups had professional, organisational and political weaknesses. The university campus became a breeding ground for political leaders where democratic struggles found a voice.

The attainment of independence heralded the second phase in the development of student unionism. SRCs at the University of Zimbabwe and at a handful of higher education colleges were transformed by the authorities into institutional bodies with recognised responsibilities. They became involved in programmes that focused on students and their experiences, including social advisement, student health, recreation, alumni and fundraising, etc. Student representative bodies ceased to be part of a political vanguard contesting state authority in order to become part of the project of national healing, reconstruction and development. Because of their elitist appeal, the student representative bodies became ‘privileged actors’ in the state-led thrust for national development. Through the Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU), students became a key stakeholder in government planning and policy implementation. The government also rewarded students with grants and loans to finance their studies.

With the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, the government of Zimbabwe’s socialist rhetoric toned down in the late 1980s in favour of capitalism. Zimbabwe, which was literally ‘orphaned’, was ‘adopted’ by the Bretton Woods Institutions, leading to the introduction of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in 1990, which coincided with the third phase in the development of student representation in Zimbabwe. ESAP eroded the expectation of good jobs and high status for students after graduation. Government cut back on social spending. Although students clung to a self-conscious elitism, the austerity imposed by ESAP resulted in financial problems and poverty for students. Confrontation and upheavals characterised university and college campuses. Criticism of the shift in government policy saw the student representative bodies aligning themselves with trade unions and opposition parties. Student bodies began to use any political event perceived to be unpopular, in order to vent their anger at the authorities.

Methodology

This study was carried out between June 2014 and August 2014 at the University of Zimbabwe. It employed a qualitative research methodology involving both primary and secondary data, interviews and discussions, and participant observation.

The body of historical information was obtained by consulting archival files. These yielded newspaper cuttings, which, however, had some gaps. The tragedy of government departments is poor record keeping. Open-ended interviews without a structured or formal questionnaire were done with randomly selected senior administrators at the University of Zimbabwe. This was deliberate in order to encourage cooperation, because previous attempts to document student unionism through questionnaires was not readily embraced. The tendency is to associate student unionism with radicalism. Discussions were

held with the 2014 academic year SRC members. Participatory observation also helped to fill some of the gaps in the information. The author has been part of the university community since 1994.

Apart from the recent work by Zeilig (2007) and Chibango and Kajau (2010), there have been few attempts to properly document student unionism at the University of Zimbabwe. Furthermore, the study has limitations owing to the attitude of key informants: Students who were interviewed regarded themselves more as recipients than as sources of information, and university officials in central administration and the Student Affairs Division who were interviewed treated the study with suspicion, as 'inquisitiveness' and 'adventurism' on the part of the researcher, as opposed to contributing to knowledge on institutional history.

The University: A conceptual framework

According to Owolabi (2007), the idea of the university refers to that apex institution of learning devoted to the objectives of knowledge and culture production. This resonates with the 1962 (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organizations UNESCO) declaration which gives the university the responsibility to advance the frontiers of knowledge through teaching and research. These traditional functions are basic and they are the pillars of the academic life of the university. The university is thus expected to engage in critical inquiry into the nature, culture and essence of humans and the environment they inhabit. It should acquire information and develop it into a body of knowledge to be disseminated for improving the conditions of humanity and addressing challenges facing society. Knowledge, in this context, is typically defined as 'those ideas that are universally valid and relevant' (Owolabi, 2007, p.71). In essence, Owolabi (2007, p. 71) sees two roles emerging. The first is that of universal development of human knowledge, while the second is that of applying this to the production of a culture that will meet with the demands and aspirations of the society where the university is located.

Ngara (1995) provides a useful contribution to a conceptual framework for understanding the nature of the university. He concurs that the university stands at the apex of the education system as a place for the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge. He, however, suggests that there are three characteristics which distinguish the university from the point of view of its nature rather than its functions. Firstly, a university has both a local and an international dimension; it is characterised by particularity and universality. Secondly, a true university enjoys a high degree of autonomy and academic freedom. Thirdly, a university is a self-motivating and self-perpetuating institution (Ngara, 1995, p. 6).

The nature of a university is determined by history and the environment which it finds itself in. Ngara (1995) cites examples of land grant universities in the United States, such as Michigan State University, which were meant to play a pivotal role in agricultural and industrial development. Further examples are the Imperial College of Science and Technology in London, which was a key factor in Britain's military strategies and successes in the First and Second World War, and the University of London, which reflected the interests and character of the British Empire and, consequently, had a significant influence

in the development of education in Britain and in the colonies. Owolabi (2007, p. 77) observes that, in this age of globalisation, the university – particularly in the African context – is faced with the dilemma of reconciling two roles: attending to the practical needs of society and modernisation. It is torn between the demand to serve humanity in general and the interests of its host community. A university has to establish and maintain links with global trends and development; it has to reassert traditional values but also enter the main stream of global culture.

Another important aspect of Ngara's (1995) conceptualisation of a university is that it must enjoy autonomy and freedom. He observes that, for the university to perform key functions such as sharpening consciousness, developing intellectual faculties and developing skills, a stimulating and free environment unfettered by government rules and regulations should be created. In addition, a university should be a self-evaluating and self-renewing institution; it should be responsible for maintaining and improving itself. By his own admission, Ngara (1995, p. 15) points out that, often external pressures affect the entire fabric of the university system, such as government demands which can come in the form of promulgating Acts of parliament that affect the operations of universities or alter modes of financial support.

In the light of the foregoing framework, the article traces the historical development of the relationship between the university and students in Zimbabwe with the theoretical lens that the university must enjoy freedom to advance the frontiers of knowledge in the context of its historical and environmental – especially its macropolitical – setting. It takes as its starting point that the principles of academic freedom to inquire, to debate, and to acquire and to disseminate knowledge in its many ramifications should not be constrained for students, staff and members of the university community.

Against this, students emerge as critical thinkers and have the right to contribute to advancing and disseminating this knowledge. As will be shown below, as the good intentions of the university drew it into the vortex of political and community life, student unionism emerged in Zimbabwe. Consequently, the university had to grapple with student unionism in areas such as freedom of speech, racial discrimination, freedom of association, and many other rights.

Student unionism in Zimbabwe involves, amongst others, that students come together to express their dissatisfaction and disaffection with current problems affecting society, seeking to eliminate poverty and inequality, and holding institutions accountable to the needs of the people. It is therefore important to underline that student unionism manifests itself in an oppositional manner which is usually dependent on the pressures of the day. Student unionism ought to be understood and not condemned. This emerges from the conceptualisation of a university as a bastion of truth and sharpener of consciousness.

For purposes of accomplishing their goals and objectives, student unions have always sought to direct confrontation with the authorities and law enforcement agents. Confrontation, it was believed, would result in police overreactions and excesses, a situation most beneficial to the success of their cause. They expected the press to see and record a person being injured in order to discredit the police role of law keeping or enforcing agent,

depending on which title best suited the situation. Also the quickest method to create confrontation was the issuing of impossible ultimatums or demands.

Prior to independence in Zimbabwe, student leaders thrived on grievances. This will be illustrated latter though quotes and excerpts from the 1970s. Errors of government provided the opportunity around which to articulate these grievances, which revolutionaries seldom ignored. The goal was to inflame passion, incite violence, and foment disorder in the hope that this would lead to more violence until authority was undermined and delegitimised and government was viewed by citizens as the enemy (Mutape, n.d.).

The University of Zimbabwe: A historical note

The University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, which became the University of Rhodesia on 1 January 1971 and later the University of Zimbabwe in 1980, was incorporated by Royal Charter on 11 February 1955. The original impetus for the founding of the university was given by Mr J.F. Kapnek, who, in 1945, donated GBP20 000 for such a purpose. Mr L.M.N. Hodson, who was a member of parliament, gathered a group which called itself 'Friends of the University of Rhodesia' to publicise and foster the idea. The group later changed its name to 'The Rhodesia University Association'. On 26 October 1946, the Legislative Assembly of Southern Rhodesia accepted a motion, introduced by Mr Hodson as a private member, that a university should be established as soon as practicable to serve the needs of Rhodesians and neighbouring territories and that a board of trustees be appointed. On 19th May 1947, His Excellency the Governor of Southern Rhodesia established by trust deed the Rhodesia Foundation Fund and appointed as trustees the minister of internal affairs, the secretary for internal affairs and Mr Hodson (University of Zimbabwe, 1991, p. 61).

On 13 July 1953, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother laid the foundation stone at the present Mount Pleasant site. The new university college was admitted to the Scheme of Special Relation with the University of London. Except for the Faculty of Medicine, which was affiliated to the University of Birmingham, the students were registered and prepared for University of London degrees. In November 1953, Dr William Rollo, formerly Professor of Classics at the University of Cape Town, was appointed interim principal for two years; he was succeeded in December 1955 by Walter Adams, formerly secretary for the Inter-University Council. After the dissolution of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland at the end of 1963, it was agreed at meetings between governments of the United Kingdom and Southern Rhodesia that the University College should continue as an independent institution of learning, open to all races and serving and contributing to the advancement of knowledge within the international community of universities.

In January 1970, the University College and the University of London agreed to a phased termination of the Scheme of Special Relation so that the last intake for degrees of the University of London was in 1970. In April of the same year, the formal association with the University of Birmingham was also terminated and the last intake for medical degrees of the University of Birmingham was that of 1970. In September 1970, the University

College Council enacted new statutes in terms of the Charter establishing the University of Rhodesia, governed by a council and a senate. Full university status was achieved on 1 January 1971. On the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980, the University of Rhodesia became the University of Zimbabwe. In 1982, a Bill to make further and better provisions for the governance of the university was enacted by the Zimbabwean parliament, thereby replacing the Royal Charter (University of Zimbabwe, 1991, p. 62).

Demonstrations: Pre-independence era

The University of Rhodesia and Nyasaland opened its doors as a teaching institution in March 1957. This coincided with the rise of African nationalism in Southern Rhodesia. The goals of African nationalism therefore received maximum attention from the student community. Students, being familiar with the ideals legitimised by the United Nations, such as human rights and opposition to discrimination and segregation, expressed full acceptance of the aims and tactics of the African nationalists. Their approach to issues was marked by insistence on moral solutions.

Cefkin (1974, p. 145) further observes that issues which affected campus life were essentially the same issues facing the country, and that the political organisation of students reflected parent political groupings in the country. In 1963, African students formed the National Union of Rhodesian Students (NURS). This was necessitated in part by the need to continue with activities of nationalist parties which had been banned under the Law and Order Maintenance Act, and also as an alternative to the mainstream Students' Representative Council (SRC) which had negligible African representation. The split in the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) in 1963 elicited a lot of interest on campus. Since the split arose over a conflict of leadership within nationalist ranks rather than over principles, a good basis remained for student support through the NURS. The NURS invited the leaders of ZAPU and the newly formed Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) to address students on campus and answer their questions.

On 11 November 1965, Ian D. Smith issued the so-called Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) from Britain. According to Cefkin (1974), this was at a time when students were writing end-of-year examinations and hence there was no immediate reaction from students. However, when campus reopened the following year, on 16 March 1966, there were demonstrations on campus. Students demanded that the College should denounce the UDI and condemn restrictions and harassment of students by law enforcement agents. Nine lecturers and nine students were arrested and expelled from the country because of the demonstrations and class boycotts.

Student unionism and the associated disturbances in pre-independence Zimbabwe were political in the sense that they were more of an ideological follow-up of events than based on the practical needs of an academic nature. From its conception, a university should be regarded as part of the society in which it is located. It follows therefore, that, since the University of Rhodesia and Nyasaland was multiracial, it was bound to be faced with many controversies. As Cefkin (1974) notes, segregation and racial conflict clearly became a function of the polarisation in the larger society. Student protests and demonstrations

signified a moral outrage and moral pressures affecting society. Authorities were expected to, and should be rightly challenged to, take a second look at their decisions and policies.

From the archival files which were accessed, the following selected incidents at the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland can be noted, with a specific focus on the 1973 racial conflicts:

5 July 1973

The president of the Students' Representative Council (SRC), Mr Witness Mangwende, had applied for a Rhodesian passport so that he could attend the conference of the Southern African Students Movement from 25 to 28 June, 1973. Mr Mangwende was among those students who had signed a recent letter sent to the British newspapers asking for the withdrawal of the invitation to the University of Rhodesia to send representatives to the 11th Conference of the Association of Commonwealth Universities to be held in Edinburgh. It was not clear if Mangwende's views were known to the government before the passport was denied.

Although the invitation was not withdrawn, the University of Rhodesia did not attend because opposition to the university's presence from some students in Britain and some Commonwealth countries made it impossible for the congress to be held if the Rhodesian delegation attended (*Rhodesia Herald*, 5 July 1973).

27 July 1973: Unity with whites

Students from the University of Rhodesia held a demonstration outside the Houses of Parliament and the Office of the Prime Minister to protest against allegations made in the House of Assembly by a white lawmaker that black students were not using ablution facilities, resulting in filthy conditions. About 200 students, all but half a dozen of whom were blacks, waved placards and clenched fists in Black Power salutes in the peaceful demonstration lasting about half an hour (*The Umtali Post*, 27 July 1973).

29 July 1973

Two hundred African students occupied parts of the administration block at the University of Rhodesia hours after the demonstration outside parliament. Among their demands was that 50% of all administrative and teaching posts at the university be filled by Africans (*The Sunday Mail*, 29 July 1973).

4 August 1973

African students wielded tools and other equipment collected in the raids on dining halls, residences and faculties in demonstrations over rates of pay and conditions of black workers at the university, described as the 'Pots and Pans' protests. Two cars belonging to white students were stoned (*The Rhodesia Herald*, 4 August 1973).

7 August 1973

About 150 African students staged a protest at the University of Rhodesia, while 20 of their colleagues were appearing before a disciplinary committee charged with taking part in a demonstration at the multiracial university against the wage levels of employees there (*Evening Standard*, 7 August 1973).

8 August 1973

After rioting following the expulsion of six students, 155 African students were arrested (*The Times*, 8 August 1973).

17 August 1973

Racial discrimination had intensified since 1965 and there was now talk of segregation in higher education to increase opportunities for white school leavers and thus help solve Rhodesia's acute shortage of skilled and professional – and, of course, white-workers. Recently, there had been calls in the Rhodesian parliament for the expulsion of self-styled 'African nationalists' from the university and the restoration of 'normal standard of decency and hygiene'. One government backbencher even called the University of Rhodesia, 'with its ambivalent multi-racialism, an ulcer on society' (*The Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 17 August 1973).

17 August 1973

The majority of African students at the University of Rhodesia boycotted classes on the grounds of discrimination. The university principal, Professor Robert Craig, said this when 37 students appeared in court on a charge of public violence. Another 62 appeared on the same charge later in the day. All 99 pleaded guilty (*Rhodesia Herald*, 17 August 1973).

The unrest on the campus of the University of Rhodesia could not be dissociated from the wider political context. It was in response to attacks from a government minister that students held their first demonstration. The university's actions towards black students revealed a strong identification with white Rhodesia. Its inability to adjust to changing circumstances, the expressed determination not to compromise, and its dependence on the armed police force were all important characteristics of settler colonialism.

1 November 1973

Ninety-eight African student rioters were banned from entering the city of Salisbury. These restriction orders were served as the students were released from prison and barred them from coming within a 20-km radius of the city. The Students' Representative Council immediately condemned the government action (*The Rhodesia Herald*, 1 November 1973).

14 November 1973

Society benefited from people with university education and it was harsh for a judge to say that it was a privilege to attend an institution whose capital costs were met, in the main from public funds – defence counsel said this at the trial of University of Rhodesia students (*The Rhodesia Herald*, 14 November 1973).

19 November 1973

Herbert Makoni, Peter Molife and Eveready Changata, who were expelled from the University of Rhodesia earlier in the year for leading a demonstration against racial discrimination on campus, began a campaign to have the university thrown out of the Commonwealth Universities Association. If the campaign succeeded, it could mean that Rhodesian degrees might no longer be recognised internationally. (*Guardian*, 19 November 1973).

22 November 1973

Another African student from the University of Rhodesia, Mr Davis Karimanzira, was restricted to Highfield Township, Salisbury. He became the 104th African student to be served with restriction orders following riots on campus (*The Rhodesia Herald*, 22 November 1973).

These excerpts from newspaper clippings were the most relevant ones, relating to students, in the archival file on the University of Rhodesia before 1980. They were selected, firstly, to show the problems which arose when members of the university community felt that the government of the day was not doing enough to address societal problems. In such instances, students, who commonly refer to themselves as ‘the voice of the voiceless’, and in the name of academic freedom, openly challenged the government. Secondly, they demonstrate that the relationship between students and government is shaped by circumstances and events of the day. Thirdly, the excerpts help to illustrate how government reacts when it is directed by members of the university community, who view themselves as critical thinkers, on how to conduct its affairs. But, more importantly, and with reference to the conceptualisation of the university, the excerpts help in locating the university as an integral part of the community, yet it uses the freedom, from a point of objectivity, to criticise the very same society which it is part of.

Students in independent Zimbabwe

Students (and graduates) possessed one of the resources of greatest relevance for obtaining elite status in post-independence Zimbabwe: the credential of an advanced Western education. University graduates had prestige and influence that would otherwise have been impossible to obtain at their age. Graduates were treated differentially and were granted concessions that their less educated counterparts would not receive. For example, a university student or graduate–returning to his or her home in the country-side would be greeted as a ‘god’; they were approached, admired, and flattered, and they were subject

to no restraints, except perhaps an overly solicitous protection from harm. This deference led to influence within many segments of society; at the extreme, students were touted as the future leaders of the country. Even if it was not probable that every university graduate would become a member of the ruling elite, it was quite likely that the future political elite would include many former university students.

It is also important to note that students had international and Western frames for judging their own country's standing and progress. Students were therefore acutely aware both of the gap between international modernity and national reality and of the potential of political action. Students often believed that their leaders should do better and they also often thought that it was their responsibility to lead public opinion.

Independence also bequeathed a tradition of activism and oppositionalism among student bodies. This is because students were part of the broader movement which opposed injustice, and their focus now shifted to critically assessing the performance of the new, independence government. This tradition had its roots in the colonial era when nationalists opposed foreigners in their quest for independence and where opportunities for upward mobility were restricted on racial grounds. Although independence moderated oppositionalism, this was short-lived. Oppositionalism was sustained by the students' disillusionment with the slow pace of development in communities and with the human weaknesses which appeared to be at fault, bearing in mind that, at independence, many administrative appointments were filled before there was an adequate pool of well-trained and educated Africans.

Another factor which made students potentially important in the political life of their society was that the university brought intellectuals together physically, which made it easy to communicate with one another and to organise for political purposes. Youthful exuberance is also another propitious condition for oppositional activities. Generational conflict usually exists between older political leaders and the youthful university students.

Students and politics in the first decade of independence

Zimbabwe attained independence from Britain in 1980 and the University of Rhodesia was renamed the University of Zimbabwe. The euphoric crowds which celebrated independence included graduates from the university and those from foreign universities who had come back to assist in rebuilding the newborn country. Also present were young men and women who had left high school and others university to join the war, whose feeling was that they had played a significant role in the attainment of independence and that it was their responsibility to consolidate it and contribute to the prosperity of the nation.

The new government immediately declared a Marxist-socialist ideology and a leadership code which meant that the people were their own government. The government was inclined to treat students with care and respect in order to prove that it was different from the colonial regime (Chibango & Kajau, 2010, p. 20).

Chibango and Kajau (2010) note that the removal of bottlenecks in the education system resulted in an increase in enrolment at the University of Zimbabwe, which would

be a source of problems in the future. The increase in enrolment meant an increase in campus accommodation on which, in turn, spurred on student unionism. Indeed, the first demonstration in 1981 by students against racism saw the resignation of Professor Lewis and ushered in Professor Kamba as the first black vice-chancellor of the University of Zimbabwe.

The University of Zimbabwe Act 27 of 1982 provided for the establishment of an association of students to be known as the 'Students Union'. The aims and objectives of the union were:

- To provide for the representation of students in matters that affected their interests both as individuals and as a body in the pursuit of academic freedom;
- To promote intellectual, scientific, artistic, cultural, athletic, political, religious, social and economic activities arising among its members, and to promote their general welfare;
- To provide, encourage and develop among its members the formation, organisation and operation of clubs and societies for such purposes as mentioned above;
- To provide an effective channel of communication between the student body and the university authorities and the people of Zimbabwe in general; and
- To organise students on the basis of a love for peace, democracy and progress, as well as the elimination of racism, tribalism, regionalism, nepotism and imperialism.

(University of Zimbabwe, Students Union Constitution, as amended 1997)

The Student Union was led by the SRC, which consisted of the Student Executive Council (SEC) and the Students Representative Assembly (SRA). The SEC exercised the administrative functions of the SRC, and, in the exercise of its powers, was directly accountable to the SRA and, by means of a general meeting, to the Students Union. The ordinary general meeting of the Students Union was held at least once every academic semester.

The SEC was composed of ten members elected by the whole Students Union. There was a president, a vice-president, a secretary-general, a treasurer and six other members. Each of the six would discharge their duties in terms of different offices, for example: transport and non-resident students' secretary; social welfare secretary; academic and legal affairs secretary; sport and entertainment secretary; external, publicity and information secretary; and properties secretary. The SRA was composed of three representatives from each of the ten faculties of the University of Zimbabwe, voted for by students in their faculties. There were also two seats each reserved for the physically challenged and the visually impaired.

The University of Zimbabwe Act of 1982 was also significant in shaping the relationship between government and students in the future. The Act had a provision which made the state president the chancellor of the university. However, during this period, the office of the president was ceremonial and so this did not affect anything until 1987 when the Constitution of Zimbabwe was amended to create the executive president. There was now increased government control of the university. Thus, the appointment of the vice-

chancellor and pro vice-chancellors by the university Council was now subject to approval by the responsible minister. The executive president's influence on ministerial decisions also increased. This created divergent views between the government and students on issues such as government corruption, academic freedom, university decision-making and financial support for students.

The second decade of independence: A relationship gone bad

After the first decade of independence, the hitherto cordial relationship between government and students began to freeze. The year 1989 saw the birth of the first opposition political party in Zimbabwe, namely the Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM). This party was formed by a former secretary-general of ZANU (PF), Edgar Tekere, in protest against corruption and divergence from socialist tenets. Students were enthused by the formation of this new political outfit.

The local crescendo of student activism in the second decade of independence was the formation of a national union of students, namely the Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU), in 1989. Its objective was to create a platform for students to lobby and advocate for good governance, human rights and the empowerment of the youth. It became a member of the Southern African Students Union, the All Africa Students Union, and the International Union of Students. It began mobilising and participating in civic issues under the moto 'Struggle is our birthright'.

With the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, students became particularly opposed to the one-party ideology. It was felt by the students that the one-party ideology led to a cult of personality, politics of domination, inefficiency, corruption and primitive accumulation (Chibango & Kajau, 2010, p. 32). Student unionism filled the gap created by weak and disorganised workers, peasants and others. Students observed and scrutinised all the activities of government and began to question the responsibility of government towards its citizens and its intolerance of criticism. Students became aligned to opposition politics and ZUM became popular. Eventually, the introduction of the Economic Structural Adjustment, the tabling of the University of Zimbabwe Amendment Bill in October 1990, the arrest of student union leaders, and the arrest of Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) Secretary-General, Morgan Tsvangirai, marked the divorce between students and the government. The SRC, led by Arthur Mutambara, turned to demonstrations to express disapproval of government policy.

The University of Zimbabwe Amendment Bill, which curtailed academic freedom, was particularly vigorously resisted by students. Of particular interest in the Bill were the rules on student conduct and the powers vested in the vice-chancellor to discipline students. A section of the Bill empowered the vice-chancellor to discipline students deemed to have disrupted normal business on campus. Indeed, in the past, students had disrupted official university meetings and barred invited speakers of the university. It also empowered the vice-chancellor to suspend any student or staff member as deemed necessary pending a disciplinary hearing. This Bill was seen as taking away academic freedom and at the same time magnifying the powers of the vice-chancellor. Students felt that they had a right and

deserved to speak out on issues affecting society. The vice-chancellor at the time, Professor Walter Kamba, also felt that the Bill had the effect of putting too many fingers in the running of the university. In protest, he went on early retirement.

Eventually, together with other civic and workers groups, ZINASU participated in the formation of the opposition party, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), in 1999. Several former leaders of ZINASU moved from representing students to become political leaders of the opposition in the parliament of Zimbabwe.

Conclusion

From its conceptualisation, a university is a community of members who are engaged in seeking the truth. In so doing, a university is granted the privilege of academic freedom. The primary concern for the university should therefore be scholarly and only secondarily reformist. The starting point for judging a university should be its academic prowess in terms of generating and contributing to the advancement of knowledge. However, an inevitable product of knowledge and enlightenment is the desire to bring change to the status quo in society. In the same vein, student politics in Rhodesia mirrored the national politics of the day. The essential facts about everyday life in Rhodesia impinged upon student representation and political activities. At the same time, the enduring culture of revolutionary protest can best be summed up by Karl Marx's observation that the history of society is indeed a history of class struggle. In a way, students viewed themselves as a class, with a special identity, place and role to play in society.

For Zimbabwe, the first decade after independence was a honeymoon period in the relationship between government and students. Having had a marriage of convenience during the liberation struggle forged in their shared disdain for colonial rule, this marriage of convenience was to collapse in the second decade after independence. Thus, student unionism's dominant characteristic throughout the pre-independence and post-independence history of Zimbabwe can be defined as a product of reactions to perceived government shortcomings. This article has outlined this argument in relation to three periods and with specific reference to two moments in the history of the Zimbabwe student movement and its relationship with government.

Endnotes

1. The neo-liberal agenda of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank suggested that, in Africa, the returns on investment in university education were too low and unjustifiable. The Zimbabwe government working under the IMF and World Bank conditionalities also found it difficult to finance universities.

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