

Chapter 38

The Institution of Traditional Leadership and Local Governance in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This article describes how traditional leaders play important developmental, administrative and political roles in rural areas, despite modern state structures. They regulate rural life, control access to land, and settle various disputes. They are respected leaders in their communities. The existence of traditional leaders means that both the decentralisation and the strengthening of local governance are not taking place in a vacuum. Documentary sources such as the Constitution of Zimbabwe; the Traditional Leaders Act (2000) and Chiefs and Headmen Act (1982); newspapers and unpublished non-governmental organisations (NGOs) evaluations and reports were used in this article. Traditional leaders have played a pivotal role in ensuring that the ZANU-PF government remains in power since 1980. In principle, traditional leaders should not be drawn into party politics and their role should remain one of the neutral leadership. If the traditional leader assumes a party-political role, one should appoint a substitute to handle their traditional role to avoid a conflict of interest.

INTRODUCTION

Rural areas in Zimbabwe fall under the governance of traditional leadership. The institution of traditional leadership has been regarded as the main ruling system closest and accepted by the people at the grass-roots level (Ntsebeza, 2002). A traditional leader is defined as a person who by virtue of his ancestry occupies the throne or stool of an area and who has been appointed to it in accordance with the customs and tradition of the area and has traditional authority over the people of that area or any other persons appointed by instrument and order of the government to exercise traditional authority over an area or a tribe (Mohammed-Katerere, 2004). They are in essence people-oriented and not service oriented as

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local government structures. Traditional leaders in this study refers to the leadership structures (chiefs, headmen, village heads) within the community which are by custom ascribed or appointed (traditional forms) and provide the necessary leadership which ensures that the norms, practices, vision and values of the community are respected (Mohammed-Katerere, 2004). The primary function of traditional leaders is to regulate and control relationships and social behaviours within a traditional community.

Traditional leadership is an institution that has developed from pre-colonial to post-colonial period in Africa. It has served the people of Africa through wars, periods of slavery, famine, freedom struggles, economic and political restructuring, and natural resource management (Williamson, 1995). Traditional leaders often embody historical and lineage alliances with their territory that empowers them with important rights and obligations. Their primary functions are to ensure peace and harmony in the rural communities within their territory. This involves regulating access to land, holding land in trust on behalf of their people as well as mediating disputes over land, thefts of crops, misconduct, and performing traditional rituals and sacrifices. They mobilise people to participate in community activities. Traditional leaders embody social norms, values and practices that may be antithetical to the development of the community (Ntsebeza, 2002).

Zimbabwe has a decentralised local government system which is hierarchical in nature spanning from the state to the grassroots level. The hierarchy consists of Provincial Development Committee (PDC), Rural District Development Committee (RDDC), Ward Development Committee (WADCO), and Village Development Committee (VIDCO). The traditional leadership is comprised of chiefs, headmen and village heads (Ncube, 2011). These form several administrative, developmental, social, political, and other bodies at the local level (Sithole, 1997; Mandondo, 2000).

EVOLUTION OF TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP IN ZIMBABWE

When looking at the development and change of traditional leadership in Zimbabwe, it is necessary to separate them into three distinct phases which are:

1. Pre-colonial period: indigenous self-rule under various forms of traditional chiefdoms or kingdoms. During this period there were many forms of social organisations which were in continuous transformation and development. Pre-colonial traditional authorities derived their authority from a variety of sources such as rights of conquests, control over land, and direct descent from great ruling ancestors, or membership in a particular ruling family (Lutz & Linda, 2004).
2. Colonial period: Pre-colonial states and other polities were integrated into various components of the colonial state. In many cases the colonial rulers denied or ignored existing structures and tried more or less successfully to establish new ones. Often the traditional communities and indigenous peoples had their political leadership turned into instruments of colonial rule for the benefit of the empires and used to implement their policies of colonial rulers (Ray, 2003: 3). They relied on village chiefs and disproportionally shifted power to them. The benefit for the chiefs in turn would be, for example, that they could keep a portion of the revenues that they collected for the colonial rulers. Overall, using traditional structures was an ideal way for the colonialists to gain control over the local population (Ribot, 1999). Although they were partially transformed, colonial rulers usually did not manage to fully eliminate traditional pre-colonial structures despite their efforts.

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