



Critical Appraisal of the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission on Gukurahundi

Likhwa Ncube*

Abstract

This paper explores two emerging optimistic perspectives regarding the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC) and its efforts to address the Gukurahundi crisis in Zimbabwe. One perspective suggests the potential for victim-centred discussions to resolve Gukurahundi, focusing on filling the epistemic gap in victims' accounts. It terms this the 'plugging the epistemic gap' argument. The second perspective, contrasting with past neglect, acknowledges imperfect progress, labelled the 'half a loaf is better than nothing' argument. While the paper supports both optimistic views, it offers additional clarifications, advocating a cautious approach. It addresses three main aspects: (i) technical challenges in framing the NPRC's outcomes around forgiveness, (ii) reconciling victims' justice with NPRC's institutional goals, and (iii) a detailed clarification and nuance of the 'plugging the epistemic gap' argument, stressing the urgency of addressing specific gap at stake. Additionally, the paper critically evaluates the NPRC's victim-centred approach, revealing a discrepancy between its claim of prioritising 'victims' justice' and its actual focus on 'survivors' justice', underscoring the significance of this distinction.

Keywords: National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC); Gukurahundi; Victim-centred approach; Victims' justice; Survivor's justice

* Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities, University of Johannesburg, Postal address: PO Box 524 Auckland Park, 2006, South Africa; likhwancube@gmail.com

1. Introduction

In Zimbabwe, four decades have elapsed since the commencement of the horrendous atrocities of Gukurahundi. This tragic episode, concentrated in specific regions of the country, led to the deaths of over 20,000 unarmed civilians, involving torture, abductions, rape, beatings, and severe mistreatment. Despite the significant passage of time, little progress has been made in achieving justice and accountability for Gukurahundi crimes. Instead, many vital perpetrators have escaped responsibility, some through death. Sadly, numerous victims and survivors have also passed away without ever understanding why they were targeted and subjected to violence.

The Zimbabwean government has recently initiated discussions regarding Gukurahundi in affected regions, aiming to 'resolve' the issue (The Herald, 2021). To tackle this, the government established the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC), a chapter 12 independent commission mandated by the constitution to promote national healing, unity, and cohesion (Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013, sec. chapter 12, part 6). Inquiries into Gukurahundi will be overseen by the NPRC, with local chiefs entrusted to address Gukurahundi issues in their areas using a victim-centric approach (The Sunday Mail, 2022). While questions persist about the NPRC's mandate and the effectiveness of the victim-centred approach led by chiefs, there are emerging optimistic voices in response to these efforts by the Zimbabwean government. However, the challenge remains that no one has yet made a concerted effort to critically grasp the optimism that victims are starting to associate with the NPRC's work. During a recent public lecture at the Centre for Innovation and Technology (CITE), Siphosami Malunga hinted at one direction for such optimism, but his views remained speculative. There has been a lack of theorisation regarding what positivity in the NPRC's work would entail, or should entail, at least from the victims' perspective. This paper attempts to contribute directly to that discourse by articulating the arguments of optimism from victims.

We identify and discuss the '*plugging the epistemic gap*', and the '*half a loaf is better than nothing*' arguments. Firstly, we propose that these arguments of optimism merit critical examination (which we

do) and theorisation. Secondly, we contend that while both optimistic arguments show promise, further aspects of the NPRC's work need clarification, and nuances of the 'plugging the epistemic gap' argument that we clarify necessitate a cautious approach. Additionally, we describe the victim-centred approach to transitional justice advocated by the NPRC, focusing on 'victims' justice' and differentiating it from the concept of 'survivor's justice', which we argue underpins the NPRC's work.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the NPRC's victim-centred approach and its objective of achieving victims' justice, distinguishing it from the related but distinct concept of survivors' justice. Section 3 provides a brief historical background on the Gukurahundi conflict, specifically focusing on the experiences of victims affected by Gukurahundi. In section 4, we introduce and elaborate on two arguments expressing optimism regarding the potential for victims' participation in the NPRC. In section 5, we address two technical challenges related to the NPRC's objectives and those of the victims. We further refine the 'plugging the epistemic gap' argument, delving into its complexities – finally, section 6 offers concluding remarks to wrap up the paper.

2. NPRC's Victim-Centred Approach

In many post-conflict settings, endeavours are made to achieve justice for victims and hold perpetrators accountable. These justice efforts typically encompass various measures such as trials, prosecutions, truth commissions, reparations programs, institutional reforms, and reconciliation initiatives. The NPRC's approach, regarded as 'bottom-up' and 'grassroots-centred' to addressing the Gukurahundi conflict, is expected to promote national unity by allowing victims to have a say in resolving this post-independence conflict. In a recent newspaper statement, Justice, Legal, and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Ziyambi Ziyambi commended President Mnangagwa for eschewing what he termed 'Western approaches' that have proven ineffective in achieving peace, unity, and reconciliation in African conflict-affected regions. Minister Ziyambi further outlined that the NPRC would operate on a 'victim-centred approach', stating:

The approach that we have adopted is victim-centred or a bottom-up approach. As the Government, we have created a conducive environment for all concerned to voice their opinions and opened up the bureaucratic apparatus to assist the process (The Sunday Mail, 2022).

The victim-centred approach describes a transitional process or mechanism that emerges in response to the explicit needs articulated by the victims. This term is employed by many post-conflict transitional processes, often aiming to signify that the process places victims at its core, reflecting a commitment to restorative justice principles (Hamber & Lundy, 2020). Consequently, a victim-centred approach necessitates extensive consultation with victims or active involvement of victims and their representatives in all phases of transitional processes (Aldana, 2006; Bonacker et al., 2011).

While the victim-centred approach, as advocated for by the Zimbabwean government, typically operates within institutional frameworks like the NPRC, its theoretical basis offers a way to prioritise victims' needs and navigate bureaucratic complexities. Conventional, transitional justice tools have been criticised for their institutionalised nature, which is often seen as detached from victims who may have limited access to these institutions (Sharp, 2018). Yet, the practical implications of circumventing institutional mechanisms in post-conflict justice contexts remain uncertain, as many justice processes are inherently tied to institutions like courts, commissions, and trials.

Moreover, questions have emerged regarding a potential trade-off between the processes within a victim-centred approach and the intended outcomes. Some argue that there exists an inherent trade-off between these priorities. For instance, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) aimed to prioritise forgiveness and truth-telling in South Africa. However, these two imperatives were considered in a trade-off relationship (Wielenga, 2014).

Another example of this trade-off within the victim-centred approach can be seen in the Rwandan Gacaca trials. These trials were established to uncover the truth about the genocide (Honeyman et al., 2004; Kirkby, 2006) while emphasising individual accountability (Graybill & Lanegran, 2004). In the context of the Gacaca Rwandan

genocide trials, sacrificing truth-telling to avoid personal accountability was a possibility, thus compromising the authenticity of the trials. Given these concerns about trade-offs, it remains to be seen how the NPRC, by adopting the victim-centred approach, strikes a balance between these priorities to promote national reconciliation and unity in Gukurahundi.

Elsewhere, some scholars caution against the terminology and underlying concepts linked to the victim-centred approach. The idea of 'victim-centred' assumes an apparent perpetrator is responsible for victims' grievances, which has led to criticism. For instance, Mamdani (2015) argues that this victim-versus-perpetrator framework in transitional justice originates from a post-1945 Nuremberg concept of justice, primarily emerging from inter-state wars, where one side typically appears as the victor and the other as the loser. Consequently, in post-war trials, individuals are usually considered innocent or guilty.

However, Mamdani contends that this perspective fails to accurately capture the dynamics of victims and perpetrators in civil wars or intrastate conflicts. He emphasises that in civil war conflicts, victims and perpetrators often interchange roles within ongoing cycles of violence. No single party is entirely innocent or entirely guilty.

Victims and perpetrators in civil wars often trade places in ongoing cycles of violence. No one is wholly innocent, and none is entirely guilty. Each side has a narrative of victimhood. Victims' justice is the flip side of victors' justice: both demonise the other side and exclude it from participation in the new political order. (Mamdani, 2015, p. 20)

Mamdani argues that those emerging from a civil war conflict are 'survivors', and they seek 'survivor's justice'. Drawing on the example of South Africa's transition from apartheid through political negotiations (CODESA), he argues that this context reflects a civil war rather than a war between states.

The paradigm shifted from one of victims' justice to that of survivors' justice—where the meaning of survivors changed to include all those who had survived

apartheid: yesterday's victims, yesterday's perpetrators, and yesterday's beneficiaries [presumed to be bystanders], all were treated as "survivors." (Mamdani, 2015, p. 8)

Thus, as per Mamdani, individuals emerging from civil war conflicts can be seen as survivors. His argument implies that individuals emerging from such disputes do not neatly fit into the categories of victims or perpetrators since both sides have elements of blame and victimisation. While we disagree with Mamdani's characterisation of what constitutes a 'civil war', particularly in the context of South Africa, he validly points out that identifying and holding perpetrators accountable in post-civil war conflicts is challenging due to the absence of clear delineations between victims and perpetrators.

In a different perspective, Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Benyera (2015) find Mamdani's concept of 'survivor justice' appealing and suggest that it allows for reconciliation and national healing. Moreover, about the NPRC, they propose that it should base its work on Mamdani's principles of 'survivor justice', moving away from the traditional post-1945 Nuremberg-style criminal justice that rigidly categorises people emerging from mass violence into two camps: victims and perpetrators.

Mamdani, Ndlovu-Gatsheni, and Benyera advocate for a 'survivors' justice' perspective while downplaying the emphasis on victims and perpetrator dichotomy. However, exercising caution in hastily adopting this 'survivor' preference is important, as it can lead to challenges. For example, the process of reparations for the Rwandan genocide faced obstacles as funds were mismanaged due to debates over who qualified as a 'survivor' (Ruvugiro, 2019). In Zimbabwe, the concept of 'survivors' justice' has confused, often clouding straightforward issues as efforts are made to evade accountability. In a newspaper interview, Zimbabwe's Minister of Justice, Legal, and Parliamentary Affairs, Ziyambi Ziyambi, discussed the rationale behind granting the 1988 amnesty and its outcomes. The minister stated,

Since both sides of the conflict may have committed offences, as a part of the transitional period, in 1988, the Government promulgated General Notice (GN) 257A/1988 that granted amnesty to 'dissidents', collaborators and members of the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) and in 1990 a General amnesty, repeating GN257A/88, was promulgated to include the State's uniformed forces, deployed from 1982 to 1987 to suppress the dissidents. This was done to foster a new Zimbabwe based on peace and unity. (The Sunday Mail, 2022)

Minister Ziyambi, influenced by the principle of 'survivors' justice', defends the government's amnesty decision by recognising the possibility of wrongdoing by all parties in the conflict. However, the statement lacks clarity regarding the occurrence of offences. It doesn't decisively assign responsibility to the government, dissidents, or both, despite evident State's involvement, execution, and efforts to cover up crimes (Ncube, 2024).

Finally, while transitional justice mechanisms are generally welcomed and encouraged, their implementation and effectiveness are sometimes straightforward. In some cases, mechanisms may serve as a smokescreen, creating the illusion of progress while perpetrators avoid accountability. In other instances, perpetrators may dictate the terms of justice for victims without consulting them. Additionally, commissions may be established, investigations conducted, and reports generated but remain unpublished or shrouded in secrecy, as exemplified by the Dumbutshena and Chihambakwe commissions in 1981 and 1983.

3. Gukurahundi: Brief Background

Gukurahundiⁱⁱ denotes a series of brutal atrocities occurring in Zimbabwe's Matabeleland and Midlands provinces during the 1980s. Orchestrated by the State, under then-Prime Minister Robert Mugabe's leadership, these meticulously planned acts targeted the Ndebele-speaking population, resulting in over 20,000 deaths and numerous enduring physical and psychological traumas (Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe & Legal Resources Foundation (Zimbabwe), 1997; Ndakaripa, 2014). Perpetrated by a

North Korean-trained militia, the violence encompassed rape, torture, public executions, abductions, humiliation, and beatings (Cameron, 2018). Those who perished in the Gukurahundi massacres were disposed of in abandoned mine shafts, such as those in Balagwe, or hastily buried in unmarked, shallow graves scattered throughout the affected communities (Rwafa, 2012). Focusing on the plight of the victims of Gukurahundi, below, we briefly discuss some of the struggles Gukurahundi brought upon them.

Victims of the Gukurahundi massacres primarily originate from the Matabeleland and Midlands provinces, where the Ndebele-speaking community is prominent (Ndlovu, 2018). The majority of Gukurahundi atrocities unfolded in impoverished rural areas, disproportionately affecting women and children who bore the brunt of the violence. Young girls and women were subjected to rape, resulting in loss of life for many. Many young schoolgirls who endured rape during Gukurahundi found themselves pregnant, which permanently disrupted their education and prospects.

Children born from traumatic events still suffer from the distress of not knowing their fathers, hindering their access to vital identification documents, including birth certificates. Additionally, children who lost their parents during these massacres encounter ongoing challenges in acquiring proper identification documents due to the criminal nature of these killings, which prevents the official documentation of their parent's deaths. Consequently, the absence of parental death certificates remains a significant barrier to obtaining birth certificates and national identity cards. For others, identity documents were burnt when victims' houses were torched, and they have since then suffered and struggled to get their identity documents replaced.

Furthermore, those subjected to torture suffered enduring physical injuries, forcing them to adapt to life with disabilities and physical limitations. Nearly all victims and survivors bear lasting psychological scars from the traumatic experiences they endured. Some survivors, particularly those who were children at the time, remain unaware of the fate of their loved ones, who were abducted by unknown people and never returned. Government support, even in the post-conflict era, has been notably absent for survivors and victims, including the support for young individuals forced to

assume the responsibility of raising their children and or siblings when their parents were killed.

The confluence of these life circumstances among Gukurahundi victims and survivors further exacerbates their suffering and welfare in a country ravaged by everyday socio-economic challenges. Regrettably, these individuals have received little to no support. Instead, they have faced ongoing humiliation and harm, as the discussion of Gukurahundi has long been a censored topic in the country, only getting better recently in the last decade. However, recently, there have been reports of renewed sophisticated censorship on Gukurahundi, with Chief Mathema, a prominent Matabeleland chief, publicly stating that authorities recommended changing the name 'Gukurahundi' during a meeting with President Emmerson Mnangagwa at Bulawayo State House. Chief Mathema characterised this move as an attempt to "whitewash" the State's genocide (Sibindi & Nkala, 2022).

4. Two Optimistic Arguments

Despite concerns about the sluggish pace of Gukurahundi justice proceedingsⁱⁱⁱ, we present two emerging optimistic arguments regarding the NPRC's efforts in addressing Gukurahundi. These arguments, mainly emerging from the conflict's victims, propose that the NPRC's recent initiatives focusing on victims could yield positive results in resolving the dispute. The two optimistic arguments we are referring to are what we are terming the 'half a loaf is better than nothing' argument and the 'plugging the epistemic gap' argument.

4.1. Half a loaf is better than nothing

The 'half a loaf is better than nothing' argument acknowledges that while the government's engagement with Gukurahundi is overdue and not ideal, it marks a significant departure from past silence and neglect spanning decades. Stemming from a history of neglect and marginalisation of Gukurahundi victims and survivors, this argument contends that the recent steps taken by the Mnangagwa government, such as assigning local chiefs to address Gukurahundi, albeit uncertain in outcomes, offer a platform for a victim-centred approach to justice. Despite doubts about the effectiveness of these

efforts, proponents argue that the initiatives by the NPRC represent a marked improvement over past disregard for the atrocities of the past.

This argument is partly fuelled by a sense of hope and cautious optimism stemming from the change in government leadership. The Gukurahundi atrocities occurred under the leadership of former President Robert Mugabe. Mugabe governed Zimbabwe until he was ousted from power in a military coup in November 2017 (Moore, 2017). During Mugabe's tenure, the 'half a loaf is better than nothing' argument highlights the extensive censorship surrounding discussions of Gukurahundi. The government largely failed to acknowledge the crimes, with President Mugabe's dismissive remark characterising Gukurahundi as "a moment of madness" as a harrowing reminder (Rwafa, 2012). However, under the administration of President Mnangagwa, there appears to be some willingness to address the issue of Gukurahundi, albeit with potential shortcomings in execution.

The willingness on the part of Mnangagwa's government is seen through setting up and giving support to the NPRC. It is seen through the president's openness to talk and initiate processes that would facilitate national healing and reconciliation on Gukurahundi done through the NPRC framework. Moreover, in a radically uncommon fashion, President Mnangagwa came to Bulawayo^{iv} and met with traditional chiefs and leaders from Matabeleland, ushering in an unprecedented move to resolve Gukurahundi. In this meeting, President Mnangagwa tasked local chiefs in Matabeleland to head and coordinate the resolution of Gukurahundi with affected people in their jurisdiction^v. The 'half a loaf is better than nothing' argument reads this move by the president and his government as a signal of hope and encouragement that, at least, some semblance of justice might be on the horizon.

In the previous decades, no head of state-sanctioned chiefs to resolve Gukurahundi. Thus, Mnangagwa's moves are pathbreaking, and some already see a glimmer of hope for justice from his initiatives. The hope also comes from the recent developments under his (Mnangagwa) auspices in empowering local chiefs from the victims' provinces to solve Gukurahundi. The argument is that as much as this should have long been done, it is better. Eventually, the

Gukurahundi justice process will open up. The head of state oversees and sanctions the developments. This, the argument concludes, is better than nothing.

Finally, the 'half a loaf is better than nothing' argument takes seriously the terminology used by the government of President Mnangagwa on Gukurahundi. The government speaks of *resolving* Gukurahundi (The Herald, 2021). For this argument, even though *many* victims and survivors of the horrors of Gukurahundi have since died, it is nonetheless better that attempts at resolving are made rather than previous ignorance. While cognisant that Gukurahundi affairs could long be handled better and in a human and practical manner, the 'half a loaf is better than nothing' argument consoles victims by saying at least something is happening; it could have been far worse.

4.2. Plugging the Epistemic Gap

Siphosami Malunga, speaking recently at a public lecture, gave expression to what we are calling the 'plugging the epistemic gap' argument (CITEzw - YouTube, 2018). The argument is as follows. A complete picture of what happened during Gukurahundi has never been served. While the full picture involves the sides of both the perpetrators and the victims, it has never been in the perpetrators' favour to offer their account of what happened. However, for the victims, it is to their advantage that the truth is uncovered and laid bare, Malunga reasons. It has been a big challenge for the victim to reveal and give her account of Gukurahundi with hopes for justice. The censorship and, frankly, lack of political will by the previous Mugabe administration made it difficult for the victims' stories to surface and very easy for the perpetrators to remain concealed. However, a unique opportunity presents itself with the current government's initiatives of empowering the local chiefs in Matabeleland to solve Gukurahundi through a victim-centred approach.

The opportunity is the free expression of the victims' account of Gukurahundi. The understanding is that the victims are now free to speak out on what happened to them during Gukurahundi to the traditional chief in their jurisdiction. The hope in doing this is twofold. Firstly, it complies with the president's directive on what

moving forward and resolving Gukurahundi should look like. Secondly, the hope is that through uncovering the victims' experiences with their chiefs, efforts to document these accounts could be simultaneously rendered. And if this is done, the truth on Gukurahundi will be obtained and conserved.

A further motivation for the 'plugging the epistemic gap' argument is that once the gap is plugged with victims' testimonies and through documentation, such information made available could further prove crucial in justice efforts (for example, litigations) moving forward. The risk is too much for the victim if her story is not narrated and documented. People age, and their memories fade, others die, and if their accounts of Gukurahundi are not shared, documented, and conserved, this might stifle justice as perpetrators might walk free on account of victims' amnesia. For this reason, the stakes are high in getting the victims' truth of Gukurahundi on record. The 'plugging the epistemic gap' argument sees a rare opportunity from the victim-centred approach promulgated through the NPRC. The opportunity is to document and save the truth told by the victims and survivors while partaking and participating in efforts at resolving Gukurahundi through their local chiefs.

5. Critical Reasons for Caution on the Optimism Arguments

While we agree with both optimistic arguments, this section offers further explanations, emphasising a cautious approach. We scrutinise three key aspects: firstly, technical issues arising from framing the NPRC's intended outcomes around forgiveness; secondly, the challenge of reconciling victims' justice with the NPRC's institutional goals of national healing and unity; and thirdly, a detailed clarification of the 'plugging the epistemic gap' argument, explicitly identifying the epistemic gap requiring urgent attention.

The Institutional Dimension of the NPRC Problematic

While the NPRC is constitutionally mandated and prioritises a victim-centred approach to seeking and serving justice, it faces the challenge of reconciling this imperative with its institutional objectives of national cohesion, healing, and forgiveness. While achieving justice for Gukurahundi victims is not inherently

incompatible with the NPRC's institutional aims, achieving both simultaneously requires compromise. For instance, the outcomes desired by both the victims and the NPRC involve trade-offs.

How can the pursuit of justice for victims, including uncovering motives, execution plans, exhumations, reparations, trials, and accountability, be reconciled with the NPRC's broader objectives of national cohesion, reconciliation and healing? Gukurahundi victims rightfully expect these measures to feel that justice has been served. However, if the NPRC proceeds with these demands, it risks lengthy investigations and uncovering potentially divisive orchestrations, undermining its intended objectives and causing upheaval. To prevent this, the NPRC must carefully guide proceedings, balancing victims' justice with its institutional goals and ensuring a trade-off that safeguards national peace and stability. Essentially, institutionalising victims' justice requires careful management to achieve predetermined outcomes. Ironically, the planners and strategists behind this process are the very individuals whom Gukurahundi victims identify as the perpetrators of their suffering – the State.

Furthermore, in these 'victim-centric' proceedings, the truth is that the NPRC assumes a dominant position, with victims and survivors relegated to mere participants. For instance, Gukurahundi victims and their chiefs cannot initiate testimonies independently; instead, the entire process must be overseen and directed by NPRC commissioners. Unfortunately, despite the appearance of prioritising justice for victims and survivors, the underlying objective is forgiveness (at whatever cost) and remotely about victim justice.

What's more troubling is that this institutional hermeneutical injustice is brutal to circumvent (Tobi, 2023). Participants are eager to engage in a process they hope will allow their experiences to be heard and provide insights into the reasons behind their victimisation, as seen in the 'half a loaf is better than nothing' and 'plugging the epistemic gap' arguments discussed earlier. However, this misalignment of anticipated outcomes between participants and the institution ultimately hampers the prospect of a fair process. It further compounds the harm suffered by victims and survivors by

reducing them to mere instruments for achieving predetermined institutional and government objectives of forgiveness.

Framing the NPRC Proceedings as about Forgiveness is also Problematic

Albeit framed and initiated by the listeners (NPRC commissioners), the listener lacks the necessary tools to fully understand the meaning of ‘forgiveness’ in this context, as only the victims and survivors truly grasp its significance and roots. Nevertheless, the listener encourages victims and survivors to include forgiveness in their narratives for several reasons, including shaping the narrative of NPRC proceedings. This manipulation aims to ensure that forgiveness becomes the outcome. Consequently, the listener establishes the language and reference terms for victims and survivors, which, in turn, restricts the framework within which they can express their experiences. This constraint is not due to any inadequacy of victims and survivors in comprehending and articulating their experiences but rather stems from the listener’s redirection towards an outcome unrelated to the victims’ and survivors’ accounts.

It’s crucial to recognise that Gukurahundi victims and survivors are not hindered in their ability to comprehend their own experiences due to a deficiency in available social hermeneutical resources (Fricker, 2007). They possess a clear understanding of their experiences. The challenge arises when they must convey this experiential knowledge within the confines of a forgiveness-based framework. This results in a disconnect between the resources accessible to the speaker and those available to the listener. The issue is the difficulty in effectively communicating one’s well-formed self-understanding to dominant groups, such as the NPRC and its commissioners, who might lack the hermeneutical resources necessary for comprehension. Thus, framing the NPRC’s proceedings as about forgiveness is a classic case of epistemic injustice to the Gukurahundi victims.

Nuancing the ‘Plugging the Epistemic Gap’ Argument

The belief that the government’s openness about Gukurahundi will allow the victims’ narrative to emerge is incorrect and somewhat

misguided. In reality, when asked about Gukurahundi, people will typically recount the victims' perspective, focusing on the innocent civilians subjected to brutal violence in the 1980s. However, what is often overlooked, and what the 'plugging the epistemic gap' argument should advocate for, is understanding the motivations and actors behind these mass crimes and killings. The epistemic gap needs plugging in the Gukurahundi conundrum for national peace, unity, and cohesion to materialise.

To be fair to the 'plugging the epistemic gap' advocates, not all have been told about the victims' truth and experiences of Gukurahundi. Further, it is accurate that when a more detailed picture of the victims' truth emerges, this surely will assist in prosecuting the Gukurahundi matter. However, no good reason or evidence shows that such efforts cannot be executed contemporaneously with the perpetrators' epistemic gap being filled. The idea that for justice on Gukurahundi to occur, firstly, the victims and survivors should first narrate their experiences to their chiefs, and after that, a resolution will emerge is plain fiction and nonsense. But equally revealing, it is further evidence of stalling tactics.

Suppose we tell you a story from a past era, say forty years ago, of a rapist or cabal of rapists who went amok and violated many people, raping them. Assume the rapists did this in two specific provinces of the country. Weird enough, the rapists managed to remain in their elite positions in that country, politically governing for all forty years while victims were tormented by post-traumatic stress, depression, ill-health etc. Further, suppose we tell you that, for whatever reason, the tormentors now come back to the rape victims and tell them that they intend to get the rape saga resolved. However, they prescribe that this is done through their victims getting together and talking through their ordeals to their local chiefs. What would you make of such a justice process? Would you see the victims' convergence and sharing of their rape experiences as a healing and unity-shaping process?

The scenario described reflects what the Zimbabwean State advises Gukurahundi victims to accept as a form of justice. However, this instruction is flawed, considering the government's direct involvement as the mastermind and executor of the Gukurahundi crimes. If the government genuinely seeks victims' justice, both the

victims' and perpetrators' perspectives should be heard simultaneously. The notion that one side must be prioritised lacks evidence and appears to be a delaying tactic by perpetrators aiming to evade accountability. Hence, we advise against being overly optimistic about the NPRC's ability to deliver justice for victims. Still, we suggest the NPRC's proceedings focus on closing the epistemic gap regarding the perpetrators' account of what truly transpired.

6. Conclusion

The Gukurahundi atrocities in Zimbabwe have left a devastating legacy of suffering and injustice. Despite time, little progress has been made in achieving justice and accountability for the victims. The establishment of the NPRC by the government signals a potential avenue for resolution, with inquiries into Gukurahundi overseen by the NPRC and local chiefs adopting a victim-centric approach. However, thorough scrutiny within this paper exposes unresolved queries regarding the efficacy of these endeavours and the necessity for additional elucidation on the NPRC's mandate. Specifically, there's ambiguity concerning its objectives of fostering national unity, healing, and cohesion, all within the context of forgiveness, and how the NPRC intends to reconcile these goals with the victims' pursuit of justice. Two emerging optimistic perspectives, the 'plugging the epistemic gap' and 'half a loaf is better than nothing' arguments, offer hope but require careful consideration. Additionally, the distinction between 'victims' justice' and 'survivors' justice' underscores the complexity of the NPRC's victim-centred approach. This paper contributes to the discourse by shedding light on these arguments and advocating for a cautious approach towards achieving justice and reconciliation in the aftermath of Gukurahundi.

Notes

ⁱ Surely, significant distinctions exist between the Tutsi and Hutu civil conflict in Rwanda and the conflicts between the National Party (Afrikaner) and native black South Africans that led to the downfall of Apartheid. These two conflicts cannot be equated or labelled

simplicitically in the same manner. A more critical and nuanced reading shows that while the former qualifies unquestionably as a civil war, the latter exemplifies a revolutionary war—a liberation struggle fought against a prevailing *unjust system* of oppression imposed on the masses. That is, in the former, the conflict is about a people against a people, and in the latter, it is about a people (masses) against an evil and oppressive system, not against another people. Moreover, while a civil war and a revolutionary war are not mutually exclusive, the differences are important to flag, especially with reference the victim-survivor debate.

ii Gukurahundi is a Shona word referring to the first flash floods that cleanse the riverbeds of all debris and chaff before the spring rains (Maedza, 2019). Sithole and Makumbe define Gukurahundi as “the early rain that washes away the chaff before the summer rains” (Sithole & Makumbe, 1997, p. 133). Notice the difference in the two definitions on spring rain for the first, and summer rain, for the second definition. However, the term in Zimbabwean politics, has a more technical meaning, a code name, if you like, referring to the terror, and massacres by the state on Ndebele speaking regions of the country designed to cleanse as the early flash floods.

iii According to the (NPRC, 2023) annual report, there is no indication of the progress made by the NPRC in addressing the Gukurahundi issue over the past year. This is evident from the affected provinces—Matabeleland (including Mat North, Mat South, and Bulawayo) and Midlands—where only five politically-related conflicts were reported to the NPRC in 2023. However, the report does not specify the nature of these political complaints. It is possible that these cases are unrelated to Gukurahundi and instead pertain to political activities and concerns surrounding the 2023 national election. Consequently, the NPRC’s annual report lacks information on Gukurahundi-related complaints and fails to provide data on the number of victims seeking justice through the victim-centred approach of the NPRC. Moreover, the term ‘Gukurahundi’ is entirely absent from the report, and the phrase ‘victim-centred’ is mentioned only once, unrelated to the Gukurahundi conflict.

iv Bulawayo is the second-largest city in Zimbabwe after the capital Harare and is located in the Matabeleland region. Its population primarily consists of Ndebele speakers. Historically, while Harare

was regarded as the primary power centre for the ZANU PF political party, Bulawayo unofficially held a similar status for ZAPU.

^v Certain local chiefs tasked with overseeing these proceedings may have themselves or their families experienced the horrors of the Gukurahundi atrocities. The underlying rationale is that given their own personal connection to the events, these chiefs would be motivated to ensure a fair and impartial process in conducting these proceedings. This, in turn, could provide a degree of safeguarding for the victims, reducing the risk of further victimization and exploitation in the course of the proceedings.

References

- Aldana, R. (2006). A Victim-Centred Reflection on Truth Commissions and Prosecutions as a Response to Mass Atrocities. *Journal of Human Rights*, 5(1), 107–126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/147548830500485916>
- Bonacker, T., Form, W., & Pfeiffer, D. (2011). Transitional Justice and Victim Participation in Cambodia: A World Polity Perspective. *Global Society*, 25(1), 113–134. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2010.522980>
- Cameron, H. (2018). The Matabeleland Massacres: Britain’s wilful blindness. *International History Review*, 40(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2017.1309561>
- Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe, & Legal Resources Foundation (Zimbabwe). (1997). *Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace: A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands, 1980 to 1988*. Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe.
- CITEzw - YouTube. (2018). *The Matabeleland Question- A continuing Atrocity and limitations of the NPRC: Siphosami Malunga*. Centre for Innovation and Technology (CITE) Zw. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSgxnH7GmW8>
- Constitution of Zimbabwe. (2013). *Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act. 2013*. Government of Zimbabwe.

https://www.veritaszim.net/sites/veritas_d/files/Constitution%20of%20Zimbabwe%20Amendment%20%28No.%20%20%29.pdf

- Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic Injustice*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198237907.001.0001>
- Graybill, L., & Lanegran, K. (2004). Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation in Africa: Issues and Cases. *AFRICAN STUDIES QUARTERLY*, 8(1), 1-18.
- Hamber, B., & Lundy, P. (2020). Lessons from Transitional Justice? Toward a New Framing of a Victim-Centred Approach in the Case of Historical Institutional Abuse. *Victims & Offenders*, 15(6), 744-770. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2020.1743803>
- Honeyman, C., Hudani, S., Tiruneh, A., Hierta, J., Chirayath, L., Iliff, A., & Meierhenrich, J. (2004). Establishing collective norms: Potentials for participatory justice in Rwanda. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 10(1), 1-24. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327949pac1001_1
- Kirkby, C. (2006). Rwanda's gacaca courts: A preliminary critique. *Journal of African Law*, 50(2), 94-117. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021855306000106>
- Maedza, P. (2019). 'Gukurahundi - a moment of madness': memory rhetorics and remembering in the postcolony. *African Identities*, 17(3-4), 175-190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2019.1657000>
- Mamdani, M. (2015). Beyond Nuremberg: The Historical Significance of the Post-apartheid Transition in South Africa. *Politics and Society*, 43(1), 61-88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329214554387>
- Moore, D. (2017). *A military coup is afoot in Zimbabwe. What's next for the embattled nation?* The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/a-military-coup-is-afoot-in-zimbabwe-whats-next-for-the-embattled-nation-87528>
- Ncube, L. (2024). On the Gukurahundi Amnesty: What Factors Make an Amnesty Effective? *IAHRW International Journal of Social Sciences Review*, 12(1), 14-20.

- Ndakaripa, M. (2014). *Ethnicity, narrative, and the 1980s violence in the Matabeleland and Midlands provinces of Zimbabwe*.
- Ndlovu, M. (2018). Gukurahundi, new media and the 'discourses of silence': The reproduction of the hegemonic narratives of the Matabeleland post-colonial violence on selected Zimbabwean news websites. *African Identities*, 16(3), 275–289. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2018.1439726>
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, & Benyera, E. (2015). Towards a framework for resolving the justice and reconciliation question in Zimbabwe. *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, 15(2), 9–33.
- NPRC. (2023). *National Peace and Reconciliation Commission Annual Report 2023*. <https://www.nprc.org.zw/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/NPRC-ANNUAL-REPORT-2023.pdf> Accessed: 2024-05-05
- Ruvugiro, E. S. (2019). *Rwandan reparations fund breaks ground but is still not enough, say victims*. JusticeInfo.Net. <https://www.justiceinfo.net/en/40610-rwandan-reparations-fund-breaks-ground-but-is-still-not-enough-say-victims.html>
- Rwafa, U. (2012). Representations of Matabeleland and Midlands disturbances through the documentary film *Gukurahundi: A Moment of Madness* (2007). *African Identities*, 10(3), 313–327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2012.715458>
- Sharp, D. N. (2018). *Rethinking Transitional Justice for the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108609180>
- Sibindi, S., & Nkala, S. (2022). *Chief Mathema fears Gukurahundi 'whitewash.'* The Southern Eye. <https://www.newsday.co.zw/southerneye/local-news/article/200002768/chief-mathema-fears-gukurahundi-whitewash>
- Sithole, M., & Makumbe, J. (1997). African Association of Political Science Elections in Zimbabwe: The ZANU (PF) Hegemony and its Incipient Decline Elections in Zimbabwe: The ZANU (PF) Hegemony and its Incipient Decline. In *Source: African Journal of Political Science / Revue Africaine de Science Politique* (Vol. 2, Issue 1).

- The Herald. (2021). *NPRC eager to bring closure to Gukurahundi*. The Herald. <https://www.herald.co.zw/nprc-eager-to-bring-closure-to-gukurahundi/>
- The Sunday Mail. (2022). Gukurahundi: Govt adopts victim-centred approach. *The Sunday Mail*. <https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/gukurahundi-govt-adopts-victim-centred-approach>
- Tobi, A. (2023). Intra-Group Epistemic Injustice. *Social Epistemology*, 37(6), 798–809. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2023.2182653>
- Wielenga, C. (2014). Reconciliation From the Top Down? Government Institutions in South Africa, Rwanda and Burundi*. *Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, Vol. 36(1), 25–46.