



Critical Unexplored Actions by Zimbabwean Political Opposition

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Abstract

In this article, I critique Zimbabwe's main opposition party by pointing out its shortcomings and proposing what it should do differently. Unlike the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), which skilfully studies and exploits its opponents' weaknesses, the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) has neglected this critical strategy, leading to significant consequences. Drawing on critical theory's concepts of political power, ideology, and praxis, I highlight the lack of clear evidence that the CCC fully understands ZANU-PF's strengths and weaknesses. Even if such understanding exists, there is no indication that the CCC effectively uses this knowledge to its advantage. This paper emphasises the urgent need for the opposition to close this strategic gap, warning that failure risks political irrelevance and ineffective tactics in Zimbabwean politics.

Keywords: Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), ZANU-PF, Opposition Politics in Zimbabwe, Strengths and Weaknesses, Critical Theory

Introduction

Amidst the political crisis within the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) party and broader political challenges in the country, what crucial actions should the main political opposition party in Zimbabwe neglect but should be undertaking? I argue that Zimbabwe's main opposition, the CCC, has not thoroughly analysed

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its political rival, ZANU-PF, to understand its strengths and weaknesses. It must undertake such an analysis to remain relevant and achieve electoral success. There is no indication that CCC has identified the pressure points of ZANU-PF or utilised this knowledge (if it has done so) to its advantage. For instance, despite understanding that ZANU-PF is wary of mass demonstrations, potentially a weakness, there is no compelling evidence that CCC has exploited this information, which it should have done already on numerous occasions.

Critics have assessed the main opposition's reactions to political challenges in Zimbabwe, emphasising strategic shortcomings (Magaisa, 2015; Mungwari & Ephraim, 2017; Hartwell, 2018; Mwonzora, 2022; Kawadza, 2023). While there is limited literature analysing the main opposition party politics in Zimbabwe, one way to broadly understand the extant content would be to divide it into critiques, on the one hand, of the CCC's past actions that have not politically yielded satisfying results (Ncube, 2023; Mavheko, 2024) and on the other hand, content on suggestions for future improvements (Chikwaza & Chikumbu, 2024; Matiashe, 2024). Approaching the extant literature this way would highlight the main opposition's shortcomings and recommendations for different approaches. However, a notable gap remains, one that overlooks what the CCC is neglecting, which it has not done entirely. I fill that void in this article, asserting that the main opposition has overlooked crucial research on ZANU-PF's strengths and weaknesses. I argue that exploiting ZANU-PF's weaknesses is pivotal for the CCC's political advantage, but unfortunately, due to the main opposition's loss, it has been neglected.

In discussing the opposition within Zimbabwe's political landscape, my attention is exclusively on the CCC and its predecessor, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). I will not delve into the various factions and transitions of the main opposition. However, I will instead treat the MDC and its sub-entities that contributed to the rebranding of the movement to CCC as a relatively cohesive main opposition in Zimbabwe, hereafter referred to as the CCC or (central) opposition. I use critical theory to diagnose and analyse the challenges facing Zimbabwe's main opposition. Focusing on the concepts of ideology, hegemony, and

praxis (Bates, 1975; Horkheimer, 2002; Corradetti, 2012; Domingues, 2019; Garlitz & Zompetti, 2023), I also highlight what needs to be done to enhance the opposition's relevance and potential for electoral success in Zimbabwean politics.

The paper is structured as follows: I begin by analysing the actions of Zimbabwe's main opposition, highlighting their mistakes and the ineffectiveness of their strategies. I first illustrate the CCC's ongoing and historical political challenges, demonstrating its flawed political responses. I then situate my discussion within a critical political framework, specifically critical theory. I argue that the opposition's tactics, messaging, and strategies in response to ZANU-PF's manoeuvres are akin to bringing a stick to a gunfight—revealing a lack of understanding and underestimation of its rival. Finally, I address the key aspects the opposition is neglecting: first, by showing the absence of evidence that the CCC is aware of ZANU-PF's strengths and weaknesses; second, even if such awareness exists, there is no indication that the CCC is leveraging this knowledge; and third, the opposition has not learned from ZANU-PF's political longevity, underlining the importance of studying both strengths and weaknesses of one's adversary.

CCC's Internal and External Canvassing

The recent harmonised election on 23-24 August 2023, where President Emmerson Mnangagwa declared victory, triggered controversy. Zimbabwe's main opposition, the CCC, alleged the capture of public institutions like the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) and critical security, broadcasting, and judicial sectors by the ruling party, ZANU-PF. This has led to speculations and concerns about orchestrated election manipulation. Further, Southern African Development Community (SADC) election observers and other international observers deemed the 2023 elections chaotic and unfair, issuing preliminary and final scathing reports on their unhealthy nature (Mumba, 2023). Despite condemnation from the CCC and external election observers, President Mnangagwa swiftly inaugurated himself, solidifying his grip on power and making controversial family appointments to crucial cabinet positions.

While these events unfolded, attention turned to the anticipated response from the main opposition, the CCC. The opposition's reaction followed a dual strategy – one focused internally within Zimbabwe and another externally seeking regional support for fresh elections. Internally, the CCC opted not to file a court petition to overturn the election outcome, citing judicial corruption involving substantial cash loans to elite judicial members (International Republican Institute (IRI), 2023). Instead, the CCC proposed a nationwide stakeholder consultation to engage its members to determine the best course of action. Externally, the main opposition claimed engagement with regional and international stakeholders such as SADC, the African Union (AU), and the United Nations (UN) to advocate support and pressure for new elections.

The effectiveness of internal and external measures adopted by the CCC remains uncertain and, at best, ineffective. Firstly, internally, the ruling party continues to govern the country without significant impact from the recent elections' legitimacy concerns, mainly raised and cited by the CCC. The CCC missed the opportunity to challenge the election results in court. Whenever they (CCC) complain about a stolen election, they are reminded that they should have taken their grievances to the courts. Since they did not, it has now been considered a closed issue.

Secondly, when one focuses internationally, President Mnangagwa's legitimacy is unquestioned, evident in his participation a month after the elections at the United Nations General Assembly in New York, where he addressed the assembly as Zimbabwe's President. Thirdly, a focus regionally shows that Mnangagwa has actively participated in SADC troika meetings and received invitations as head of state to presidential inaugurations in the region, including those in Madagascar on the 16th of December 2023, the Democratic Republic of Congo on 20 January 2024, and recently hosting the SADC Summit of heads of state in Harare on 17 August 2024, wherein he assumed the rotating chairpersonship.

Other critics, more broadly, have approached the shortcomings in the main opposition's response to the 2023 national elections and the CCC's overall objective of unseating ZANU-PF from diverse perspectives. Analysts have provided insights into the main opposition's responses to its political challenges, with much focus in

the literature on the shortcomings of CCC's strategies in countering ZANU-PF. They have highlighted perceived mistakes, including the strategic ambiguity tactic and the lack of internal party structures, as costly to the party (Buwerimwe & Saunyama, 2023; Madanhire, 2023).

Some analysts have focused their analysis on the role of the main opposition leadership in its effects and failures to unseat ZANU-PF electorally. Nelson Chamisa, who served as the president of CCC until he dissented his party alleging external infiltration, has been argued to have dismantled CCC's structures to centralise power around himself, leading to conflicts with prominent party members such as Tendai Biti and Welshman Ncube (Mavheko, 2024).

Moreover, some have argued that the crisis within the main opposition is self-inflicted, emphasising policy strategic errors made by the CCC. Trevor Ncube, for instance, avers:

The opposition blames the strongman tactics of the ruling Zanu PF party for their misfortunes. They accuse Zanu PF of using its incumbency to infiltrate and repress opposition political parties and of creating a political environment heavily skewed against multiparty democracy. However, a deeper look will reveal that most opposition wounds are self-inflicted (Ncube, 2023).

For brevity, the critique and analysis of the main opposition's politics in Zimbabwe can be categorised into two camps. On the one hand, there are discussions about what the CCC has done but done wrongly, primarily focusing on its *strategic failures*. On the other hand, emerging ideas revolve around what the main opposition should be doing differently in the future— that is, the nature of politics and tactics the CCC should embrace. However, a gap exists, neglecting what the CCC is not doing but should be doing; that is the *normative approach*. This article addresses that gap, arguing that the main opposition has not conducted sufficient research on its political rival, ZANU-PF, to understand its strengths and weaknesses. The contention is that while the CCC has neglected this, it should prioritise such research to leverage and exploit ZANU-PF's weaknesses to its advantage.

In the following sections, I delve into specific strategies adopted by the main opposition in its efforts to contest and overthrow ZANU-PF rule. These strategies expose the gap alluded to above and thus further substantiate my argument that the main opposition has consistently fallen short in conducting fundamental and crucial research to understand its opponent – including their characteristics, nature, and limitations. However, before that, I begin by placing my discussion and analysis within the critical political framework – critical theory.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Theory

Critical theory, as developed by thinkers from the Frankfurt School, offers a framework for understanding how (political) power, ideology, and social structures interact in society (Corradetti, 2012; Domingues, 2019). Critical theory provides valuable tools for analysing the challenges and opportunities involved in the context of Zimbabwe’s opposition politics, particularly the main opposition party’s attempts to unseat a ruling party that has been in power for over four decades. Central to this framework are the notions of ideology, hegemony, and praxis, each of which plays a crucial role in shaping the political landscape (Fuchs, 2016).

Ideology is a crucial concept in critical theory, referring to the system of ideas, values, and beliefs that justify and perpetuate the existing power structures in society (Ng, 2015; Domingues, 2019). In Zimbabwe, the ruling party, ZANU-PF, has sustained its grip on power by cultivating a dominant ideology rooted in liberation struggle narratives, nationalism, and promises of economic empowerment (Rwodzi, 2024). This ideology is disseminated through state-controlled media, education, and public discourse, creating a sense of inevitability and legitimacy around ZANU-PF’s rule. For the opposition, challenging this entrenched ideological framework is essential. However, simply critiquing the ruling party’s failures is insufficient. The opposition must offer an alternative ideological narrative that resonates with the people and effectively counters the ruling party’s hegemonic discourse. Without this, the opposition risks being perceived as disconnected or lacking a clear vision for Zimbabwe’s future.

Hegemony, a concept developed by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), refers to how a ruling class maintains power through coercion and by securing the consent of the governed (Bates, 1975; Rexhepi & Torres, 2011). In Zimbabwe, ZANU-PF has mastered the art of hegemonic control by intertwining its political dominance with the nation's social, economic, and cultural fabric. This hegemony is reinforced through patronage networks, control over state institutions, and using the liberation war legacy to legitimise continued rule (Ndawana & Hove, 2023). For the opposition, breaking ZANU-PF's hegemony requires more than political mobilisation; it demands a strategic intellectual and cultural campaign to reshape public consciousness. The opposition must engage in what Gramsci termed a "war of position", gradually undermining the ruling party's ideological dominance and replacing it with an alternative hegemonic project that appeals to the broader population (Egan, 2015). This project must address critical issues like unemployment, corruption, and human rights abuses while proposing a more inclusive and democratic future for Zimbabwe.

Praxis, a term central to critical theory, emphasises the importance of action informed by critical reflection (Bronner, 2017). In the Zimbabwean context, opposition parties cannot merely critique the ruling party from a theoretical standpoint; they must translate their ideas into concrete strategies and actions that challenge the status quo (Rwodzi, 2024). Praxis involves actively engaging with the people, understanding their struggles, and building a political movement rooted in their lived experiences (Southall, 2020). The opposition's failure to capitalise on moments of popular discontent, such as protests against economic hardships or political repression, reveals a disconnect between theory and practice. To be effective, the opposition must align its political strategies with grassroots movements and civil society organisations, building a broad-based coalition capable of mounting a sustained challenge to the ruling party (Moyo, 2020).

It is critical to see that critical theory offers a valuable lens through which to analyse Zimbabwe's opposition politics. The opposition can develop a more coherent and effective strategy for challenging ZANU-PF's long-standing rule by focusing on ideology, hegemony, and praxis. Understanding the ideological

underpinnings of the ruling party's dominance, engaging in a "war of position" to disrupt its hegemony, and practising reflective, action-oriented politics are crucial steps toward achieving meaningful political change in Zimbabwe.

In the next section, I analyse a critical political issue within Zimbabwe's main opposition and propose interpretations for understanding its persistent recurrence within the party.

You Do not Bring a Stick to a Gunfight

As mentioned earlier, the main opposition's response to the perceived stolen election of August 2023 was two-fold. The CCC sought regional support for its allegations and called for fresh elections, urging SADC to hold President-elect Mnangagwa and his ZANU-PF party accountable. Additionally, the CCC conducted nationwide stakeholder consultations on the way forward. Concurrently, party leader Mr Chamisa sought to keep his support base informed and motivated on X (formerly Twitter), promising that CCC's victory in this redress was certain.

In his social media communication with the electorate and CCC supporters, opposition leader Nelson Chamisa consistently delivered a singular message, emphasising "God-is-in-it" (Nenjerama, 2022). This recurrent theme of 'God-is-in-it' is accompanied by bible verses and occasionally cryptic messages, sometimes received lukewarmly and in a confusing reception (Masengwe & Dube, 2023). Despite some trolls and CCC supporters on X expressing a need for political rather than religious leadership, Mr. Chamisa persisted in this theological approach. To be fair to the opposition leader, his sometimes-sporadic messaging did cover other topics. However, it is also evident that these messages increasingly leaned toward theological themes, often at the expense of clear political insights and a concrete way forward.

However, how should we interpret all this? Were the measures taken by the main opposition effective and appropriate, given the recurring nature of their challenge? How should we view the leadership's stance amid ZANU-PF's tactics? From a critical theory political analysis perspective, the main opposition in Zimbabwe approached the political arena and the recent elections unprepared,

akin to bringing a stick to a gunfight. There appears to be a noticeable lack of clear political ideology within the main opposition. A solid political ideology is communicated effectively, not obscured. Statements by Chamisa on platform X, such as “The citizens shall govern!”, “There will be celebrations in Zimbabwe, trust the process” and “A leopard never changes its spots” create confusion. These messages, released just weeks after the August 2023 national elections, do not provide clear political direction.

What seems evident, especially after the recent national elections on August 2023, is the main opposition's lack of political clarity and direction. Infighting has taken hold of the party, and alleged impostors have emerged, disrupting the stability of the newly branded CCC party. While internal conflicts and factional splits are not uncommon in political parties, challenging a formidable force like ZANU-PF, with its extensive political history, requires a more organised, agile, and prepared opposition, which the CCC aims to be. Unfortunately, the current actions of the main opposition do not indicate a potential to unseat ZANU-PF. The key reason behind this is the failure to adhere to the fundamental political advice emphasised in this paper – understanding your opponent and leveraging that knowledge.

What is abundantly clear is that the main opposition consistently underestimates the determination and political strength of the ruling party. These significant miscalculations have not only been politically costly but are a direct consequence of not understanding the character and nature of ZANU-PF (Kawadza, 2023). Cuthbert Mavheko has characterised the recent political missteps of the CCC, primarily concentrating on the top leadership, specifically Mr. Chamisa.

His breathtaking naivety, incompetence and blundering have shattered his personal integrity and credibility to shreds and made it virtually impossible for any fair-minded person to support him. This scribe believes that Chamisa must now relinquish his position as leader of the CCC and surrender the reins to someone else (Mavheko, 2024).

According to the quote, the situation within the opposition camp was so dire that an immediate reshuffling of top leadership was imperative to salvage the party. The evidence supporting this assertion is apparent for all to witness. The opposition has never secured a decisive victory in Zimbabwean elections at the presidential level. Even in 2008's first round, where Tsvangirai was declared the winner, he had less than 50 per cent of the votes, necessitating a re-run (Dzirutwe, 2008). While failure to win decisively can result from various factors such as cheating, rigging, or voter suppression, the critical question remains: What has the main opposition done in response to these tactics, or what proactive measures has it taken to prevent and counter these dirty tricks before they occur?

Zimbabwe's main political opposition has repeatedly failed to analyse and leverage the strengths and weaknesses of its political rival. This deficiency in political strategy is starting to manifest fatigue among the loyal supporter base, and the charismatic CCC is gradually losing its political appeal (Mafundikwa, 2023). While there have been no recent conclusive studies on the growth or dwindling of the main opposition's support, it is a reasonable expectation that political support will decrease if the party and its leadership continue to be out of sync with the people's needs and aspirations for a new political era in Zimbabwe, independent of ZANU-PF. Without a swift course correction, the alternative's political aspirations may remain mere (Chikwaza & Chikumbu, 2024).

A noteworthy insight from the one top-brass former ZANU-PF leader, Webster Shamu, could be valuable. Shamu, an experienced politician and former minister in Zimbabwe, once asserted, "I want to repeat that this country came about through the barrel of a gun. It cannot be taken by a pen, never" (Tazvinzwa, 2013). While Shamu's statement may overlook the democratic process, implying that changing political power through elections (symbolised by the "pen") may not be an option, the underlying message is clear. ZANU-PF cannot be defeated through conventional and unconsolidated politics. The main opposition must surpass such approaches; it must deeply analyse ZANU-PF, identify its vulnerabilities, and effectively exploit them for meaningful political change.

Moreover, direct input into recommendations for improvement for the main opposition has been proposed already. For instance, Chikwaza and Chikumbu have reasoned that CCC should embrace radical politics to avoid becoming irrelevant, eloquently arguing:

It is public knowledge that Zanu PF does not always follow the constitution, systematically employs violence against its political opponents, does not respect democracy and human rights, and has no interest in conducting free, fair and credible elections. It is therefore illogical, self-defeating, and delusional to think that such a party can be ousted through what we like to call ‘moderate clerical politicking,’ or the timidity politics of avoiding confrontation with the regime. (Chikwaza and Chikumbu, 2024)

The suggestions in the quote and Chamisa’s recent exit indicate that the main opposition’s current policies and strategies are yielding unsatisfactory results and failing the opposition. The sentiments reflect a main opposition engaged in consistent ‘moderate clerical politicking’, which is inadequate given the magnitude of its challenge—comparable to ‘bringing a stick to a gunfight’. While this approach is something (unlike doing nothing), it is disproportionate to the challenge and expectations. Rather than what the main opposition in Zimbabwe is doing, but doing wrongly, unsatisfactory and ineffective, in the following section, I address what the main opposition has neglected but should have undertaken.

What the Opposition has Not Done but Ought to have Done

In politics, the distinction between what one avoids doing and what one does incorrectly can be pretty narrow (Lupia, 2016). Whether one abstains from voting altogether or votes for the wrong party (as in a regressive, corrupt party), the outcome may appear similar. Highlighting what the main opposition is not doing but should be doing underscores the critical importance of this omission. Omission by the main opposition to do what it ought to do and engaging in ineffective strategies are both shortcomings that push the opposition further away from achieving electoral victory over ZANU-PF. This section focuses on revealing and analysing the aspects that the main opposition in Zimbabwe, the CCC, is entirely neglecting rather than what it is doing incorrectly.

While the literature has somewhat critiqued the main opposition's misguided actions, I emphasise its omissions here. I argue that the main opposition has failed to research the strengths and weaknesses of its political adversary, the ruling party. I assert this has, for example, deprived the opposition of the opportunity to capitalise on what ZANU-PF allegedly fears the most – mass protests.

Drawing from dialectical reasoning as an epistemological aspect of critical theory, we understand that (some) political concepts are dialectical because they go beyond surface-level reality and reveal their opposites analytically (DePoy & Gitlin, 2016; Fuchs, 2016). For instance, Marx's idea of alienation inherently suggests the possibility of self-determination (Øversveen, 2022). In this way, concepts are both negative and positive simultaneously. Using this insight, I argue that ZANU PF's weaknesses hold potential strengths for the CCC, as ZANU PF's strengths inherently contain their opposites. Unfortunately, the CCC fails to recognise this critical theoretical insight, as I will demonstrate with evidence below.

There is no evidence that the CCC truly understands ZANU-PF's weaknesses or has successfully capitalised on them, even dating back to the early days of the MDC. Merely being a successful popular alternative with national appeal does not equate to a deep understanding of the opponent's vulnerabilities. The CCC lacks a comprehensive understanding of ZANU-PF's character and nature, as evidenced by their failure to adopt different approaches – *praxis* – in engaging and countering ZANU-PF's political gimmicks.

For instance, within Zimbabwe's political circles, widespread whispers suggest that ZANU-PF is particularly uneasy about mass protests and elections (The Newday, 2012). Frankly, I have reservations about the latter. ZANU-PF has consistently emerged victorious in all elections where it has actively participated. Thus, what could justify its (ZANU-PF) apprehension about elections when it has repeatedly proven itself as a winner? On the other hand, I see mass protests as much more likely something to fear if you are ZANU-PF.

There is evidence for ZANU-PF's uneasiness with mass demonstrations. Under ZANU-PF's rule in Zimbabwe, security members – police, army and the central intelligence officers (CIOs) –

always have swiftly responded to any signs of uprising from the citizens. They have frequently infiltrated and disrupted plans for dissent, large-scale strikes, and protest actions. A decolonial perspective could also be applied to analyse ZANU-PF's approach to handling protests in Zimbabwe, offering an avenue for further future research. Before independence in 1980, Ian Smith's white settler Rhodesian government used similar tactics to suppress protests, tactics now employed by ZANU-PF. Smith's regime infiltrated protest plans and violently crushed them, sometimes resulting in loss of life, as seen in the *Zhiii* riots of July 1960 in Bulawayo (Zimbabwe Peace Project, 2016). It seems ZANU-PF has adopted its colonial predecessors' methods of protest repression and, in the spirit of decolonisation, must unlearn these tactics.

Recently, ZANU-PF's top politician and Minister of Media, Information, and Broadcasting Services, Christopher Mutsvangwa, acknowledged the party's fear of protests during a press conference reflecting on the SADC Summit held in Harare. He mentioned the arrest of over 100 individuals suspected of planning mass protests against President Mnangagwa's rule and SADC's perceived complacency. These activists were arbitrarily detained in prison and denied bail in the weeks leading up to and just after the Summit. Following the Summit's successful conclusion, Mutsvangwa stated that the detainees should now be released (Mavhunga, 2024), revealing not only ZANU-PF's significant fear of mass protests but also the troubling entanglement of the judiciary with ZANU-PF politics.

In Zimbabwe, any protest movements that have managed to gain momentum have been forcefully suppressed and extinguished, often resulting in the loss of innocent lives. However, it is essential to note that this does not indicate that the opposition has been organising protests against ZANU-PF's rule. Various protests, including some thwarted early on, have originated from different sources, such as civil society, student protests, and strikes by teachers and doctors. Calls for protests during the recent SADC Summit in Harare originated from sources outside the official opposition party, CCC. Furthermore, despite the growing momentum for protests and the arbitrary detention of over 100 individuals, which could have provided additional motivation, CCC failed to capitalise on the

situation. Despite these favourable circumstances, the party did not mobilise or call for any strike action.

A notable exception in recent history is the protest unrest in August 2018, in which the military response shot six people dead and injured thirty-five for protesting the contested July 2018 presidential polls. Unnerved by (potential) international condemnation, Mnangagwa's government set up a commission of inquiry to look into the events of the protest and what happened during post-election violence. As part of the crucial findings of Motlanthe's commission, the following is noted: "The demonstrations which became riotous and caused extensive damage to property and injury had been incited, pre-planned and well organised by the MDC Alliance" (Motlanthe, 2018). Thus, according to the commission, the main opposition (at the time) in Zimbabwe did plan and execute these mass protests, which were violently suppressed by ZANU-PF's security forces.

The critical point, however, is that such evidence is rare and limited. Since the deadly mass protests in Harare in 2018, there has been little indication of ongoing protest actions by the main opposition. In January 2019, security forces killed seventeen people during protests against a fuel price hike (Human Rights Watch, 2018; Mavhunga & McKirdy, 2019; Mavhunga, 2021). However, it is unclear if the main opposition was involved in planning and organising these protests. Instead, evidence points to the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions' call for and encouragement for resistance against ZANU-PF (Amnesty International, 2019). The opposition in Zimbabwe does not have a monopoly on mass demonstrations; civil society and the general population have often self-organised to oppose repression and ZANU-PF's policies.

It is unclear why the ruling party, ZANU-PF, is deeply apprehensive about mass protest actions, given that protesting is a right provided and protected by the constitution of Zimbabwe. While this question is significant, my focus here is only on revealing that the main opposition in Zimbabwe has failed to grasp the intricacies of this issue thoroughly and to leverage it to its advantage. The CCC's primary goal should be to investigate why ZANU-PF strongly opposes mass protests to the extent of risking international condemnation for its forceful methods to suppress protests.

However, the main opposition has not sufficiently addressed and capitalised on this aspect.

While the rapid suppression of uprisings may not conclusively prove ZANU-PF's fear of mass mobilisation, it provides enough reason for the opposition to challenge the ruling party on that point persistently and to discover its vulnerabilities. Normatively, the point I am making here is that the opposition should be aware of the ruling party's weaknesses, often revealed by what the ruling party fears the most. The CCC must recognise that while people's lives and livelihoods are at stake in the country's politics, politics remains a strategic game. The CCC is a participant, and ZANU-PF is the opposing player in the game. In any game, understanding your opponent's strengths and weaknesses is crucial for effective and successful gameplay (and winning).

The ruling ZANU-PF government in Zimbabwe may fear the power of 'people's power', demonstrated by the impactful mass actions of the Arab Spring uprisings that started in 2010 in North Africa (Kienle, 2012). The collective strength of united citizens poses a significant threat, and Mnangagwa's government is keenly aware of this dynamic. However, for this knowledge to be practical in the hands of the opposition, it must be utilised and tested. Simply knowing that ZANU-PF fears mass protests is insufficient; the CCC needs to leverage this information strategically.

Further, there is no rule against learning valuable lessons from your opponent's effective tactics. ZANU-PF has maintained power in Zimbabwe for the past forty-four years. This four-decade political hegemony can be contested by the opposition through a critique of dominance, as outlined in critical theory (Fuchs, 2016). On the ruling party's side, strategic political approaches and intellectual efforts must have contributed to its enduring power. Unfortunately, the main opposition lacks a record or evidence of appreciating and learning from ZANU-PF's success on this score. The main opposition in Zimbabwe has not grasped the successful strategies of the ruling party for maintaining power and political rule. A pertinent question might delve into understanding how ZANU-PF has managed to sustain its rule over time, which the opposition continues to miss.

Once ZANU-PF recognises you as an adversary, the next crucial step is to assess your strengths and weaknesses. The ruling party in Zimbabwe has consistently undertaken this vital background work, dating back to its effort in the struggle against white settler rule alongside the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU). ZANU-PF has gathered insights into the strengths and weaknesses of its political opponents and adeptly utilised this information to its advantage (Shubin, 2008). This clearly illustrates how ZANU-PF outmanoeuvred its formidable sister party, ZAPU, through its political tricks and carnage.

ZANU-PF comprehended the political limitations of ZAPU, particularly the cardinal principles that ZAPU's leadership was unwilling to compromise, even for political freedom. ZAPU maintained a high moral stance that refused to jeopardise, and ZANU-PF exploited this knowledge. During Gukurahundi, a period of mass terrorisation and killings in the Matabeleland and Midlands provinces, ZANU-PF systematically tested ZAPU's ethical boundaries. Despite the extreme actions, ZANU-PF knew that ZAPU would not retaliate with ethnic violence. This perceived weakness in ZANU-PF's perspective of ZAPU allowed them to politically torture, isolate and absorb ZAPU under the terms of the 1987 Unity Accord, which marked the end of targeted hostilities against ZAPU's supporter base (Ncube, 2024a, 2024b).

Furthermore, there is evidence that ZANU-PF carefully considers its opponents' strengths and weaknesses. After the contested 2008 national elections, a re-run was scheduled for June 27, 2008. However, the period leading up to the run-off was marked by political violence, with the Morgan Tsvangirai-led MDC and President Mugabe's ZANU-PF blaming each other for the violence. On June 22, just days before the re-run, Tsvangirai withdrew from the race, denouncing the scheduled elections as a 'violent sham' and expressing concerns for his supporters' safety (Shaw, 2008). In this instance, as ZANU-PF did earlier with ZAPU in the 1980s, it appears that ZANU-PF knew precisely which pressure points to target to prompt Tsvangirai, a strong opposition figure, to eventually withdraw from the elections, leaving President Mugabe as the sole contender and securing an overwhelming victory.

In summary, the importance of understanding your opponent is a clear lesson from ZANU-PF's successful political endeavours, which the record shows continuously help it to hold and retain political power and rule. The critical insight is that as a political actor, it is crucial to invest in understanding the strengths and weaknesses of your adversary. Unfortunately, the main opposition in Zimbabwe has consistently overlooked this vital task, thus failing in its primary responsibility to overthrow ZANU-PF.

Before I conclude, a brief consideration of possible objections to what I have argued is in order. I am not persuaded by objections suggesting that my criticism of the CCC's failure to analyse ZANU-PF's strengths and weaknesses is unfair based on the argument that political parties are not research organisations. The claim that parties focus on immediate gains rather than what they should do, requiring organisational capacities beyond their means, also misses the point. Additionally, while it is true that the ruling party has an advantage through access to state apparatus for background work, which the opposition lacks, these objections overlook a critical aspect. Politics, particularly party politics, is a contest of strategy and popularity. For a strong opposition, unseating the incumbency requires more than rally speeches—it necessitates comprehensive background work. Successful parties have researchers working diligently behind the scenes to complement efforts on the ground. The opposition in Zimbabwe does have the capacity and resources to establish such a research unit. As Leon Hartwell observed during the MDC-T era, "Failure to rely on in-house expertise led to increased dependence on external consultants and 'experts' for advice" (Hartwell, 2018, p. 4). This highlights the importance of internal research for effective political strategy.

Finally, I have highlighted that not only has the main opposition neglected to learn about the weaknesses of ZANU-PF, but it has also proven inadequate in utilising information on what many consider the ruling party's most feared aspect—mass demonstrations. Furthermore, the opposition has missed an opportunity to glean insights from ZANU-PF on how it continues to prevail over its adversaries. In essence, the main opposition has not learned from the strategic and political strengths of ZANU-PF, neglecting to study

and research its opponents and leverage their weaknesses for political advantage.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper highlighted the challenges of opposing something without fully understanding it. Drawing on critical theory's political power, ideology, and hegemony principles, I demonstrated how Zimbabwe's main opposition has failed to apply insights from this theoretical framework. I have presented a compelling case demonstrating that Zimbabwe's main political opposition cannot convincingly assert that it fully knows and comprehends its political adversary, ZANU-PF. This assertion lacks coherence as long as the strengths and weaknesses of ZANU-PF remain undisclosed to the opposition. Additionally, I have shown that even if the opposition claims to have thoroughly researched and uncovered the weaknesses and strengths of ZANU-PF, such knowledge has been ineffective without evidence of successfully exploiting these weaknesses to its advantage. Moreover, I demonstrated that the main opposition in Zimbabwe has failed to learn from ZANU-PF's strengths, which have kept the ruling party in power since independence.

¹On 25 January 2024, Nelson Chamisa left the main opposition, CCC, splitting the movement further as he exited with a significant number of loyal supporters and some active national party leaders.

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