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Religious and political intersections: the instrumentalisation of Christianity during Zimbabwe's 2018 presidential elections

Shepherd Mpofu 

School of Languages and Communication Studies, University of Limpopo, Limpopo, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the critical intersection of Christianity with Zimbabwean politics during the 2018 harmonised elections. Christianity and politics play an important role in organising or polarising society. Major problems arise when the church becomes more “political” than spiritual or becomes silent on political matters affecting society. Religion has been used for various purposes in Zimbabwean politics, such as holding on to power, contesting power, rebuking leaders and silencing opponents. In the current research, my interest lies in two specific aspects; how, firstly, the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) leader, Emmerson Mnangagwa, and, secondly, the opposition Movement for Democratic Change-Alliance (MDC-A's) Nelson Chamisa evoked Christianity in their national electoral campaign through rallies and posts on social media, before the 2018 harmonised elections and during the disputation of the results. The article concludes that Chamisa and Mnangagwa instrumentalised Christianity differently as a political tool.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article traite de l'intersection critique du christianisme dans la politique zimbabwéenne lors des élections harmonisées de 2018. Des problèmes majeurs surgissent lorsque l'Église devient plus « politique » que spirituelle ou se tait à propos de questions politiques affectant la société. La religion a été utilisée à des fins diverses dans la politique zimbabwéenne, comme s'accrocher au pouvoir, contester le pouvoir, réprimander les dirigeants et faire taire les opposants. Dans le cadre de cette recherche, je m'intéresse à deux aspects spécifiques ; de quelle manière, premièrement, le leader du ZANU-PF au pouvoir, Emmerson Mnangagwa, et deuxièmement, Nelson Chamisa du MDC-A [AQ], ont évoqué le christianisme dans leur campagne électorale nationale, par des rassemblements et des messages sur les médias sociaux, avant les élections harmonisées de 2018, et pendant la contestation des résultats. L'article conclut que Chamisa et Mnangagwa ont différemment instrumentalisé le christianisme en tant qu'outil politique.

KEYWORDS

Religion; elections; ZANU-PF; MDC-A; Pentecostal churches; Zimbabwe

MOTS-CLÉS;

Religion; élections; Zanu-PF; MDC-A; églises pentecôtistes; Zimbabwe

Introduction

Africans are reputed to be notoriously religious (Mbiti 1969; Idowu 1967). In this research paper I am specifically interested in how two political “gladiators,” Nelson Chamisa and

Emmerson Mnangagwa, evoked Christianity in their respective 2018 national election campaigns through rallies, patronising church services and posting on social media. Religion plays a central role in politics globally (Jones-Correa and Leal 2001; Philpott 2007; Gonzalez 2012; Wilson 2014). Religion, especially Christianity, has always had a central place as an organisational force in global politics.

Historically, the church has played an important role in Zimbabwe in terms of colonisation, where missionaries established schools to civilize the colonized, supporting the nationalist cause under colonialism, advocating for human rights under the post-colonial dispensation and, in some cases, politicising black people into joining anti-colonial struggles (Dorman 2002). Further, the church created Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) wings that advanced the more political work of the church, such as taking care of detainees and their families (Christian Care) during the war while also documenting the Rhodesian security apparatus's human rights abuses. After independence in the 1980s, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) was instrumental in the documentation and production of an authoritative report in 1997 of the Matabeleland genocide carried out by Mugabe's government. Prominent Zimbabwean politicians such as Reverend Ndabaningi Sithole, Bishop Abel Muzorewa and the first president, Reverend Canaan Banana, are some of the men of the cloth to play salient political roles. These belonged to mainline churches. The surge of Pentecostal movements has added another dimension to religion and politics.

Scholars of religion and politics in Zimbabwe have focused on church, healing, tolerance and reconciliation (Dombo 2014; Chitando and Togarasei 2010); commercialisation of religion (Chitando, Gunda, and Kügler 2013; Bornstein 2005); Pentecostalism, modernity and prosperity (Maxwell 1998); Christian music as an instrument of glorifying 'sacred' political violence (Chitando and Tasuraira 2017); church and politics in general (Maxwell 2000; Dorman 2002, 2016); and co-option and tensions between the church and the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party (Dombo 2014). This article breaks new ground as it adds another dimension to the debates and literature – that is, the intersection and heightened instrumentalisation of Christianity in the build-up to and contests over the results of the 2018 elections. The article demonstrates that contending parties viewed Christianity differently and skewed Christianity to service their own intended political gains. The elections were contested by 23 candidates, but in this paper I focus on two main contenders, ZANU-PF's Mnangagwa and the Movement for Democratic Change Alliance (MDC-A)'s Chamisa, and how these two main candidates employed Christianity as a campaign tool. The former used the "battle" cry "the voice of the people is the voice of God," while the latter used the social media hashtag #GodIsInIt. Zimbabwe faces a multi-layered cocktail of crises: that of ZANU-PF's legitimacy, whose post-colonial consensus has all but crumbled; a crisis of unfulfilled expectations informed by socio-political and economic failures; and a crisis of citizens' confidence in the ability of state institutions to execute their mandates impartially (Alden 2002).

ZANU-PF has been in power since independence in 1980, and the party – especially under the leadership of Robert Mugabe, deposed in a military coup in 2017 – has used both African and Christian religions as mechanisms to sustain power. Mugabe was raised and educated in a Catholic environment, becoming "an exemplary Catholic" in the process. In fact, after his father abandoned the family, his heartbroken mother was healed through "teaching the village girls their catechism" (Holland 2008, 2–3). Mugabe believed

so strongly that he was meant to become a leader because of the influences of his mother, Bona, and Father O'Hea, who told Mugabe's mother that "Robert was going to be an important somebody, a leader ... chosen by God himself" (Holland 2008, 7). This partly explains Mugabe's approach to his "godfather" status in Zimbabwe politics, to the extent that he was willing to use violence against challengers defying God's orders. Mugabe became a king in politics because of these "prophecies"; hence, he had to be dethroned via a military coup. Kings are regarded as chosen by God, and they rule until death.

The Pentecostal Church continues to influence Zimbabwe's socio-political and economic trajectory. Pentecostal churches, in the current Zimbabwe, sell hope, perform "miracles," provide healing and promise wealth or economic empowerment to their members. This has seen them drawing crowds larger than those drawn by politicians. This has made these churches a target of politicians, who enter that religious space to sell their manifestos promising a better tomorrow should they be elected into power. Deacon observes that

Pentecostal Christianity is in general conservative, beholden to authority, and fearful of that which threatens the status quo – even where this can be seen as oppressive to its own adherents. At the same time, congregants seek to prosper through faith, even where such processes appear to restrict their own potential. (2015, 217)

The same applies to Zimbabwe, where most Pentecostal churches are supportive of the political status quo precisely because there is no democracy within those churches; they mirror political gangsterism and inequitable distribution of power and resources. In some cases, Pentecostal preachers shepherd their churches towards a confrontational path against government. Mainline churches, particularly the Seventh Day Adventists (SDAs), tend to shy away from politics and argue that leaders are chosen by God and therefore need to be prayed for. They are neither supportive of nor confrontational towards the status quo. Compared to the Roman Catholic church, some churches, such as the SDA, are co-opted or indifferent (Dombo 2014). The Zimbabwe Assemblies of God (ZAOGA) is as good as irrelevant, as its members cannot be associated "with any economic/political programme" (Maxwell 1998, 352). The Methodist church, just like the Roman Catholic church, especially after the 2000 crisis period (Raftopoulos and Mlambo 2009) has steered away from ZANU-PF influence and has stood with the majority of citizens affected by the ruling party's socio-political and economic mess (Dombo 2014).

Also known as African Initiated churches, the Pentecostal church boasts around 22% of the Protestant movement (Indexmundi 2018). The Protestant movement makes up about 80% of Zimbabwe's religions. Pentecostal churches are the fastest growing churches globally. Their growth in Africa, compared to mainline churches transplanted into the continent from Europe, could be explained by:

(1) emphasis on the "flexibility of the spirit," which enables it to transplant itself easily onto any cultural context; (2) emphasis on the working of the Holy Spirit, especially the power to provide deliverance not only from sin, but also demonic attacks, demon possession, and poverty through healing and prosperity promises; and (3) spontaneity and communal participation in worship. (Mashau 2013, 1)

This simplistic form of worship incapacitates the adherents' ability to evaluate their economic malaise. Emphasis on healing, according to Gifford (1991, 65), "diverts attention from social ills" and "its stress on human wickedness and the fallen nature of the world is

no incentive to social, economic and constitutional reform.” Since the 1990s, mainline church and state relations have tended to be both cooperative and confrontational. The church was, and in some cases remains, instrumental in building and running schools, hospitals and offering relief services in times of disaster. Pentecostal churches are the favourite hunting ground for politicians because of their flexible moral standing. Compared to mainline churches which see themselves as uncompromisingly standing for the ordinary citizens, African Initiated Churches are willing to compromise and get “in bed” with politicians for a reciprocal benefit (Maxwell 1998). Furthermore, these churches attract a lot of poor people seeking ways to interrogate their poverty and eventually break free from it. In some cases, the miracle sessions by some of these charismatic churches fill stadia, at times attracting larger crowds than politicians do, and hence politicians frequent these churches during election periods. Dorman observes that:

Zimbabwe’s religious groups – an area of remarkable growth during the crisis – proved to be fertile ground for politicians seeking allies. The rise of ‘mega-churches’ and televangelism promoting ... ‘gospel of prosperity’ ... from 2009 onwards the rise of local superstar pastors running massive campaigns and airing programmes on *YouTube* and digital channels led ... to [the growth of] “a prophetic craze” in these years, and one which did not shy away from ties to local politics and politicians. Most blatantly, Obadiah Msindo of the Destiny of Africa Network – one of the older ‘megachurches’ – repeated his campaign stunt of promising ZANU(PF) supporters houses in exchange for their vote, and denying that there was any problem with this. (2016, 203–204)

The birth of the MDC in the 2000s can be traced back to the intervention of the church “in opening up political debate[s]” (Dorman 2002, 77), especially on human rights and constitutional reforms. In 1997, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) initiated a constitutional change agitation project called the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), which led to ZANU-PF’s government being defeated, for the first time, in an election when the NCA canvassed for a “No” against the government-sponsored constitution in 2000. This, according to Dorman (2002), saw the return of violent elections as ZANU-PF became anxious about the possibility of losing power. The “victory” by the NCA later gave birth to the MDC, leading to the church taking a back seat as it did not want to be seen in the forefront of politics. Chamisa took part in the 2018 elections, where he magnified the importance of God in Zimbabwe’s politics. His campaign was a performance of religiosity as he started his rallies with prayers and diagnosed the Zimbabwean problem as spiritual, a clash of good (God) and evil (the Devil), with the latter being represented by ZANU-PF. His Twitter posts were pastoral. Chamisa, formerly a student activist, a Member of Parliament and a lawyer, ordained as an Apostolic Faith Mission pastor in 2016 after graduating with a degree at a theological seminary, once said of the relationship between politics and Christianity: “Politics is not a dark world. It is politicians who make politics dirty. We must be the light to the world, salt to the earth” (quoted in Mawonde and Depute 2016).

In contrast, Christianity was operationalized differently in Mnangagwa’s campaign, where at some point he took an explicitly God-like posture in one of his electoral campaign advertisements hung at the party’s headquarters in downtown Harare. This posturing made him look invincible, all-powerful and to be feared, all the more so given his history of commanding the State Repressive Apparatus during the 1980s genocide. Mnangagwa is a self-confessed inconsistent Christian. He belongs to the mainline

Methodist Church. Mainline churches are conspicuous for their sober approach to politics. Mnangagwa said of his religiosity a few months before the elections:

I was born a Methodist but many of you in here today (Sunday) were not yet born, in the 1940s and when I left for Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), I continued attending Methodist church there ... I stopped attending church services when I joined the liberation struggle and, after independence, I just attended some few church services ... I stopped attending again ... from today onwards, I promise that whenever my schedule allows to me do so, I will attend the church services. (quoted in Anon 2017)

The evocation of Christianity in Zimbabwe's elections is not a new phenomenon. However, there has never been such heightened religiosity in an electoral contest. Politics colours most inter-citizen relations and this implicates most citizens' religio-moral persuasion when it comes to making political choices. Religion has variously been used for holding on to power, contesting power, rebuking leaders and silencing opponents. Previous research has broadly addressed the role of the church in Zimbabwean politics, but has not necessarily explored the use of Christianity by politicians especially during elections (Chitando 1992; Dorman 2002; Bornstein 2005; Gundani 2008; Chitando, Gunda, and Kugler 2013). This article, exploring how politicians use Christianity to advance their careers, comes as an expansion of the debates that these works have provided. Evidence of the role of Christianity during elections abounds in Kenya (Deacon 2015), Ghana (Okyerefo, Fiaveh, and Asante 2011) and Nigeria (Adamo 2018).

The following questions undergird this research: What can we read from the way the two candidates operationalised Christianity during the 2018 electoral campaigns and after the announcement of disputed results? How did the candidates perform "faith" and for what purposes? What appeal did Pentecostal churches have to the two political gladiators during the 2018 election period? Data were gathered through digital ethnography (Hine 2000) from conveniently sampled media and social media platforms posted by the presidential campaign team members, followers and the candidates themselves. Qualitative content analysis is used to analyse data. Before proceeding let me map the itinerary of this article. After this introduction follows a context which attempts to locate Zimbabwean post-colonial electoral politics within the concept of Mugabeism. Thereafter I frame the discussion, after which I explore emerging themes before concluding.

Context: Mugabeism and Christianity

One cannot discuss the history of post-colonial Zimbabwe without engaging with the toxic leadership of Mugabe (Mpofu 2016), also known as Mugabeism. Mugabeism is an amalgamation of "political controversies, political behaviours, political ideas, utterances, rhetoric and actions that have crystallised around Mugabe's political life ... a populist phenomenon ... marked by ideological simplicity, emptiness, vagueness, imprecision, and multi-class character" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009, 1139–1141). Post-colonial Zimbabwe under ZANU-PF has been, for all intents and purposes, an electoral quasi-democracy (Laakso 1999). From the onset Mugabe intended for Zimbabwe to be a one-party state and delivered the country into an episode of grotesque genocide, killing over twenty thousand ethnic Ndebele people. That the party liberated the country and its members died for Zimbabwe's independence is used as an argument that they should rule permanently.

Mugabeism tabooed and made exclusive state power access a sole preserve of those who participated in the liberation war and belong to ZANU-PF. Joice Mujuru, then Mugabe's deputy president, a member of the ruling ZANU-PF later expelled and now opposition leader, captures how these things function in the extract below:

People are wasting their time by opposing President Mugabe. It was prophesied way back in 1934, when he was only 10 years old, that he was going to lead this country . . . [Opponents] should not, however, tamper with the presidency; it is sacrosanct. [These positions] come from God, they do not just come! People sacrificed their lives for this country . . . to be free. (*The Sunday Mail*, 13 January 2013)

Based on this, the party's women's league branded Mugabe a saint, a "God-given gift" (*The Herald*, 1 March 2008), and former ZANU-PF Member of Parliament Tony Gara "the second Son of God" (Meredith 2007, 80). Mugabe said his power was sanctioned by God and 'Only God who appointed me will remove me" (*BBC Online*, 21 June 2008).

The Roman Catholic church has been conspicuous in African politics despite some calls by politicians and religious puritans for it to stay out. During the 1980s genocide, a Catholic-run magazine, *Moto*, raised concerns (Maxwell 2000, 261). Thereafter, the CCJP commissioned an inquiry and released a report (CCJP & LRF 1997). Furthermore, one prominent cleric, Pius Ncube, became one of Mugabe's fiercest critics (Ranger 2002). In 2002 Mugabe reacted thus to Pius Ncube's criticisms:

We don't want to create trouble with men of God but I think Archbishop Ncube has gone too far. If he continues with his political stance, we will challenge him as politicians. We will respect him if he remains within the confines of the church but once he shows his political tentacles and if those tentacles are harmful, we will cut them short. (quoted in Muzengu 2002)

Religious leaders critical of the governing party's excesses are often harshly dealt with. Cameras were planted in Ncube's bedroom, and a video of him being intimate with a married woman was used by the ruling ZANU-PF under Mugabe to silence him. Also, state security agents were sent to sit through his sermons to monitor their political content.

Before the 2017 coup, ZANU-PF's factional craters became too conspicuous to ignore. The party continued to face mass resistance from citizens, with one prominent pastor and the leader of the #ThisFlag Movement, Evan Mawarire, in the forefront. Many other religious organisations continued to take a decisive stance against ZANU-PF's excesses. In other cases, ZANU-PF found support from religious organisations (Maxwell 2000) sympathetic especially with Mugabe's anti-homosexual stance, land reform and economic reforms. Anglican Bishop Nolbert Kunonga was known for his support for Mugabe's regime despite its disastrous economic policies that impoverished many ordinary people inclusive of his congregants. Another conspicuous supporter of the ruling regime was Reverend Obediah Msindo of Destiny Africa Network. Msindo argued that his support for Mugabe was not accidental, as it was divinely directed:

The plain truth is that I did not support ZANU-PF and President Mugabe by accident. I had a divine prophecy of the revolutionary party and the president. When my organization came into being in 2000, the land programme brought it closer to ZANU-PF. We discovered in the Network that the land programme was more biblical than political. By taking the land back to Zimbabweans, President Mugabe became the modern black political and economic Moses and also revived the Martin Luther King spirit. (*Daily Mirror*, 8 August 2005, cited in Dombo 2014, 146)

Since 2000 political leaders have been seen visiting different churches, especially close to elections, to canvass for support.

Framing the discussion: Christianity and the 2018 presidential election political gladiators

It remains unclear how Christianity as a persuasion, organising principle and form of identity influences voting patterns (McKinley 1944; Hammond, Shibley, and Solow 1994; Takyi, Opoku-Agyeman, and Kutin-Mensah 2010), but evidence from research and the foregoing suggests it plays an important role in electoral politics in different localities (Freedman 1989; Ellis and ter Haar 1998; Wuthnow 1991). Also, as Norris and Inglehart explain, modernisation and high levels of affluence “greatly weaken the influence of religious institutions” (2011, 25). In the Zimbabwean context, where levels of poverty induced by droughts, economic meltdown, bad governance characterised by corruption and elite accumulation, hyperinflation, deindustrialisation and high levels of unemployment had led to the mushrooming of Pentecostal churches promising people riches or at least giving prophecies to explain their followers’ predicament, there has been a rise in church attendance. Churches, in the last decade, have grown and drawn more congregants for their services than politicians have in their rallies in some cases. From the foregoing, it is clear that “religion’s relevance is not lost on political elites, who routinely develop campaign themes and use religious imagery as a way to connect religious worldviews with political mobilization” (Scheufele, Nisbet, and Brossard 2003; Leege 1993). In Africa, this could partly be attributed to people trusting religious leaders more than they trust politicians and official institutions (Bratton and Gyimah-Boadi 2016). In the Zimbabwean context, Afrobarometer (2017, online) observed that

Almost three-fourths of adult Zimbabweans trust religious leaders and non-governmental organisations the most in the country. The least trusted institutions are the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority and opposition political parties. This data is from the latest Afrobarometer survey and is being released at a time when there is a proliferation of church organisations and much intra-party fights among the opposition political parties in Zimbabwe ahead of the 2018 harmonised elections.

Nelson Chamisa, who went into the 2018 elections as a qualified pastor, relied on prayer during the electoral contest and also encouraged his supporters to pray and seek spiritual guidance. Both Mnangagwa and Chamisa courted religious institutions before the elections. During the Easter holidays, Mnangagwa addressed members of the Zion Christian Church to canvass support. In reaction, Chamisa used the social media platform Twitter to tell people what he was doing during the holiday and condemned Mnangagwa’s visit to the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) camp where he

reminded congregants that the new political dispensation that he is heading is all in God’s plan. Zanu-PF politburo member and secretary for war veterans Victor Matemadanda in another parallel Easter church attendance took to the podium and urged members of the Jekenisheni church to vote for ZANU-PF in the coming polls. (Newsday 2018)

Chamisa wrote that he “had a wonderful and prayerful Easter weekend. The blood of Jesus shall never lose its power. Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour. For me, worship gatherings

must never be reduced to being rallies for politics and point-scoring” (Chamisa on his Twitter account, 2 April 2018). He did, however, patronise churches outside of Zimbabwe.

After the disputed 2018 election results, there were religious explanations for Mnangagwa’s victory from some church and political leaders. For example, former First Lady Grace Mugabe said at her mother’s funeral, whose costs Mnangagwa had catered, “Mnangagwa loves us ... we love him too. We pray for him because it is God’s will that he is President of the country ... that he be given the wisdom to lead the country” (Murwira 2018). The apostolic Christian Council of Zimbabwe leaders equated Mnangagwa to the “Biblical Joshua who led the Children of Israel into Canaan while Mugabe was the equivalent of the Biblical Moses who extricated the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage, President Mnangagwa was anointed to engender economic prosperity for Zimbabwe” (Mpofu 2018).

In the cases presented in this paper, Mnangagwa and Chamisa differently deployed and performed Christianity in the 2018 electoral challenge for the purposes of divine validation, striking fear into voters, and demonstrating reform, creation of identity and subjectivity to God in their different quests. The endgame was to win votes, as explored below.

The voice of the people is the voice of God: Christianity in Mnangagwa’s electoral campaign

Even though Mugabe was deposed, Mugabeism continues to hallmark Zimbabwean politics. In August 2018, Mnangagwa was controversially declared by the constitutional court as the winner of the disputed presidential ballot. The court, or the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), could not tell the nation the number of votes that Mnangagwa got as the latter kept varying them. This suggests that there is some validity in worries that ZEC and the courts are compromised by the military and ZANU-PF, who conflate state and party (Mpofu 2014). The coup that upset Mugabe did not impose positive changes to the country’s socio-political and economic fortunes, and the temptation is high for analysts and citizens to argue that Mugabe was better than his successor (BBC HardTalk 2020). However, it remains difficult to proffer any systematic and logical socio-economic and political analyses of the current Zimbabwean environment.

Before the coup, Mugabe fired Mnangagwa as the country’s deputy president. The latter illegally crossed the border to South Africa via Mozambique (Ndlovu 2018). While in exile, Mnangagwa wrote a letter to Mugabe in which he made a bold promise:

I stand prepared ... to pay the ultimate price in defence of Zimbabwe ... as I leave this post for now ... we will very soon control the levers of power ... let not your heart be troubled for peace, love, unity ... are around the corner. I ... shall return to Zimbabwe to lead you. (Mnangagwa 2017).

There is a clear usage of Christianity as a political resource (Harris 1994) and a Messianic tone in the letter, where Mnangagwa, like Christ, declares a willingness to die for Zimbabwe, comforts his supporters and promises a victorious return. During the coup, masses who were suffering under Mugabe’s ZANU-PF joined the army in its quest for Mugabe’s ouster. This clearly was the voice of the army, and not the people, as soon after the coup soldiers were deployed in civilian offices starting from the presidency. In 2020 Zimbabweans mounted the social media campaign #ZANUMustGo, internationally

trending #ZimbabweanLivesMatter and a foiled protest march on 31 July. The masses marched for various reasons, and it seems in 2017 Mnangagwa misread this as support for himself and he declared, after the coup architects installed him as the president: "The people have spoken. The voice of the people is the voice of God . . . The will of the people will always succeed (Dzirutwe 2017)."

Mnangagwa and his wife are self-confessed and devout Methodists, but we see him in 2018 patronising the Vapostori sect. The Methodist church has steered away from ZANU-PF's brand of politics and has, in a way, distanced itself from Mnangagwa. The Vapostori, on the other hand, are willing to be manipulated, especially by ZANU-PF. On 14 July 2018, Mnangagwa visited the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church where the church leaders prophesied his victory "with ease." In response Mnangagwa said to the 250,000 congregants:

I want to thank Baba Mutumwa Taguta. He has extended his benevolence to me and shown me the way. He said, my son, this is the correct path to follow and if I fail, that will be my own fault. As the leader of the country, I preach day and night the gospel of peace and unity. Yes, we are approaching elections and you have assured me victory. What God has written with his hand is final. My victory has been prophesied here and nothing is going to stand in the way of that prophecy. I thank you all for that . . . The last time that I met Mutumwa Taguta he requested if Government can provide the church with a farm to do projects and we have honored that request. They also requested tractors and I said as Government we will do our best . . . You also requested that we sink boreholes here for people to have safe drinking water and I am sure work is underway to address that. We do that as Government because the people that we lead are from the church. Church has a role to prepare for our future life. (Mukarati and Mugabe 2018)

Pentecostal churches have for a long time claimed to be apolitical (Dube 2019) while mainline churches have voiced concerns over government excesses, especially post 2000 (Vengeyi 2011). Mnangagwa's presence emotionally manipulates (Brady 2010; Gerstlé and Nai 2019) the minds of the congregation to vote for him based on the leaders' prophecy, since the prophets have spoken, and also church members have a role in making tomorrow better by voting for him. Religious prophecies in this context are illogical and unscientific, which means that Mnangagwa's rhetoric feeds off congregants' fear and anxiety (in that should the MDC win, they would lose on the promises made by ZANU-PF; or the fact that they worship in open spaces where there are no water and ablution facilities and ZANU-PF's leaders' failure to condemn this and child marriages, not sending girls to school and not immunising children on their visits means endorsement of worshipping in such spaces): "the assumption that emotions act as powerful determinants of attitudinal behaviours" (Gerstlé and Nai 2019, 413). It is possible that the socio-economic and political challenges that Zimbabweans have faced have led to the religious groups taking a political stance for politicians' and material benefit.

The active political participation of Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwean politics can be traced from 2000 at the height of the Zimbabwe crisis – and that is, again, the time when ZANU-PF demarcated citizens into insiders/outsideers, patriots/sellouts, and used the land reform project to partly benefit its supporters while punishing those deemed members of the opposition. Also, Mnangagwa is a benefactor of the church; he plays the god who provides for their needs. This relationship is transactional, where the church "bootlick[s] and hero worship[s]" ZANU-PF leaders (Dube 2019, 2). The church leadership, in order to obtain land and farming implements, has to give Mnangagwa votes and

indulge in “self-configured prophecies that negate social justice” while fulfilling leaders’ selfish desires (Dube 2019, 2).

Figure 1 shows Mnangagwa “assimilating” into the Apostolic church community by following their rituals. Historically, the Apostolic church members (Vapostori) never voted since their formation in the 1930s, until one member, Border Gezi, became involved in politics and was later appointed a Minister in Mugabe’s government. In 2000, Gezi canvassed for ZANU-PF and succeeded (Sunday News 2000). A year later he died. The Vapostori remained a mainstay of Zimbabwean politics and have supported ZANU-PF ever since (Dube 2019), in some cases being involved in political violence aimed at dismantling the opposition (Daily News 2002). The teachings border on “ideological support for the nation-state, encouraging people to passively bear injustice in the hope of attaining reward [in the] afterlife” (Brittain 2014, 206). It was easy for Mugabe to appeal to these sects given their dislike of anything they deemed colonial, such as medical health, homosexuality and education (Machingura 2012). In 2013 Mugabe was seen attending a church service for the electoral campaign, clad in white robes (Dorman 2016). This assimilation into the church was born out of an understanding of the church as a political mobiliser of votes for ZANU-PF. Engelke (2007) confirms this with the observation that Vapostori sang ZANU-PF songs instead of religious hymns and hoisted ZANU-PF placards during an all-night prayer.

Mnangagwa, as shown in Figure 1, used the same tactics as Mugabe to court the Vapostori and increase his chances of getting their votes. Figure 1 brings to the fore a lot of themes that Mnangagwa wanted to be associated with in the minds of the voters. He is a human being “like all of us” who needs God. He also listens to the “prophet” and since the prophecy seems in his favour, he portrays the image of an obedient Christian who accepts his fate as laid down by God. His servant leadership style is shown through the humility, a thread weaving through his speech buttressed by sitting down to listen to the church leaders who stand to address the congregation. He is equal to “us” before elders and God. In most public appearances, he is



Figure 1. A collage of screengrabs from Twitter showing Mnangagwa visiting the Johanne Marange Apostolic church. ED-Emmerson Dambudzo.

usually with security details standing behind him and yet in this setting, they are not visible. Either he has surrendered his security to God or this is a demonstration of trust of the congregants. This is in stark contradiction to the image of Mnangagwa the crocodile and the man behind the 1980s genocide. At the same time, he becomes god-the-provider where leaders of the church are bribed and co-opted through provisions (Machoko 2013; Dube 2019). The church has a list of prayers presented to him and he makes promises to fulfil these. His God-like status is further amplified in Figure 2.

Figure 2 shows an electoral campaign poster hanging from the 15-storey ZANU-PF headquarters in Harare. The poster covers more than half of the building, and in the image are the multitudes who marched in support of efforts to force Mugabe to step down. The profiles of these multitudes cannot be easily deciphered. Mnangagwa appears as a towering figure, smiling and forward looking in typical leadership style. The inscription “THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE IS THE VOICE OF GOD” has many different connotations. The coup and subsequent support by some citizens is taken by Mnangagwa to have been an endorsement of his ascension to power. Furthermore, there is an assumption that it is his supporters who marched in support of the coup and Mugabe’s demise. Informal conversations with people who marched reveal otherwise.

This rhetoric seems to find resonance with the majority and especially followers of the charismatic churches, who are not encouraged to see things as they are but



Figure 2. Mnangagwa’s electoral campaign poster hanging on the walls of ZANU-PF headquarters in Harare. (Photo by Shepherd Mpofu)

through spiritual lenses. The poor performance of Zimbabwe's economy was largely man-made but religious leaders had their followers believing that it was due to spiritual or satanic issues. The poor performance of the politicians, leading to socio-economic challenges, left people with only one option to understand and survive their predicament: Christianity. Prophets promise deliverance and prosperity to followers, something that the political situation made impossible for them to attain. The Pentecostal churches discourage seeing things politically; hence, "[U]nless citizens begin to critique the public posturing adopted by political leaders, citizens can be cajoled into docility" (Gunda 2015, 110).

Mnangagwa's involvement in the genocide and his attendance at church, not to pray or preach but to be prayed for and preached to, shows he is an obedient son and acts like a "god" who answers prayers (through allurements: land and farming equipment). In [Figure 2](#) Mnangagwa appears like a god: the people are small (in relation to God), and God's place (large in relation to the people) is taken by Mnangagwa. This shows all power rests in him, regardless of democratic rituals that might dictate otherwise. The churches were used as platforms of endorsement. Again, at the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church, Mnangagwa is simultaneously a child, congregant and god – a triune being. He addresses the church as an obedient son and immediately as a god who answers prayers of the church. Mnangagwa's religiosity could be read in three ways: firstly, as part of ZANU-PF's furthering of the "economies of patronage closely linked to ... remaking of ZANU-PF powers" (Alexander and McGregor 2013, 758) canvassing for elections; secondly, as a need to cleanse himself of the "sins" he committed while working with Mugabe, chief among which remains the Gukurahundi genocide; and, finally, these visits serve as intimidation tactics against the church.

Mnangagwa's performance of religion is meant to demonstrate to the congregants that he is a changed man, but with that change comes a history that no one would wish to relive as "[I]f the church tries to voice (concerns about leader's excesses), the individuals are victimized" (Mujinga 2018, 261). Besides, as Takyi et al. argue, "[R]eligious groups are a force by themselves ... [and as they] accurately represent their members' views, politicians at times have no choice but to listen to them" (2010, 65). Further, the church is compromised in Zimbabwe and the pronouncement of Mnangagwa's victory suggests the influence of politics, where political patronage of church organisations by especially autocratic politicians in an attempt to seek legitimacy (Larsson 2018) has been on the rise. Since the land reform in the early 2000s, ZANU-PF's control over land has also been a "source of political capital to the party used to win votes ... and to undercut the [opposition], which has had little or nothing in terms of material rewards to offer its supporters" (Alexander and McGregor 2013, 758). The prophecy, made by most of the church organisations he visited, that Mnangagwa would win the elections could better be viewed through a survivalist transactional lens than as truthful prophecy (Chitando 2013; Majome 2016). Land remains the most viable source of economic empowerment in a context of high levels of urban unemployment and deindustrialisation.

#GodsInIt: Chamisa's deployment of religion in his electoral campaign

Chamisa's electoral campaign deployed religion in a distinct way from his opponent. As already intimated, Chamisa is a qualified pastor. He saw his entry into politics as God ordained, as he was sent into politics by God to shed light into the dark space of the political and deliver Zimbabwe from the tyranny of ZANU-PF. This added to his charisma (Landtsheer, De Vries, and Vertessen 2008) and attracted those who saw Zimbabwe's problems through a spiritual lens and hence believed they warranted spiritual solutions. His discourse was largely populist, using appeals to enthusiasm (Gerstlé and Nai 2019). Since spiritual solutions outside politics could not be used, Chamisa's adoption of religion and religious rhetoric into his politics seems to have been a strategic move to resonate with voters. He was exemplary in performing religion, and his supporters took to the public performance of their religiousness in courts, at rallies and in bushes – something that had never before been done in Zimbabwean politics. All his rallies before the elections were begun and closed with a prayer in which he submitted himself before God and expressed his powerlessness to confront the Mnangagwa evil regime.

Chamisa's rally cries, which he used mostly on his Twitter account, were #GodsInIt and #BeholdTheNew. The campaign strategies suggested by these hashtags may have been threefold. Compared to ZANU-PF, the MDC-A ran an underfunded campaign. ZANU-PF had a well-coordinated and resourced campaign, as evidenced by the number of motor vehicles they bought for the project and a survey of their billboards and campaign posters on the streets. #GodsInIt suggested MDC-A's meagre-resourced campaign was left in the hands of God. Secondly, there is a possibility that Chamisa's camp saw the 2018 elections in a good versus evil binary, hence the tone of his electoral campaign rhetoric where his sometimes brash populist messages went "hand in hand with the use of more negative and offensive messages" (Gerstlé and Nai 2019, 416). In so doing, he became the "little" David fighting Goliath. He saw his victory as guaranteed by God, hence #GodsInIt. The submission to God through prayer on the campaign trail, his court petition of results, etc. suggest the centrality of God in Chamisa's presidential bid. He also ran a metaphorical campaign (Anderson 2004) whereby "economic and political crisis situations" (Gerstlé and Nai 2019, 224) were magnified by Chamisa and his team, shepherding voters to vote for him as the only God-appointed leader. Chamisa and his camp equated the contest with a movement from oppression to the promised land, as illustrated in [Figure 3](#).

The insinuation of a movement from Egypt to Canaan captured in [Figure 3](#) comes from the experiences of Zimbabwe in the past 20 years, where the nation has faced socio-economic and political crises emanating from mismanagement of the economy under Mugabe, sanctions, human rights abuses, drought and many other factors. Chamisa uses populist rhetoric to appeal to voters whose lived circumstances are not comfortable. Thus, populism as a rhetorical communication style "appeals to and identifies with the people, and pretends to speak in their name ... a conspicuous exhibition of closeness to (ordinary) citizens" (Jagers and Walgrave 2007, 322). Chamisa's claim that #GodsInIt, and hence the belief that it is a transition from the old to the new, is informed by this status as an anointed man of God. Chamisa did not believe that the church should campaign or endorse political parties. In reaction to Mnangagwa's Easter visit to some churches, he said: "[I] had a wonderful and prayerful Easter weekend. The blood of Jesus shall never lose its power ... For me, worship gatherings must never be reduced to being rallies for politics and point-scoring" (Munyukwi 2018).



Figure 3. Faith! Chamisa prayed as he addressed rallies before elections, promising Zimbabweans a transition from Egypt (oppression under ZANU-PF) to the promised land (Canaan). The collage shows hope and faith in winning the election.

When Chamisa visited churches in Zimbabwe and outside the country he prayed and preached, rarely making overt political statements relating to his run for presidency. In a way, Chamisa demonstrated to his followers that he was godly rather than go around to churches looking for God. His surrender to God is further demonstrated by the fact that whenever he visited hospitals or when he met the sick at church he prayed for them (see Figure 4). Chamisa did not go to the mainline or African initiated churches to campaign, as he believes the church should be apolitical, even though the MDC under his predecessor, Tsvangirai, unorthodoxically



Figure 4. A praying president: MDC-A leader Nelson Chamisa shown in prayer and preaching.

courted the Vapostori church. Their lack of appetite for hosting opposition politicians demonstrates ZANU-PF's capture of the churches through allurements such as land and violence as coercive tools. Besides, the Vapostori viewed the MDC as stooges espousing westernisation, something inimical to their beliefs such as the use of holy water, polygamy and shunning a formal education system. The Vapostori are married to ZANU-PF "so much that anyone who comes with other allurements has no chance" (Vengeyi 2011, 359).

Chamisa, on the other hand, took on the active role of a priest, especially in churches where he preached, and also demonstrated his discipleship through praying for the sick. Through this, he performed leadership, priesthood and his faith as part of his image management and to create a positive rapport with the ordinary people (Landtsheer, De Vries, and Vertessen 2008). In this way, Chamisa plays a servant to God and the people he is praying for and to Zimbabwe at large. Moreover, he demonstrates that he is not powerful outside the influence of the deity. During the rallies, Chamisa prays and pleads for strength and guidance from God. This is in stark contrast with Mnangagwa who, when not playing God, is endorsed by the church leaders as a winner even before voting.

Despite a dearth of funds, the #GodIsInIt electoral campaign was met with animation at campaign rallies and gave a sense that Chamisa was divinely ordained to govern. This suggests that the packaging, marketing and presentation of Chamisa as a political candidate seems to have "met the aspirations of the voter (consumer)" (Landtsheer, De Vries,

and Vertessen 2008, 229), considering the numbers he attracted for rallies and protests and those who used the hashtag #GodIsInIt. The rhetoric was underpinned by an informal style and popular language that appealed especially to youthful citizens and those who bought into Chamisa's anti-establishment and anti-elite rhetoric, which centred the struggles of the common man on the streets (Gerstlé and Nai 2019). Chamisa spoke about the prevailing socio-economic conditions affecting the people of Zimbabwe, and in so doing gave the impression of a leader, like Jesus, who understands and experiences listeners' predicament. What this further buttresses is the observation that, together with ethnicity, "religion impacts political behaviour in Africa" (Takyi, Opoku-Agyeman, and Kutin-Mensah 2010, 66).

Disputed votes and Christianity

The 2018 elections were meant as a fresh start to Zimbabwe regardless of whether Chamisa (MDC-A) or Mnangagwa (ZANU-PF) won. Mnangagwa promised a departure from the path Mugabe's ZANU-PF had occupied. However, after the announcement of parliamentary results on 1 August, which saw the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission declaring ZANU-PF's majority win in parliamentary elections, the ZEC stopped releasing results for some 18 hours, leading to speculation that ZANU-PF had lost and ZEC was helping the party to rig the election. Later, on 2 August they declared Mnangagwa the victor, with 2,460,463 votes to Chamisa's 2,147,436. The number was changed once more, and it remains unclear even today by what margin Mnangagwa actually won. This led to citizens protesting in the streets of Harare, with riot police and military "shooting dead six people, several in the back, and injuring many more" (Pigou 2018). This was blamed on the opposition MDC-A, who had said prior to the election that they would defend their vote. MDC-A mounted a court challenge and the constitutional court, the final arbiter of disputes, ruled in favour of Mnangagwa's victory.

The post-election dispute gave the politicians and religious organisations a chance to reflect and, in some cases, continue the religious narratives regarding elections. As demonstrated above, Chamisa and his supporters continued in fasting and prayer for deliverance, while Mnangagwa claimed that God had spoken. The Zimbabwe Amalgamated Churches Council (ZACC), for example, urged Chamisa to drop his challenge of the electoral results for the sake of the economy and further argued that it is God's will that Mnangagwa was elected. Of course, this narrative and theological advice to submit to authority as it comes from God was meant to form and strengthen a narrative of peace and stability, which is unsustainable in the long run in a context of disputed legitimacy. As a Catholic priest opines, in reference to elections and earthly legitimacy anchored on violence being divinely sourced,

The question where authority comes from depends on the kind of authority. Self-imposed authority is not from God. When you use the gun from government, you can't say it's from God. Then you get authority from the gun, from killing, from suppressing the people. Almost from the Devil. (Alava and Ssentongo 2016, 685)

Some election observer missions argued that the conduct of the elections was worrisome and therefore could not be concluded as having been free and fair, contrary to ZACC's assertion. Thus, ZACC as a religious body gave what Alava and Ssentongo, writing in the Ugandan

context, see as a “vacuous and vague” debate on “crucial issues” leading to religious leaders participating in “the enactment of a façade of deliberative democracy . . . in so doing subverting the political proper, and legitimising the autocratic tendencies of ruling regimes” (2016, 688). This contrasts with the statements by such religious organisations as the ZCC, which voiced popular concerns rather than silently condoning ZANU-PF’s authoritarianism, as did the ZACC and the Apostolic Faith Church (AFC).

The ZACC urged Chamisa to “put the country first.” Further, this grouping of churches said,

[W]e are now surprised that Chamisa, who claims to be a pastor wants to foment chaos and suffering among Zimbabweans. It is trite that Zimbabweans are peace loving and God-fearing people and do not want to be abused by political leaders who are more concerned with attaining their selfish goals . . . We strongly condemn the MDC Alliance stance to ignore the people’s will and pray that sense prevails among their supporters who just recently went on a rampage, looting shops and disturbing our peace. Leaders of the church would like to tell all politicians that the country’s president was ordained by God. He was chosen by God and the will of God should be respected. (Bhebhe 2018)

Elsewhere, the leader of the AFC of Portland Oregon in Southern Africa, Reverend Richard Sibanda, said during a crusaders camp meeting in Bulawayo:

Our duty is not to question God’s will. Let us pray for our President Emmerson Mnangagwa so that the Lord can open his eyes and help him through the way. We know he is going through a tough time and as Christians, our duty is to support him with prayer . . . In the Bible we have so many examples of people who wanted to fight the men of God but they fell by the wayside the moment God intervened. President Mnangagwa was chosen by God to steer the Zimbabwean ship forward, let us support God’s will with prayer. (quoted in Huni 2018)

Mpofu, reporting on the multi-religious organisation Faith for the Nation Campaign (FNC)’s thanksgiving under the theme “God has given Zimbabwe the answer for peace,” quotes Shuvai Wutawunashe as saying “the Church acknowledges that the miraculous peaceful transition into a new era in Zimbabwe was with God’s help, and that it has come as God’s answer of peace to fervent prayers for the nation over the years” (2018).

The election is not only the ritual of casting ballots but includes the campaign environment, the freedom of political parties and ordinary citizens to practise their rights of association and assembly, the access of the political parties to public media, the equal application of law and order to opposition and ruling parties, the freedom to cast ballots, the counting of ballots and the addressing of all queries that might relate to the whole process. The 30 July elections failed to produce a satisfactory outcome to many genuine observers, following some irregular practices by the ZEC. There is a claim that the election process was peaceful. Granted, but also one has to interrogate the trauma that most citizens voted under, induced inter alia by the violence ZANU-PF has always visited on them, the recent coup that saw the government militarised, and the eternal fear that ZANU-PF has inculcated into the psyche of the citizens. For instance, ZEC failed to give parties a credible voters’ roll. In some cases, the voters’ roll had people aged 100 years plus (News24.co 2018) or with almost identical identity numbers, and in some cases over a hundred people shared a single address. ZEC also manipulated the presidential ballot paper to the advantage of Mnangagwa (see Figure 5).

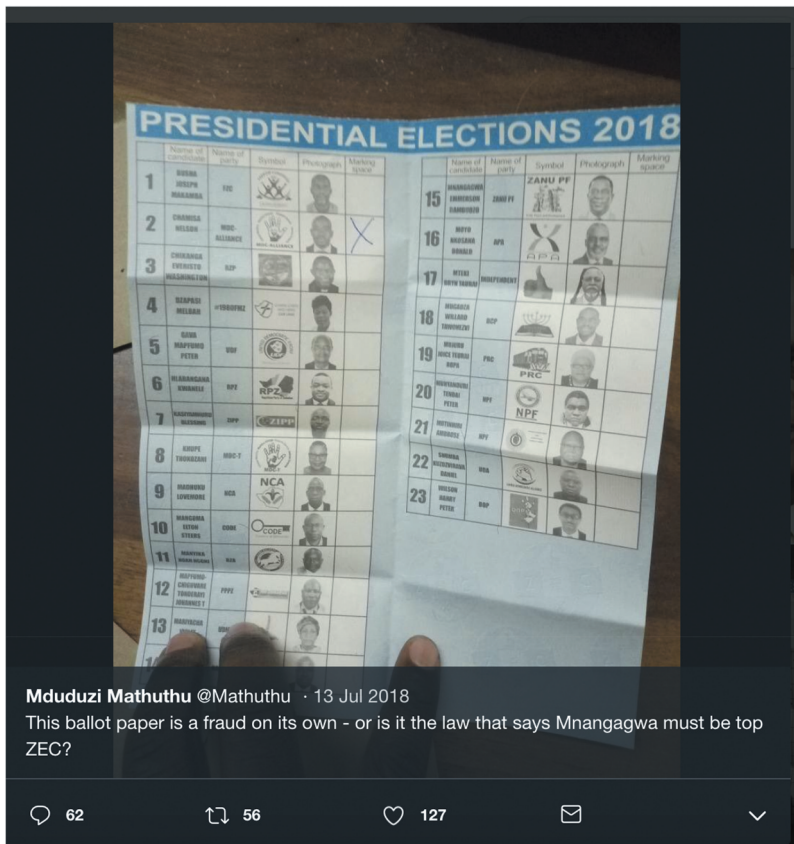


Figure 5. The manipulated ballot paper where a listing of presidential candidates attempts to advantage the ruling party's candidate, Emmerson Mnangagwa.

The ZEC also could not provide V11 (verification) forms that tallied with the votes, as in some cases it was alleged that 21% of polling station V11 forms vanished. The refusal to give the opposition access to the ZEC server further complicated the conduct of the outcome of the elections, leading to opposition party members protesting at the beginning of August. The MDC-A then lodged an election petition with the constitutional court, which they lost after failing to produce evidence of irregularities. Meanwhile, Chamisa kept demonstrating faithfulness in God through prayer and fasting and asking his supporters to do the same (see [Figure 6](#)).

The ZCC issued a measured intervention on the issue by suggesting that there were problems with the election, including:

- The enduring perception that Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) was not fully independent.
- The sense that the electoral playing field remains uneven whilst favoring incumbents.
- The existing deep national polarization across political, tribal, gender, class and other distinctions.

The figure consists of several overlapping social media posts and a news article snippet:

- Top Left:** A tweet from CCooleLe (@KuleVeZaka) dated August 19, 2018. The text reads: "President Chamisa called for Fasting and Prayer till Wednesday, the response has been overwhelming. Hills and Spaces in Epiworth and Areas around Zimbabwe been centres of Prayers & Vigils. Surely #Godsinit". It includes a photo of a large crowd of people gathered outdoors.
- Top Right:** A tweet from Nelson Chamisa (@nelsonchamisa) dated August 19, 2018. The text reads: "RELAX & REJOICE ZIMBABWE..In these times and days ahead, let's take our time in prayer, fasting & action.It is well.The truth shall set us free. #Godsinit". It includes a photo of Nelson Chamisa in a white robe standing in a natural setting, holding a book.
- Middle Left:** A tweet from Patson Dzamara (@PatsonDzamara) dated August 4, 2018. The text reads: "Zimbabwe hear me strong. Our best days are not behind us. They are ahead. It won't be an easy transition into a better Zimbabwe but it's coming. Let your faith fail not. Hold tight. The future is very very bright. lshw wedu ndichamahaga, chikakarara. #Godsinit". It includes a photo of a large crowd of people in an urban setting, many with their hands raised.
- Middle Right:** A screenshot of a tweet from Nelson Chamisa (@nelsonchamisa) dated August 21, 2018. The text reads: "WE NEITHER GIVE UP NOR GIVE IN..The past 38 years signified missed opportunities and neglected advantages. Zimbabwe must now move on not move around. Taught by the errors of the past, we stand ready to challenge all lies, contesting all deceptions until final victory.#Godsinit". It shows engagement metrics: 1,812 Retweets and 9,057 Likes.
- Bottom:** A news article snippet from My Zimbabwe News (@myzimbabwenews) dated October 29, 2018. The headline is "4 doves fly over Nelson Chamisa's head after praying a powerful prayer to God at Gwanzura Stadium >>>". The text below reads: "MDC leader Nelson Chamisa charmed his legion of supporters on Saturday when he gave a powerful prayer before delivering his speech at the com... myzimbabwe.co.zw". It includes a photo of four white doves flying in a clear blue sky.

Figure 6. Keeping up the faith during the electoral challenge process.

- (d) The growing tensions over unresolved and lingering past hurts and pains.
- (e) The reality of economic hardship, joblessness and declining standards of living for most Zimbabweans. (ZCC 2018)

Further, the ZCC urged the three critical players in the election, the MDC-A, ZANU-PF and the army, to find avenues for dialogue to seek a resolution to the dispute. The ZCC offered its intervention in the event that “the MDC Alliance does not trust to get a fair hearing in the courts, the church leadership makes itself available to facilitate other platforms of engagement as to bring mutually satisfactory closure to the current situation” (ZCC 2018).

To the security services, the council said:

We are worried that since November 2017, there remains deep suspicion within and among the different security forces. The church and citizens feel anxious and unsettled fearing the prospect of instability. We plead with the President to urgently constitute a broad-based security services reforms that will guarantee the professionalism of the security forces. (ZCC 2018)

These concerns further complicate the definition of elections as they suggest the electoral environment is as important as the security state of affairs of the country.

Conclusion

Religion continues to be an important component of politics, especially during elections where politicians and church leaders and members interface for various ends. As shown in this paper, politicians instrumentalised religion differently towards their political goals. Chamisa played the people’s servant who prayed in his charismatic rallies, prayed for the sick in hospitals and churches and also preached in churches, serving as an ordained minister. Mnangagwa, in contrast, used patronage and allurements, instilled a sense of vulnerability to some religious organisations (since he came to power through the coup: an embedded message here is the control of the apparatus of violence at his disposal), and ultimately became like a god himself who could grant what churches wanted. Religious organisations made a critical intervention. On the one hand, it is common that networks of patronage could influence religious leaders into failing to speak for the downtrodden as is the case with ZACC and AFC; while on the other, as could be seen through the ZCC, some religious organisations are willing to be counterweights to state power, especially where protest in the face of evil is irresistible. While researchers agree on the power that prophets wield over their congregations, there remains a need for further research exploring the relationship between religion and voting patterns, especially with the Vapostori, and the influence of political parties that entice the religious leadership.

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Notes on contributor

Shepherd Mpfu is an associate professor of media and communication at the University of Limpopo in South Africa. He has published several articles on communication, media, and journalism. His body of work covers social media and politics; social media and identity; social media and protests. He is the co-editor (with Dumisani Moyo) of *Mediating Xenophobia in Africa* (Palgrave 2020), and is currently contracted by Palgrave to edit two book volumes, the first is on digital media and humour in and the second one is on social media and humour in the COVID-19 pandemic (both focusing on the Global South). He also offers commentary to various local and international media on issues that fall within the area of his research expertise.

ORCID

Shepherd Mpfu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5924-5721>

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