

An analysis of the Zimbabwe heads of Christian denominations' call for a Sabbath on elections

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Abstract

The Zimbabwe heads of Christian denominations issued a pastoral letter proposing to postpone the general elections for seven years. The leaders argued that Zimbabwe's political paralysis and the economic decline have a long history and they needed to be addressed. The leaders called for a national Sabbath on all political contestation to allow for the rebuilding of trust, and confidence, reset politics, and chart a shared way forward toward a comprehensive economic recovery path in a non-competitive political environment. Their views were criticised by politicians and individuals resulting in the Church leaders withdrawing the call. This article was aimed at analysing the church leaders' theological justification of the Sabbath call. It also challenged the leaders' muting of their prophetic voices at a time when they were supposed to shout louder on issues that direct political leaders to democratic elections that are controversially marred with mistrust, intimidations, abductions, and rigging.

Keywords

Zimbabwe heads of Christian denominations; elections; national Sabbath; trust; confidence building

1. Introduction

Since the 1979 Internal Settlement Elections, Zimbabwe has had 12 General Elections in 1979, 1980, 1985, 1990, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2002, 2008, 2013, 2018 and 2023¹. Although these elections have always been contested by different political parties, the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front

1 Although Zimbabwe conducted its twelfth general election on 23 August 2023, this article will not focus on this election as the Church leaders' Pastoral Letter was aimed at stopping the plebiscite.

(ZANU-PF) party has held electoral hegemony² since the independence elections of 1980 (Sithole & Makumbe 1997:123). ZANU-PF capitalized on the election process which they were controlling thereby causing the whole process to be a formality more than a democratic space (Sithole & Makumbe 1997:124). Having noted the challenges caused by elections conducted every five years, the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHOCD)³ produced a Joint Pastoral Declaration titled, “Call for national Sabbath for trust and confidence-building in Zimbabwe”.⁴ In their discharge of the Pastoral Letter, the church leaders argue that, during the seven years, Zimbabweans would have the opportunity to rebuild trust and confidence; reset the way of doing politics and chart a shared way forward toward comprehensive economic recovery and the Jubilee that will be characterised by a non-competitive political environment.

Although the church leaders had brought a theological approach to deal with the political crisis in Zimbabwe, unfortunately, the Sabbath call was received with mixed feelings by both politicians and civilians thereby leading the church leaders to withdraw their theological pursuit. In discussing the church’s twisted position to pursue its theological conviction, the

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- 2 By hegemony Sithole & Makumbe (1997) were referring to how ZANU-PF as the ruling party manipulated the electoral process. The party suppressed all descending voices and pushed for a one-party. However, the hegemonic tendencies declined as some suppressed voices within ZANU-PF moved to form their political parties e.g. Edgar Tekere one of the founding members of ZANU-PF formed the Zimbabwe Unity Movement and contested against ZANU-PF (Sithole & Makumbe 1997:12). Another descending voice was Margareth Dongo a freedom fighter who later worked at the ZANU- PF Headquarters as Secretary for Women’s Affairs and the Ministry for State for Security in the President’s Department. She became one of the founding members of the Zimbabwe War Veterans Association, an organisation representing former freedom fighters in Zimbabwe. She entered the political arena in 1990 and was elected Member of Parliament for Harare East Constituency. In August 1995 Dongo became the first person in Zimbabwe to single-handedly challenge an election in the High Court. She won her case and became the only Independent Member of Parliament (Coleman 2005).
 - 3 Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHOCD) is comprised of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops’ Conference (ZCBC), Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ), and the Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe (UDACIZA). The Pastoral Letter was released on 18 October 2019.
 - 4 The Sabbath call was based on the Biblical Jubilee season of seven years as read in (Lev 25:1-7). The year of Jubilee were seven cycles (Sabbatical years) which had a special impact on the ownership and management of land in Israel. Hebrew slaves and prisoners were freed and debts forgiven, and the mercies of God would manifest.

essay will start by demonstrating the need realised by the church leaders to propose the Sabbath on elections. This will be followed by a summary of the Sabbath call by the ZHOCD. The article will go further to analyse the responses given by different political parties and some individuals on the same subject. These discussions will be crowned by challenging the Zimbabwean Church that by not pursuing the call for the national Sabbath for trust and confidence-building, the church lost an opportunity to give a theological interpretation of elections to a country whose plebiscites are always characterised by intimidation, rigging, vote buying, unfree and unfair playground and in some cases deaths of innocent civilians. The article also forwards that, by withdrawing the Sabbath theological discourse, the ZHOCD exposed itself to abuse by secular powers on theological issues which politicians are not informed about, and this might be a reason for politicians not to take the church seriously.

2. A brief history of elections in Zimbabwe

The history of elections in Zimbabwe was well documented by Delap (1979); Mandaza, (1986); Moyo (1992); Sithole and Makumbe (1997); Tevera (1989), and Nicholas (2017). This article will not grapple with this history but will analyse the outcomes of elections in Zimbabwe as a seedbed for conflict resulting in the ZHOCD proposing suspending the elections for 7 years in order to build the trust and confidence of the government by its citizens. From the analysis of these scholars, the election period in Zimbabwe has never been a good time. For example, in 1979 Bishop Abel Muzorewa's⁵ United African National Council (UANC) won a clear majority capturing 51 of the 72 common roll seats. Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU Ndonga) led by Rev. Ndabaningi Sithole⁶ came second with 12 seats, and Chief Kaisa Ndiweni came third with 9 seats, mainly in the two Matebeleland provinces. Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF and Joshua Nkomo's Zimbabwe African National- Patriotic Front (PF- ZAPU) represented the mainstream nationalist movements fighting a guerrilla war from exile, did

5 Bishop Abel Tendekayi Muzorewa was the first Black head of Church for the United Methodist Church.

6 Rev. Ndabaningi Sithole was the clergy in the United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe and was one of the founding members of ZANU -PF.

not take part in these elections and they pledged to disrupt the election and called for a boycott (Sithole & Makumbe 1997: 12) By 1979, all of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) apart from the central area between Salisbury (now Harare) and Bulawayo were under a form of martial law due to attacks by the Patriotic Front's armies namely the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) for ZANU-PF and the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) for PF-ZAPU. This boycott cast a huge shadow of doubt as to the legitimacy of elections thereby necessitating the "all-party" Lancaster House Constitutional Conference towards the end of 1979 at which a Constitution for an independent Zimbabwe was agreed upon (Sithole & Makumbe 1997:12). The "all-party" Lancaster House Constitutional Conference led to the 1980 elections where all political parties participated.

Of the 80 seats available ZANU-PF garnered 57 seats in parts of Manicaland, Midlands, and Mashonaland areas, PF-ZAPU obtained 20 seats in the Matebeleland areas, and the UANC got three seats in Manicaland (Tevera 1989). The elections were also marred with allegations of widespread voter intimidation and undue external influence on the electoral process. ZANU-PF and PF-ZAPU embarked on a nationwide terror campaign to coerce voters into electing their parties to power (Dumisani 2019).

The 1990 general elections took place after the Unity Accord was signed on 22 December 1987 between ZANU-PF and PF-ZAPU which was the main opposition party. The Unity Accord was an agreement to end the violence and brutality in Matabeleland that had started in 1982. The operation to expunge the dissidents was coded *Gukurahundi* in Shona (which refers to the first rains of the year that wash away rubbish). The operation saw more than 20, 000 people dying with some disappearing (Mashingaidze 2005:85). The Accord effectively swallowed PF-ZAPU into ZANU-PF (Moffat 2015). However, this unity did not stop the disgruntling voices of ZANU-PF as argued in footnote hegemony resulting in Edgar Tekere's Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM). ZUM enjoyed widespread national appeal as the second opposition party after the Unity Accord of 1987. Unfortunately, ZUM only got two seats out of 120. ZANU-PF had become a very strong party after 1987 as the Ndebele and the Shona people were now united. Mugabe's power clinging, and his domestic and foreign policies created a political

terrain that made Zimbabweans stuck with one political party dominating the political landscape.

In 1996 Zimbabwe conducted a Presidential Election and several political parties took part however, only the newly formed Muzorewa's United Parties and ZANU Ndonga challenged ZANU-PF. Most of the other opposition parties boycotted the elections which they claimed were being held on an uneven playing field (Sithole and Makumbe 1997: 132). Before the election, ZANU (Ndonga) withdrew from the contest for similar reasons. The elections went ahead as scheduled with both Muzorewa and Sithole on the ballot. Mugabe was returned to power with 93% valid votes in a poor voter turnout of 32% of an estimated voting population of 5 million people. Muzorewa attracted only 5%, while Sithole got 2%. It is clear from these statistics that although ZANU-PF won the elections in 1980, there were always problems in the electoral system which was characterised by many flaws.

ZANU-PF used all forms of tricks to win the elections including the use of state institutions, especially the Central Intelligence Organisation, the police, the army, and the media which had turned into state machinery resulting in the seamless relationship between the government and ZANU-PF. Up to mid-1992, the ruling party was financed from public funds through the Ministry of Political Affairs which received approximately Z\$50 million every year and no other party had access to these funds. Under increasing criticism, the Ministry was abolished, but the financing of the ruling party continued under the Political Parties (Finance) Act of 1994 under which a party that has at least 15 seats in Parliament is entitled to public funds. Once again, ZANU-PF won the elections (Sithole and Makumbe 1997:133)

In 2000, Zimbabwe had one of the strongest opposition parties called the Movement for Democratic Change formed by Morgan Tsvangirai and Gibson Sibanda who were trade unionists. The elections were also declared unfree and unfair. As the elections drew near in 2008, MDC candidates and their followers were subject to harassment and attacks by the police and ZANU-PF loyalists. The 2008 elections took place in a highly constrained political environment because MDC had won the first round of the Presidential Election (as none of the parties achieved the 50 percent

plus one threshold). This outcome resulted in the unleashing of violence, allegedly at the hands of ZANU-PF, on MDC members and supporters. An increasingly tense climate was further heightened by several government actions, including the detention of the opposition leaders. As the politically motivated violence, intimidation, and rhetoric continued, on June 22 Tsvangirai withdrew from the election race, citing the impossibility of a free and fair election. Nevertheless, the elections went on and Mugabe was declared the winner in a one-man election despite assertions from independent observers that the election was neither free nor fair (Chitando & Togarasei 2010).

The disputed elections of 2008 led to the creation of the Government of National Unity⁷ which led to the elections in 2013. The economic achievements were notable although the Unity Government was a marriage of convenience. The elections were held in July 2013. Although the election day was relatively peaceful, there were complaints regarding the electoral roll, which was not made public until the day before the election and appeared to contain many inaccuracies. Additionally, many voters particularly in urban areas, which were typically MDC strongholds had challenges to vote. Mugabe was declared the winner, having captured 61 percent of the vote to about 34 percent for Tsvangirai, who announced that the MDC rejected the results of the election, which he characterised as “fraudulent and stolen” (Dzirutwe 2013). Tsvangirai’s disputation of the election as stolen was not supported by many observer missions such as the Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network, the Southern Africa Development Community, and the African Union who declared the elections as free, fair, and credible. Tsvangirai and the MDC filed a petition with the Constitutional Court to overturn the election results and hold a new election. They later tried to withdraw the petition, believing that they would not receive a fair hearing after another court did not grant their requests to obtain election data that they needed as evidence. The Constitutional Court refused to dismiss the petition and ruled that Mugabe was the legitimate winner of the election (Dzirutwe 2013).

7 ZANU-PF and MDC formed one government with Robert Mugabe as the President and Morgan Tsvangirai as the Prime Minister.

The problems of claimed unfree and unfair elections continued in 2018 when there were new political players namely Emmerson Mnangagwa representing ZANU-PF and Nelson Chamisa representing the Movement for Democratic Change Alliance (MDC-A).⁸ A slight delay in the announcement of the results of the elections that were conducted on 30 July 2018 led to the killing of some civilians on 1 August 2018. When the presidential results were finally released, Mnangagwa was declared the winner. Chamisa and the MDC-A rejected the results and challenged them through the Constitutional Court. During the case hearing, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission revealed that there had been an error in the original results, although it was not enough to change the outcome of the election. The Constitutional Court ultimately upheld Mnangagwa's victory, and he was inaugurated on 26 August 2018. The above scenarios clearly show that elections were never a means of democracy in Zimbabwe, and it is against this background that the church leaders were calling for a Sabbath for trust and confidence building. The church leaders had seen the violence that happened before, during, and after elections that resulted in the killing, disappearance, and displacement of some citizens. For them, this was the sense to which the Sabbath call was initiated to seek restitution from God for the innocent bloodshed due to political unrest.

3. Summary of call for national Sabbath for trust and confidence building

In ZHOCD crafting of the call for a National Sabbath for trust and confidence building, church leaders built the argument on four pillars namely, the vision of the 2006 church discussion document, the Zimbabwe We Want document, and the proposal from the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations Episcopal Conference at the Large City Hall, Bulawayo of 08- 09 May 2019 and the theological idea of the Sabbath (ZHOCD). The Church leaders argued that on the Sabbath, God commanded his people to set aside the seventh day for rest. The seven-seven-year Sabbaths or forty-nine years constituted the Jubilee season (Leviticus 25). In this season, the

8 Nelson Chamisa contested the 2018 harmonised elections as the leaders of the MDC-A before a court ruling that he had assumed power illegally. The ruling saw him stripped of his power and he formed another political part called Citizens Coalition for Change.

land would be left fallow so that it could recover its nutrients and debts would be forgiven. New relationships were built, and God would bless his people. The ZHOCD further argued that since its independence in 1980, Zimbabwe will reach its Jubilee year in 2029. The nation could use the coming period to usher in a true Jubilee for the nation by removing all political contestation from the land and focusing the period on healing the past wounds, recovering the economy, and building a new political culture of cooperation focused on nation-building (ZHOCD 2019).

For the ZHOCD, the Sabbath was also an opportunity to deal with the deteriorating economic crisis, which was characterised by systemic corruption, shortages of fuel, prices of food going out of control, and the collapse of the health sector (ZHOCD). The church leaders also emphasised that by 2019, an estimated 7.7 million Zimbabweans needed food assistance due to drought and this needs a collective government to address the problem. Malnutrition and the interruption of basic services such as health and education had both immediate and long-term negative impacts. When this negative impact is combined with high levels of unemployment, stagnant salaries, and the loss of buying power of salaries for those who are still employed, one can conclude that Zimbabwe needs an urgent and holistic solution in which the grassroots, organised society, political and policy sectors should collectively contribute (ZHOCD 2019). In addition, the document stressed that the political paralysis and logjam characterised by the failure of the ruling party and the main opposition party to find a workable collaborative model is an issue of great concern. The fact that the ZANU-PF and MDC-A remained stuck in the post-election mode means that Zimbabwe was unlikely to realize any meaningful engagement towards a shared constitutional alignment agenda. The two political parties undermine each other at every step. Opposing parties had not learned how to collaborate while the ruling party rejoices in staying in power without the people's mandate.

Moreover, for the ZHOCD, Zimbabwe had undergone healing from various periods of national hurt for example the *Gukurahundi* as discussed earlier. In addition, the church leaders observed that Zimbabwean politics was toxic with hate speech and did not allow for meaningful political reforms nor was it conducive to inclusive economic participation for ordinary citizens. The church leaders argued that such a polarised environment

weakens respect for national institutions such as the judiciary system and the security sector. It was also highlighted that since 2000, election periods have been characterised by violence and polarisation and have helped to provoke high levels of mistrust among the citizens. On the one hand, ZANU-PF blames the opposition for selective recognition of electoral processes and for celebrating when results go in their favour while crying foul when results go in favour of the ruling party. On the other hand, the opposition continued to point to gross human rights violations and the skewed political playing field (ZHOCD 2019; Samasumo 2019)

The ZHOCD further pointed out that while all the political bickering is continuing, the basic concern for the ordinary citizen across the political divide was to get on with their personal development unfortunately, citizens have grown weary from struggling against the never-ending waves of electoral polarisation that undermine their hard work, disrupt community building, and erode progress resulting in the citizens lacking confidence in democratic processes such as elections (ZHOCD). The leaders also stressed the need to rescue the situation by providing, a proper break in the contest of the prevailing political paralysis and move towards real renewal and transformation. To achieve this, the ZHOCD proposed a national seven-year Sabbath period for the purposes of:

1. establishing an emergency recovery mechanism to address the dire national situation, especially for the most vulnerable.
2. rebuilding trust and confidence by healing all the hurts of the past,
3. developing a shared national reform agenda to deepen democracy,
4. establishing a shared and inclusive national economic vision (ZHOCD 2019).
5. In the opinion of the church leaders, the Sabbath proposal meant the suspension of the constitutional provision of elections through a national referendum. The national referendum would seek to ascertain from all Zimbabweans whether they agree with a proposal for a seven-year suspension of all political contestation for the sake of rebuilding trust and confidence by healing all hurts of the past, sharing and executing a shared constitutional and political national reform agenda, and establishing and implementing a shared national

economic vision. The call was not proposing any detailed government structure of the Sabbath season but if agreed, such an implementation structure must emerge from a process of consultation of citizens at different layers of society. The structure of the government would take into consideration the institutional and systemic requirements to achieve the objectives and safeguard the outcomes of the Sabbath. The Church leaders were also soliciting national acceptance of the seven-year Sabbath period as a season for trust and confidence building, resetting national politics, and creating an appropriate environment for economic recovery outside of party-political competition. The leaders encouraged a commitment to upscaling efforts towards health, education, development, and humanitarian assistance and that the political actors, state, and non-state actors should respond to the immediate need for humanitarian assistance and social services to alleviate the suffering of Zimbabweans.

4. Responses to the call for a national Sabbath for trust and confidence building

This call was received with mixed feelings by politicians and individuals. On the one hand, Nelson Chamisa and his MDC-A agreed with the church's concern to find solutions to the country's deepening economic crisis marked by triple-digit inflation; fuel, food, and electricity shortages; a weak currency and declining salaries (*The Zimbabwean Mail* 2019). On the other hand, the party disputed the sabbath call arguing that the crisis in Zimbabwe is political and not an economic crunch. MDC-A was concerned that Zimbabwe's problem was the "crisis of political legitimacy" as the party does not recognise President Emmerson Mnangagwa as a Zimbabwean President following his disputed election win in 2018 (*The Zimbabwean Mail* 2019). For MDC-A, it was only political legitimacy that allowed the growth of the economy and social order and not suspending elections.

The first person to comment from ZANU-PF was Energy Mutodi, its Deputy Minister of Information and Broadcasting Services. Mutodi wrote on his X formerly Twitter handle saying:

[C]hurches' call for a national sabbath for trust and confidence was based on visions from the devil. Every nation has mad people, and we have our own Kenneth Mtata⁹ and his bunch of false prophets. The Bible says all leaders come from God and for a purpose but for his lack of faith, the hypocrite sees visions from the devil and proclaims them as if they were from God (*The Zimbabwean Mail* 2019).

Although the statement was presented by the ZHOCD, Mutodi made a personal attack on Kenneth Mtata. In his response to the attack by Mutodi, Mtata retaliated by saying “It just signifies that people at the feeding trough on both sides of the political divide do not want to see a lasting solution” (Serfontein 2019). Mutodi’s response to Mtata was a way to defend the political hegemony of which he was part of, targeting individuals whom he felt that once they were attacked everyone else would be silenced.

Another critique was received from Eldred Masunungure who said.

[C]hurches, like any other Zimbabwean institution, are desperate to make this nation develop and prosper, so they are now coming up with some of the worst desirable ways that will draw Zimbabwe backward in its democratic transition. The sabbatical period is not feasible and could not be implemented as no single party in Zimbabwe would want to be taken aback and thrush the Constitution into the dustbin. The autocratic States have had elections, but it does not mean they are democratic. You can have elections without democracy, but it is not possible to have democracy without elections. These pastors have gone out of step. Zimbabwe has its problems, but suspending elections is not the solution. Even having a symbolic election is better in this democratic transition (Mapfumo 2019).

The sabbath call was also critiqued by Lovemore Madhuku who dismissed the Call as constitutionally impossible. Madhuku argued that “the idea of having a referendum is not allowed in our Constitution, and the Constitution makes it clear that whenever a government has failed, it

9 Rev Dr Kenneth Mtata was the General Secretary of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches which hosted the ZHOCD.

should step down and call for an election, not a referendum” (Mapfumo 2019). Another analyst mentioned that the church must be careful of what they are suggesting. They will create a monarch in President Emmerson Mnangagwa because of their suggestions. This is because the Zimbabwe military will not allow any form of regime that is not headed by Mnangagwa and Zanu-PF (Mapfumo 2019).

President Mnangagwa also shot down the ZHOCD’s proposal arguing that “government systems are run on laws that are bound by constitutions and statutes and any idea related to the election process must be in line with the laws of the land” (*ZimEye* 2019). The President also emphasised that allowing actions contrary to the law is failing to uphold, defend, obey, and respect the laws that he was sworn in to be a custodian of. He also cited the opening Chapter of the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No.20) Act 2013 which states that; “this Constitution is the supreme law of Zimbabwe and any law, practice, custom or conduct inconsistent with it is invalid to the extent of the inconsistency” (*ZimEye* 2019). President Mnangagwa also mentioned that:

[T]he principles of good governance, which bind the state and all institutions and agencies of Government at every level, include a multiparty democratic political system, universal adult suffrage and equality of votes; free, fair and regular elections, orderly transfer of power following the election, respect to the rights of all political parties; observance of the separation of powers and respect for the people of Zimbabwe, from whom the authority to govern is derived... Section 88 (1) provides that, the Executive authority derives from the people of Zimbabwe and must be exercised by this Constitution. Section 90 (1) obliges the President to: “... uphold, defend, obey and respect this Constitution as the supreme law of the nation” and to “ensure that this Constitution and all the other laws are faithfully observed” (*ZimEye* 2019).

Mnangagwa further challenged the ZHOCD to be consistent and compatible with the letter and spirit of the Constitution as anything contrary, would not pass the overarching test of constitutionality (*ZimEye* 2029). President Mnangagwa further urged the church leaders to distinguish between genuine failures, faults, and/or shortfalls in the country’s processes and

systems of governance and the wilful acts of treachery, premeditated lawlessness, and violence that must never be condoned or rewarded through undeserved recognition or accommodation. For Mnangagwa, the solution to Zimbabwe's challenges cannot subsist in robbing the winner of his victory and popular mandate to hand it over or split a portion of it as a reward to an ungracious loser, whose first reflex is to resort to political violence as a negotiating tool (*ZimEye* 2019). Mnangagwa accused the ZHOCD of wanting him to repudiate the will of the people by surrendering the constitutional mandate bestowed on him in the 2018 harmonised elections to accommodate Chamisa and MDC-A. The President further challenged the ZHOCD's theology arguing that there are few chances that beyond the Old Testament, the ZHOCD's notion and use of the Sabbath would survive the scrutiny or interrogation, even in biblical terms (*ZimEye* 2019).

5. An analysis of the Sabbath call

The church leaders' call for the Sabbath for trust and confidence was a very good idea given the history of elections in Zimbabwe. The history of the plebiscite has demonstrated that from the time Zimbabwe started to have elections, there was never a time when elections were agreed to be free and fair. History has shown that Zimbabwean elections have caused a lot of untold suffering including abductions, killings, vote buying, rigging, refusing to be defeated, clinging to power, the introduction of draconian laws to deal with those who would want to speak on behalf of the voiceless among other vices. Even after elections, the contestations through the judiciary systems have proved to be predetermined judgments where the ruling party will win the case (Aljazeera 2018). Unfortunately, the call from the ZHOCD had several conflicting statements that resulted in the Church leaders muting their voices when they were challenged.

The first challenge with the proposal was the failure of the church leaders to separate socio-economic and political issues from democratic processes. Elections are a process in which people vote to choose a person or group of people to hold an official position. Elections are thus a decision made by citizens to select leaders and to hold them accountable for their performance in office. In any democratic society, elections offer a privileged moment in

representative democracy, when citizens can express their views on the way the country should be governed in the future (Hooghe & Stiers 2016: 46). In addition, elections are mechanisms for appointing rulers and legitimising governments and are rational means for appointing rulers to ensure that no single person or group can have an indefinite hold on power (Makoa 2004: 4). Moreover, elections are a democratic space where people have to take turns to lead.

From these definitions of elections presented above, to call for the suspension of election for seven years in a country with an elected President who was declared a winner by the judiciary system was either the church's lack of appreciation or ignorance of the Zimbabwean electoral law. Contestations of elections in Zimbabwe have more often resulted in bloody conflicts and costly legal battles. The problem has to do not only with the institutional framework of the elections but is also rooted in the voter's view of elections, lack of confidence in the electoral system, mismanagement of the electoral process by the concerned governments, and their failure to resolve electoral disputes timely, argued Masunungure (Mapfumo 2019). Once there are political disputes with any side refusing to be defeated, the result is socio-economic and political conflicts which are the end and not the means. Elections are not only a democratic process, but they also serve a self-actualising purpose by confirming the worth and dignity of individual citizens who would have won the elections. What needs to be in place are clear electoral systems that allow both winners and losers to accept the outcome of the elections and not confuse the malfunctioning electoral process with socio-economic challenges. Political education for citizens to ensure the responsiveness of democratic governments is therefore necessary and it is the role of the Church as a neutral partner to do voter education than to want to abandon a democratic process because of undefined political frameworks.

The second challenge of calling for the suspension of the election is associated with confusing constitutional issues and sociological challenges. The church leaders failed to separate socioeconomic challenges from legal issues. The issues of lack of confidence in the government are caused by the behaviour of the government in calling for the elections and how they run the plebiscites before, during, and after the elections. However, this does not remove the constitutionality of the elections. According to the

Zimbabwean Constitution, Section 155 (1) Elections must be held regularly, (a) must be free and fair (b) must be conducted by a secret ballot (c) must be based on universal adult suffrage and equality of voters, and (d) must be free from violence and other electoral malpractices (Government of Zimbabwe 2013: 66). The church leaders' call ignored the importance of the Zimbabwe constitution and their call for the removal of the legal process by means of theologising or spiritualising legal issues is problematic. The same challenges were also raised by President Mnangagwa in his response to the Sabbath Call. His approach to the call was grounded on the constitution which the church leaders did not seriously consider central in their proposal.

Third, the church leaders failed to contextualise the year of jubilee in the Zimbabwean context. A careful reading of the Old Testament shows that after the creation of all the world order including humanity, God rested on the seventh day (Gen 2:1-3). God blessed the day and by blessing the seventh day, God marks the unique relationship that he has with it by allowing it to function in a way that the other days did not. The first six days are days of labour; the seventh day is differentiated as God's unique rest day (Haynes and Krüger 2017: 663). When God rested on the seventh day, He was not in conflict with anyone, but it was a break after bringing order in a chaotic world through creation. As such to relate the political turmoil in Zimbabwe to the Sabbath was somehow misdirected.

Fourth, the Sabbath was instituted on Mt Sinai and is intended as a day of rest (Exodus 20:8). Neither the people nor their animals were allowed to work on this day. In the New Testament, Jesus was in the grave on the Sabbath day and he was resurrected on the first day of the week thereby redefining the Sabbath day (Mk 15:42-47; 16:1; Mt 27:57-61; 28:1; Lk 23:50-56; 24:1; Jn 19:38-42; 20:1). Without splitting the Bible, it can be argued that the ZHOCD's theology of the Sabbath was influenced by the Jewish theology more than Christian theology that prioritise the day of resurrection more than the day God rested in the Torah where laws were given to the sojourning Israelites (see Ex 20).

Apart from the conflicting interpretation of the Sabbath, the Sabbath Year as defined by Lev. 25:1-7 was coming after seven years. For six years Israel could plough, plant, and harvest. But the seventh year was to be different. In

the seventh year, Israelites were not to plant their fields. Neither were they supposed to harvest them. Nor could they tend or harvest their vines. The land was not to be worked at all, but they were allowed to pick and eat what the land produced by itself. The Sabbath Year was a time to allow the land to rest. It also offers an extended opportunity for the people, their servants, and their livestock to rest. More importantly, it was also an opportunity for wild animals to eat from fallow fields. The context of Israel, and what they were expected to do as sojourners is different from the Zimbabwean situation thereby rendering the Sabbath call a misunderstanding of the context of the Sabbath and a way to deal with social issues by misquoting the Scriptures.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the church leaders did not explain the structure of the government during the seven years. In addition, they did not propose a framework for those who had won and lost the elections. Moreover, there was no deliberate move to synchronize the socio-economic and political problems that Zimbabwe is going through and the legal framework of elections. In the absence of all these frameworks and conflicting theology, it can be concluded that the Sabbath call was a misunderstanding of the difference between socio-economic, political, and legal issues. It can also be forwarded that the church was under pressure as the centre of justice in a country that is defined by voter apathy and decided to take an emotional route of suggesting a suspension of the legal framework by spiritualising the democratic rights of the people and when they were attacked by politicians and individuals, the church leaders withdrew their theological proposition as if they had not put serious thought to their theological issue. This article also argued that, instead of being relevant, the church leaders allowed themselves to be vulnerable to political abuse so it will be difficult to theologise any other issue which will affect people in the future. The church leaders wanted to theologise political issues without paying attention to the constitutionality of the whole process.

Given the challenges posed by the Sabbath call, the author proposes that the ZHOCD needs to invite politicians to a roundtable to discuss constitutional issues that affect people as the church is the voice of the voiceless. This

roundtable will be aimed at having people at the centre of solutions and not major on laws that support the minority at the expense of the majority in the name of democracy. Lastly, the church needs to continue nagging the politicians for accountability on violence, abductions, and hate speech among other ills that come with elections as an evil that must be stopped as these are causing a crisis for free and fair elections.

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