

Urban Struggles over Water Scarcity in Harare

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This essay counters the growing tendency in current scholarship to attribute nearly all the enduring water scarcity problems to climate change. Focusing on Harare, Zimbabwe's capital city, this essay contends that recurrent water crises can only really be understood within the contentious, long, and complex history of water politics in the capital city from the colonial to the postcolonial period. Although the colonial and postcolonial states in Zimbabwe had very different ideological and racial policies, for various reasons, neither was willing nor able to provide adequate supplies of water to the urban poor even as water was abundant in the city's reservoirs. It posits that while the colonial government racialized access to water by restricting its use by urban Africans, the postcolonial government failed to change the colonial patterns of urban water distribution and did little to increase water supplies to keep pace with a swiftly growing urban population and a geographically expanding city.

In 1980, Zimbabwe became independent after ninety years of colonial rule. President Robert Gabriel Mugabe's government inherited an unequal society in which access to critical natural resources had been determined by race, gender, geography, and other markers of segregation by the colonial regime. One such vital resource distributed along racial and residential lines was water. Successive colonial governments deemed controlling water allocation within the city as a potent way to give form and content to segregation between Europeans and Africans in Harare. Spatial planning ensured that water supply distribution networks and patterns would manifest the often contradictory race and class relations between colonizer and colonized. Although Mugabe's government inherited a solid urban water supply system, the infrastructure was designed to serve primarily White settlers while Africans living in segregated and overcrowded townships received limited amounts of water and sanitation services. Rectifying the vestiges of colonial resource inequalities became one of the formidable challenges the socialist-oriented Zimbabwe African Nationalist Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) government had to contend with.

While the Zimbabwean government was never found wanting when it came to making commitments to several national and international organizations on

improving water and sanitation access for its citizens, four decades after independence, the inherited unequal distribution patterns of water and sanitation remain deeply entrenched among residents of Harare. Simultaneously, the city's water infrastructure has progressively deteriorated, resulting in rampant water shortages and poor water quality, inducing deleterious epidemiological consequences, such as the 2008 and 2018 cholera outbreaks. Since the early 2000s, reports with headlines such as "Typhoid Spreads amid Water Shortage" or "Zimbabwe: Untreated Sewage Makes Its Way into Drinking Water" have been common.¹ These headlines may appear sensational, but the realities in Harare's high-density townships confirm the extent to which the twin problems of water scarcity and poor sanitation are a living reality. Yet it is too tempting to want to ascribe the city's enduring water troubles to climatic vicissitudes given the preeminence of climate change concerns in contemporary global discourse. The water scarcity problems that the ordinary residents of Harare have experienced renders it an ideal exemplar of a city whose two-decades-old water crisis has much less to do with climate change than a range of anthropogenic factors that have undermined the successful provision of water by both the central government and the local urban authority.

This essay contends that water shortages in Harare were not caused by climate change or environmental shocks and can only really be understood within the long and complex history of water politics. Put somewhat differently, although the settler state and the postcolonial state had very different ideological and racial politics, for various reasons, neither was willing nor able to provide adequate supplies of water to the urban poor. While the colonial government racialized access to water by circumscribing its use by urban Africans, the postcolonial government failed to fundamentally transform the colonial patterns of urban water distribution and did little to increase water supplies to keep pace with a rapidly growing urban population and a geographically expanding city. As water shortages have proliferated, so too have inequalities deepened between residents and urban struggles intensified over access to water. In the process, residents have protested against the urban authorities and found imaginative ways to obtain water for survival.

Established in 1890 on the present site of Africa Unity Square (formerly Cecil Square), Salisbury (renamed Harare in 1980) – the capital of colonial Zimbabwe – served the administrative and commercial interests of Cecil Rhodes's British South Africa Company following its seizure of Mashonaland and Matabeleland, both of which merged to become Southern Rhodesia (hereafter, colonial Zimbabwe). Because water was always going to be a pivotal resource to the economic development of Harare, it is important to describe the city's catchment and its hydrological, climatic, relief, and physiographic features. From the city's inception, its water supplies were shaped by the interplay between these fea-

tures as they had a bearing on how much rainfall the area received and how, in turn, water was to be acquired and distributed throughout the city. Therefore, the question of procuring sufficient water provisions for the city has persistently remained on the agenda of successive municipal administrations.

Harare lies on a watershed in the Mashonaland region of the northeast high veld of Zimbabwe. On the climatically marginal southwest end of the same plateau is Bulawayo, the country's second-largest city. Harare sits at an altitude of 1,550 meters above mean sea level, which gives it a reasonably warm temperature.² The northeast highland side of Harare comprises the divided watershed between the headwaters of the Mukuvisi, the Umwindisi, and the Gwebi Rivers. This watershed stretches from the northeast to the southeast and crisscrosses a number of rock formations.³ Rainfall drops east to west with the eastern mountains receiving 100 centimeters (40 inches) of rain annually, while Harare receives 81 centimeters (32 inches) and Bulawayo only 61 centimeters (24 inches); here seasonal shortages of water are commonplace.⁴ The summer rainfall season lasts from November to March. This is usually followed by an intermediate season when both rainfall and temperatures decrease, giving way to a cool, dry season stretching from mid-May to mid-August. Three distinct factors made water storage in and around Harare costly and challenging during the early development and subsequent growth of the city: 1) its elevation atop the main watershed of the country's high veld, with the small local streams; 2) long, dry seasonal spells; and 3) an eight-month minimal or irregular streamflow and high rates of evaporation. The combined effect of these factors elicited intermittent restrictions on water supplies during the city's development.⁵ Within Harare, the northern and eastern areas of the city are prone to more rainfall than the southwest side.⁶ It is therefore not a coincidence that Europeans allocated for themselves areas for suburban development in the higher lands, while areas with the lowest relief were designated for industrial development and for the African townships of Harari (renamed Mbare in 1982) and Highfield, that is, "downstream and downwind" of the city center and suburban areas.⁷ The predominance of ancient crystalline rocks rather than sedimentary formations around and beneath Harare accounted for the small aquifers hardly large enough to sustain sizable water yields to cater to the increasing water needs of the growing urban population.⁸

Early White settlers in Harare depended on the water within the urban catchment. They obtained their potable water from the small stream, Mukuvisi, on whose banks the city had initially been located. This source was boosted by ground water springs (*zvitubu*), wells, rainwater collected from rooftops, and (for those who could afford them) boreholes.⁹ By 1911, 3,479 Europeans, 6,400 Africans, and 339 Asians and Coloreds¹⁰ were living in Salisbury.¹¹ As Harare expanded, its water needs escalated. The initial sources soon became inadequate, and White rate-payers pressed the municipal council to develop reliable water supplies. At the be-

ginning of the twentieth century, they raised concerns about the sanitation and health dangers associated with the prolonged usage of groundwater and the widespread utilization of bucket and pit latrines.¹²

Demographic growth and adverse topographical features, highlighted above, compelled the city authorities to resort to water storage initiatives and to turn away from dependency on groundwater. Since water for urban uses was derived from rainfall, the city lost the bulk of its water through uncontrolled runoff or from what simply vanished into the depths of the earth during the annual dry seasons, causing regular water shortages. These shortages led to plans to construct large-scale reservoirs. Thus, the first ever dam for Harare, Cleveland Dam, was built in 1913, seven miles to the east on the headwaters of the Mukuvisi River, with a capacity of 200 million gallons.¹³ With the establishment of the Cleveland waterworks, it became possible for city authorities to dispense water through pipes to the European suburbs, businesses, and industrial sites.

Intensified water uses for domestic, industrial, and urban construction as well as recurring droughts revealed that the Cleveland Dam could not always guarantee sufficient water.¹⁴ The council therefore built the 600-million-gallon Prince Edward Dam on the Manyame River. This ensured a more reliable water supply for White residents until the immediate aftermath of World War II when an even bigger dam, forming Lake Mcllwaine, was built on the Hunyani River southwest of the city.¹⁵ A gigantic water purification plant – the Morton Jaffray Waterworks – was constructed in 1954 on the Hunyani River adjacent to the lake.¹⁶ By the early 1970s, Lake Mcllwaine was meeting 95 percent of Harare’s water requirements.¹⁷ It was not until the mid-1980s when the preexisting Darwendale Dam, downstream of the Hunyani River, was enlarged and connected to the purification plant.¹⁸

Guaranteed water supplies allowed the rapid development of several upper-income European residential suburbs in the northern and northeastern areas of the city, such as Highlands, Borrowdale, Malborough, and Alexandra Park. Splendid houses, fitted with water pipes inside and outside, with at least one bathroom and toilet, were built on more than one-acre stands with large, manicured, well-watered gardens. Most White homeowners had their own swimming pools, which earned Harare “the dubious honor as the city with the greatest density of swimming pools in the world.”¹⁹ As British novelist David Caute writes in *Under the Skin*, “by 1963 one out of every five families in Salisbury had installed its own swimming pool.”²⁰ Even though these suburbs had low population densities, the single-story detached houses had extraordinarily spacious living conditions. On average, such dwellings had four-to-five rooms and often housed 3.6 persons – reflecting, in the words of geographers George Kay and M. Cole, “a way of life that is expensive to obtain and maintain,” adding that “the material environment of the northern suburbs provides no place for the poor.”²¹ Due to the colonial state’s policy of racial and urban residential segregation, the northern suburbs were no place

for Africans regardless of class status unless they were domestic workers allowed to live on their premises in the “boys” *kia*.²²

Development scholar Irene Mudeka captures this disparity between European and African conditions quite well as she underscores the centrality of differential access to water:

Urban planners ... set up European suburbs such as Mount Pleasant, Vainona, Queensdale, Hatfield and Bluffhill among others and endowed them with permanent, durable, brightly lit and beautiful homes of low density and with a myriad of entertainment venues, restaurants, baths, parks as well as other trappings of civilization. Unlike the African shanty townships which relied on very limited communal water taps, the European suburbs also enjoyed clean piped water systems installed all the way from Cleveland and Seke Dams.²³

The asymmetrical provision of water between European and African residential places generated fundamentally distinct environmental outlooks, the former spectacularly green all year round and the latter unkempt and green only when the summer rains fell. Thus, a deeply divided colonial city for Europeans and Africans emerged along racial, spatial, and income lines. What was typical of the European side of the city – that is, privilege and affluence – was a far cry from the African townships created through deprivation and White paternalism.²⁴

To put the latter point into perspective, it is worth emphasizing that since 1890, the colonial state practiced a “Native Policy” of racial, economic, cultural, political, territorial, and spatial segregation. This policy was later codified into law as the Land Apportionment Act (1930), which formalized the set-aside towns and industrial areas as exclusive domains of European occupation. Simultaneously, it allocated all the unwanted, often ecologically depressed, urban land for the controlled habitation of Africans, though that land remained European-owned.²⁵ In the first decades of colonial rule, African residential places were provided with meager resources and amenities on the rationale that African migrants were temporary sojourners and were only in the city to minister to the needs of the White man. When done, they were expected to return to their rural homes. There was, therefore, no need to provide them with all the essentials of a civilized life.²⁶ This is the basis on which the creation of African townships needs to be understood. Alongside the racial and territorial division of land, the colonial state instituted the 1927 Water Act (later revoked by the 1976 Water Act) and conferred all water rights to the segregationist state. Access to water rights were now affixed to land ownership.²⁷ Because Africans had been dispossessed of their lands, they were automatically ineligible for water rights in urban (and rural) areas where they now lived on European-owned land. Thus, by law, Africans in Harare’s townships had no rights to water. Whatever access they had was at the “mercy” of the city council and the state.

Africans arriving in Harare in pursuit of employment were moved to Mbare, the first formal secluded residential area earmarked for Africans in 1892. They were subsequently moved in October 1907 to the site where Mbare presently stands. Located five miles southwest of the town center and on the banks of the Mukuvisi River, the township bore all the hallmarks of segregation: it was located in unpleasant surroundings, that is, adjacent to the town's animal slaughtering post; in proximity to the city's sanitary facilities, which oozed pungent odors; and below the burial ground for White people, though concealed from view by a strip of trees.²⁸ On the fifty-acre site, the council constructed from round, corrugated tanks an assortment of fifty Kaytor huts with thatched roofs, and a brick barrack of four rooms. African residents soon christened the huts "Ma Tank."²⁹ By 1914, the number of Kaytor huts had risen to 156, and by the middle of the 1920s, the township consisted of 247 huts housing an estimated population of 760 people.³⁰ Around the same time, the state dispensed with the Kaytor huts. In Highfield, the state built the unpopular *misana yenzou* (appeared like elephant backs) four-roomed brick houses as African migration to the city increased after World War II. More housing for Africans was provided between 1952 and 1976, as the government, municipality, and, to some extent, employers agreed to maintain stable labor supplies in the city as opposed to migrant labor. Several townships such as Mufakose, Kambuzuma, and Dzivarasekwa were built farther away from the city center and European suburbs but were close enough to places of work. The typical "small, box-like" houses were built "within individual plots, with a consequent lack of sizable open spaces for informal recreation, amenity and cultivation."³¹ A pervasive characteristic in all the townships was that these houses were regularly congested. Kay and Cole note that in 1969, about 97 percent of Harare's African population was accommodated in 65,070 houses comprising 162,130 rooms, thus an average of 1.7 people per room.³² The average home in the African township had four rooms divided into two bedrooms, a living room, and a kitchen. Flows of water into these townships were controlled by the state. From Mbare to Highfield, "water distribution to Africans was parsimonious," asserted historian Eshmael Mlambo.³³ Neither piped water nor bathrooms were provided within these houses, leaving families to their own devices.³⁴ Where the state provided rudimentary amenities, these were often linked to security and social control considerations with a view to keeping African behavior within the gaze of the colonial state: "Water pipes as well as electricity cables are always strategically placed so that any African insubordination could quickly be dealt with. In cases of strikes or political demonstrations, water and electricity in the homes is cut off until the protesters give in," states Mlambo.³⁵ This is not surprising. The colonial state always regarded African townships as "cradles of African nationalism,"³⁶ just as its successor, the postcolonial state, was to label some urban centers as the "dissident cities," justifying their surveillance at all times.³⁷

For sanitation and ablution necessities, Africans were to be content with using communal latrines. Unsurprisingly, many Africans found living conditions in the townships both oppressive and depressing. No one found these realities an affront to African dignity more than Bradfield Jacob Mnyanda, a Mfengu immigrant from South Africa and long-time resident of Mbare in the 1940s. Mnyanda rose to become the highest-ranking Black official in the Southern Rhodesia Native Affairs Department. He provided the first documented critique of the colonial state's Native Policy in his 1954 classic text, *In Search of Truth: A Commentary on Certain Aspects of Southern Rhodesia's Native Policy*. He was determined to galvanize the consciousness of his White readers to the exasperations and racial and environmental injustices piled upon, especially, the educated African elites, who were forced to live cheek-by-jowl with their poor brethren in degraded environmental settings no European would have tolerated: "Compared with the Europeans, even in the case of advanced Africans, urban native housing which, *inter alia*, includes latrines, dance and social halls, is poor in quality and in quantity."³⁸ Top on his mind was also the differential access to water, though surprisingly focused on swimming baths, which were plentiful in White suburbs: "it may be pointed out that while in almost each of our leading towns provision has been made a European public swimming bath, no similar arrangement exists for Africans in any part of the colony."³⁹ Of course, even if individual Africans from the elite class could have afforded private swimming baths, there was no space for them to build one given the tiny stands and limited water supplies available to them. Mnyanda was advocating for equal treatment with Whites as he clamored for the provision of the same public swimming baths in African townships as there were in European spaces. Mnyanda was understandably riled by the perennial unhygienic condition of the communal latrine in most townships in the colony:

The common latrines – which are in use in most urban native locations, townships or compounds – are kept in an extremely insanitary condition, possibly because the habits of many of their users are primitive in the extreme. These communal latrines are a menace to the health of the people and a disgrace to the Colony.⁴⁰

Mnyanda, however, extolled the Harare municipality for building individual latrines in the newest section of Mbare, "for an individual latrine can be kept clean because it is the sole responsibility of the tenant using it; whereas, in the case of the communal latrines, the attitude of many less advanced African people is that: 'everybody's business is nobody's business.'"⁴¹

Like Mnyanda, Lawrence Vambe, a Zimbabwean journalist, produced a similar sharp-tongued analysis of urban conditions for Africans in his 1976 classic, *From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe*, in which he documents the lived experiences of the different classes of Africans in Harare's townships and how the blunt instrument

of racial and residential segregation homogenized them. Vambe expresses how the African elite, Black moguls, and others

were forced to go to Harare (Mbare), the Highfield Village Settlement and the Mabvuku Township, where they were tenants just as all the other Africans, and they occupied the same confined, crowded houses, surrounded by muddy roads, communal lavatories and huge piles of smelling rubbish, that were left uncollected for weeks on end.⁴²

If anything, his book is an aide-mémoire documenting how little had changed twenty-two years after Mnyanda's first exposé.

In 1980, four years after the publication of Vambe's book, Zimbabwe attained independence and with it came the ruling party's promise to transform people's lives by eradicating "the long-term legacies of colonial resource inequalities."⁴³ In the exhilarating moment of gaining self-rule, a ZANU-PF-controlled city council took over the administration of the city's affairs and inherited a functioning modern water supply system.

Satisfied that 99 percent of urban areas enjoyed reliable access to water and that its loyalists were now in firm control of Harare's affairs, the central government turned to the previously neglected rural areas where only 40 percent of the populace had access to safe water,⁴⁴ partly in appreciation for the support the rural populace had rendered to the ruling party's guerrilla army and also to begin to uplift their downtrodden lives.⁴⁵ During this period, municipal authorities were left to manage the delivery of urban water and sanitation services to the sprawling cities with rising population figures following the annulment of colonial urban influx controls. In the case of Harare, between 1980 and 2001, the successive municipal councils were dominated by councilors and mayors who were members of the ruling party.⁴⁶ These authorities were too loyal to ZANU-PF leaders to have challenged the government on water issues despite the visible indicators that, sooner rather than later, the city's water infrastructure would begin to buckle under immense pressure from the growing urban population,⁴⁷ lack of constant repairs at a time when the economy was also shrinking due to a mid-1980s global recession, unequal terms of trade, the drought in 1982 – 1983, and pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank on the government of Zimbabwe to renounce its socialist programs and liberalize the economy to allow free-market competition.⁴⁸ By the end of the 1990s, Harare started to endure grave water shortages, which the Harare city council attributed to the 1991 – 1992 severe drought and also correctly to the increased consumption levels of Harare's growing population.⁴⁹

Though the city council singled out only these two factors, the plausible causes were rooted in a general culture of maladministration at Harare Town House (the City of Harare headquarters), which resulted in the lack of proper maintenance

of the once-reliable water and sanitation infrastructure and a general degeneration of services that undermined the previously ambient outlook of the city.⁵⁰ In 2003, historian Martin Meredith characterized the decay in this way: “Harare was now more noted for debris on the sidewalks, cracked cement paving, broken street lights, potholes, uncollected refuse, and burst pipelines.”⁵¹ This was not a groundless view, for long-time residents of Harare held consonant views emanating from living through and witnessing urban decay. One such resident, I. L. Makumbe from Glen View 3 township, yearned for the past when Harare was hailed as “the best city in Africa. It was always clean.” He acknowledged that the city council always undertook its responsibilities seriously – it collected garbage in a timely manner and water shortages were rare – but “now there is no water: the taps and toilets have run dry. It’s terrible.”⁵²

These conditions triggered several revelations in the media about alleged corruption and mismanagement at Harare Town House. Solomon Tawengwa, who was appointed in 1995 as the mayor of Harare on a ZANU-PF ticket and pledged to wipe out all fraudulent activities in the municipality, was relieved of his duties in 1999 on allegations of flagrant maladministration.⁵³ Instead of holding elections to appoint a new mayor, the ZANU-PF government appointed the Harare Commission, chaired by Elijah Chanakira, former secretary of higher education, to run the city’s municipal affairs. When both presidential and municipal elections were finally held in March 2002, the new opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), won control of all major urban and small municipalities as it had done in the parliamentary elections. This was, in fact, the second political embarrassment that befell ZANU-PF. The first humiliation was when all of the urban constituencies voted all MDC members into Parliament, winning fifty-seven seats against sixty-two seats for ZANU-PF – a signal that it was losing urban political influence.⁵⁴ This downfall presaged trouble for the MDC as the ruling party sprung into ruthless action calculated to do only two things: “regaining control of institutions of local governance, and getting re-elected into council and parliament.”⁵⁵ It did not take much time before state interference with the day-to-day operational matters of the Harare city council intensified as the minister of local government, under whose jurisdiction the municipalities fell, became ZANU-PF’s watchdog over municipal matters and did everything in his power to stymie the growing influence of the MDC among the residents of Harare. By diminishing the influence of the MDC, ZANU-PF hoped that it would enhance its own importance without competition and tighten its control over Harare’s civic matters by salvaging territory lost to the opposition.⁵⁶ The first casualty of this strategy was the new MDC mayor, Elias Mudzuri. Upon seeing signs that he was moving swiftly to repair broken infrastructure and dilapidated amenities, resurfacing roads, restoring street lights, fixing water leaks, and having meetings with international donors to bring investment and aid to Harare, the minister of local government, Ignatius

Chombo, fired him in April 2003 on trumped-up charges of ineptitude.⁵⁷ Instead of allowing the MDC-controlled council to appoint a replacement from among its ranks, the minister decreed that he be replaced by a ZANU-PF functionary, Seke-sai Mawavarara, to head another commission like the Chanakira Commission.⁵⁸ Whereas the earlier commission had been appointed as a stopgap measure between then and the next municipal election, the second one was specifically intended to obstruct the MDC's influence and to repress Harare's growing prominence as the opposition's citadel. This marked the beginning of a trend by the ruling party of playing dirty and disruptive games to smudge any chances of political success for the MDC. Such tactics would have far-reaching ramifications for the water supplies of Harare and other MDC-controlled cities in the country as ZANU-PF sought to reclaim its lost political supremacy by any crude means necessary.

Acting on the pretext that it wanted to reestablish the lost "Sunshine City's" preeminence,⁵⁹ the commission, at the behest of central government, launched the now ill-famed "Operation Murambatsvina" (Restore Order) to destroy all illegal structures that had blemished parts of the city. The operation left hundreds of thousands of women, men, and children homeless and without access to food, water, sanitation, or health care. They were ordered to leave the city and return to the rural areas from whence they had presumably come.⁶⁰

Government critics were quick to see this blitz as an attempt by the government to conceal the fundamental question of urban decline under successive ruling party-dominated councils, as a report in the *Financial Gazette* summed it up:

Residents have been forced to dump litter in open spaces, posing a serious health hazard that had been boiling underneath as a result of the population explosion and the mushrooming of squatter shacks, now home to over 500,000 people. Raw sewage is also flowing in some suburbs.... Water supplies to swathes of Harare have largely been erratic with the eastern suburbs of Mabvuku, Tafara, Msasa Park and Greendale being the worst affected.⁶¹

State interference in the operational affairs of the city council created political and administrative crisis conditions that left the Harare municipality unable to focus competently on the residents' environmental concerns. On grounds that it intended to rescue Harare's deteriorating water and hygiene services, central government hatched another plan to appropriate what had historically been the city council's responsibility over water distribution, sanitation, billing, and revenue collection – provided for in the 1976 Water Act.⁶² Purporting that it was changing from supply- to demand-centered water-governance measures, the government annulled the 1976 Water Act and replaced it with the Water Act of 1998. The

new act also provided for the creation of a state water corporation, the Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA), to supervise the implementation of the new water-sector reforms sanctioned by both the IMF and World Bank, which underscored that water needed to be treated as an economic good and to be sold at a profit rather than as a “social good” whose cost of production was borne by the state. In 2005, the Cabinet ordered all urban municipalities to surrender all water-supply and sanitation functions, revenue-collection systems, and their engineers to ZINWA. Because Harare and other municipalities were financially dependent on water tariffs for the maintenance of water infrastructure and for the provision of social services to residents, this action naturally robbed the MDC council of much-needed revenue and led to its severe incapacitation. In 2006, under the supervision of the docile commission, ZINWA wrested the administration of water and sanitation from the Harare municipal council.

Harare residents, now accustomed to persistent water shortages, pipe bursts, and overflowing sewers in several townships, initially welcomed ZINWA in the fervent hope that it would resolve their pesky water problems. But after two years of ZINWA’s leadership, the residents of Harare had not reaped any significant benefits from the new parastatal as the state had claimed. Despite raising water rates for the residents on the presumption that this would enable it to meet its operational costs, water did not flow through the pipes and taps of most households. During this period, waterborne diseases, especially cholera, broke out regularly, for example, in Mabvuku and Tafara.⁶³

Before long, most Harare residents sympathetic to the MDC were quick to awaken to the ruling party’s political maneuverings and intentions.⁶⁴ As ZANU-PF intensified its strategy, forms of social protest began to surface. The first form of enduring social and political protest against ZANU-PF’s control of Harare’s municipal affairs has been MDC supporters consistently ousting it from power. From the municipal elections of 2002 until today (2021), ZANU-PF has failed to regain control of the urban municipalities. As a government, the ruling party has remained alienated from the urban people because of its dismal failure to tackle the very issues that saw it booted out of power in the first place: that is, the major service-delivery questions affecting them, and top of the list was frequent water shortages and poor sanitation. As urban studies scholar Amin Kamete notes, elections became one of the few remaining opportunities for the people to vent their indignation in an era in which democratic space was increasingly circumscribed by an insecure ruling party.⁶⁵ In between elections, residents protested the ruling party’s conduct. On March 20, 2007, for example, one hundred residents besieged Harare Town House calling for the dismissal of the commission that had been administering the city’s affairs for about twenty-seven months.⁶⁶ The residents also called for new municipal elections. Some of the protesters were members of a social movement organization called the Combined Harare Residents’ Associ-

ation (CHRA). Based in Harare and founded in 1999, CHRA has been involved in sustained struggles to advocate for the concerns of Harare's residents and "ensure enhanced civic participation in local government."⁶⁷ The CHRA chairperson leading the protest remarked: "Today, CHRA occupied the steps of Town House to send a clear message to the regime that Harare belongs to us, the residents of Harare. We will continue to demonstrate and hold other peaceful campaigns against the illegal commission until elections are held in Harare. VIVA CHRA!"⁶⁸ They demanded the ousting of the Harare commission after twenty-seven months of waning municipal governance services: "Roads are falling into a state of disrepair and water and electricity and refuse collection are becoming increasingly erratic."⁶⁹

The residents' disenchantment at the commission's lethargic performance was compounded by the news that ZINWA had taken over all water distribution responsibilities from the MDC-controlled councils. The residents, once again, represented by the CHRA, whose branches were in both low-density and high-density townships such as Mabvuku, Kuwadzana, Kambuzuma, Mufakose, and Highfield, clamored for the revocation of the capture of their duly elected council's responsibility, arguing that the move

further exposes the evil agenda of the regime towards urban citizens, particularly those living in Harare. . . . The takeover of our water infrastructure is evil, unjustified and illegal since there is no memorandum of understanding between the parties involved, and no mandate from residents.⁷⁰

It was not lost on the membership and executive of the CHRA that the government's justification for ZINWA's takeover was insubstantial and that the real reason was that the water crises emanated from the successive ZANU-PF councils' lackluster performance: "water woes arise from a combination of bad policies, partisan political interference, technical and financial problems . . . the water system belongs to Harare . . . it must be returned to its rightful owners [since] ZINWA does not own our water."⁷¹ Jabusile Shumba, CHRA senior programs officer in charge of advocacy, bluntly stated, "In all fairness, the coming of ZINWA heralded a new era . . . that of water shortages."⁷² It seems that regular protests were not viable as the ZANU-PF regime became increasingly repressive, especially following the passage of the Public Order and Security Act (2002), which prohibits public gatherings construed to have political connotations.⁷³ These protests did very little to reign in the ruling party's tactics of undermining and attacking a democratically elected local authority, and the water crisis problems confronting the city's residents continued as the Harare municipality was rendered nearly dysfunctional.

ZINWA's inability to mitigate the residents' chronic water shortages and cumulative sanitation problems cleared the way for a massive outbreak of cholera in August 2008 (which lasted until the first quarter of 2009);

by that date, the urban water supply in Harare had all but collapsed. The disease struck at a critical time when the country's economy was in a moribund state and had no resources to contain the outbreak. As a result, the epidemic ravaged Harare's townships, leading to high levels of morbidity and mortality and leaving in its wake several social, environmental, and political ramifications until the international community intervened. Cholera decimated at least 4,000 people and no less than 100,000 people fell ill, the majority of whom resided in the high-density areas of Harare, namely, Budiriro, Glenview, Kuwadzana, and Dzivarasekwa. In these townships, "the lack of water, sanitation facilities, information about the epidemic, healthcare services, all contributed to the ferocious nature of the epidemic," concluded a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report.⁷⁴ Amid Harare's water crisis and a dilapidated urban environment, cholera found perfect conditions to blossom and spread from the townships to the peri-urban areas and beyond. Some of these townships were built by the colonial state with few civic amenities and rudimentary water and sanitation systems and have continued over the postcolonial years to enjoy no more resources than they had before. Others – that is, Budiriro (which ironically means progress/achievement/success) and Kuwadzana ("to get along") – were built by the postcolonial state in the same areas where the colonial state had established African townships. Strikingly, even though northern suburbs, such as Greendale, Avondale, Vainona, and Borrowdale, had also experienced water cuts on a daily basis, the residents were not infected with cholera. They had better alternatives to the poor-quality water that ZINWA was pumping into urban homes. E. Doro, a resident of Borrowdale West, confirmed this fact: "Most residents prefer to use their safer borehole water because they do not trust City Council or ZINWA water and their fears have certainly been supported by the recent cholera outbreak in greater Harare, which was essentially a ZINWA water-related epidemic."⁷⁵

The unequal spread of the disease speaks to the continuing consequences of the colonial and racial segregation of urban space and how this shaped access to water and sanitation services provisions in Harare since independence. The major cause of cholera was unquestionably tied to perennial water shortages and sewer bursts leaking raw sewage, which forced people in the townships to resort to using contaminated water sources such as streams and shallow wells dug out of desperation. A woman from Mufakose identified only as Jane told a Human Rights Watch investigation team: "We're used to flowing sewage, it happens so often. I often see kids playing in the sewage, which is why I carry my children on my back. It becomes really smelly and there are flies everywhere and you feel like you want to run away from your home. Raw sewage is not meant to be seen." Her disgust was shared by other people interviewed by the HRW.⁷⁶

The epidemiological emergency was the culminating point of a growing political and economic crisis-in-the-making since 2000. For most of this period, Zim-

babwe experienced hyperinflation, an economic meltdown, the government's abuse of human rights against members of the opposition party, and a high unemployment rate, while Robert Mugabe and his party faced increasing international isolation due to, among other things, the violent land reform program that ejected White farmers from their farms.⁷⁷ Thus, the epidemic in many ways became a clear manifestation of the inability of the state and the local urban authorities to provide access to clean water and proper sanitation services.

A major political development in 2009 that promised to bring back economic recovery and hence the rehabilitation of Harare's water and sanitation infrastructure was the rapprochement between ZANU-PF and the MDC that resulted in the formation of a Government of National Unity (GNU). Notwithstanding the continued tensions between the two parties, the GNU gave hope for peace and development to both citizens in Zimbabwe as well as the international community. Aid began to flow into the country, and for the five years of the GNU's existence, the country stabilized economically and attention was paid to the restoration and improvement of water and sanitation infrastructure. In 2009, ZINWA was ordered to stop discharging its responsibilities to urban areas after four years of poor administration of the city's water supplies. For all its attempts to restore and stabilize water supply and sanitation services with help from several donors and governments, the impact of the GNU's initiatives was short-lived when the coalition between ZANU-PF and the MDC ended in 2013. Instead, ZANU-PF pushed for elections in the hope that it would win and govern the country and the urban areas without a partnership with the MDC. As the election campaigns gathered momentum, the ZANU-PF government, presumably scared that the MDC would, once again, win municipal elections and continue to govern municipalities including Harare as it had done since 2000, intruded into municipal operation matters. This time, without consulting the urban councils, the minister of local government, Ignatius Chombo, issued a directive to all municipalities to set aside all the residents' municipal debts. This move was intended, firstly, to cast the ZANU-PF government as a "pro-poor" and caring people's party unlike the MDC and, secondly, to liquidate urban councils' finances, thus crippling their capacity to deliver services to their ratepayers and trigger dissatisfaction against the majority MDC councilors.

While ZANU-PF went on to win the parliamentary and presidential elections, it once again lost in the municipal elections. The minister of local government intensified his interference in the operations of the Harare city council, once again dominated by an MDC majority of councilors, until the Mugabe government was overthrown in a military coup in November 2017 that installed his former deputy, Emmerson Mnangagwa, who he had removed.⁷⁸ All the economic gains that were becoming evident between 2009 and 2013 were quickly wiped out as ZANU-PF, now in control of the state, became more intolerant, and investors and donors simply withdrew their support for reforms. The period was characterized by

a decline in economic growth, a severe liquidity crisis, and a lack of foreign investment.⁷⁹ The water and sanitation services in Harare were once again caught up in this economic downturn. The Human Rights Watch 2013 report on Harare's "troubled water" was more to the point when it asserted that "water and sanitation conditions for the millions of people who live in high-density areas remains almost the same as it was in 2008," and hinted that "typhoid, another waterborne disease, continued to pose a serious threat to the health of Zimbabweans, underscoring the need for the government of Zimbabwe to provide these most basic services to its population."⁸⁰ Within a year of President Mnangagwa's seizure of power from his former mentor, Harare was hit by another cholera epidemic in September 2018, and by November 21, 2018, 10,202 cases of cholera and fifty-five confirmed deaths had been registered.⁸¹ The same two high-density suburbs – Budiro and Glen View – that had been the hotbeds of the 2008 – 2009 cholera epidemic were, once again, the centers of this latest outbreak. Once more, the second major outbreak of cholera within a decade laid bare the depth of lingering inequalities in Harare and the extent to which its residents' hopes of ever accessing good-quality potable water remained a pipe dream. The response from a government that was still crippled by international sanctions and grappling with how to inject life into a moribund economy was too slow. Local and international NGOs and donors rushed to the aid of government.

In spite of commitments and public assertions by cabinet ministers and officials at various government levels to resolve the water and sanitation infrastructure problems the City of Harare and other cities and towns were facing and "often referencing the cholera crisis as a tragedy that cannot be repeated,"⁸² the two outbreaks of this deadly waterborne disease have shown that access to clean water for the urban residents of Harare remains a perennial challenge.

For all its pronouncements as a self-defined avowed revolutionary government that had liberated the oppressed rural and urban African masses from the yoke of colonialism and committed itself to the radical transformation of their lives by improving their access to water, a central resource to the survival of the urban poor, why did the Zimbabwean government fail to fulfill this commitment? While the colonial policy of racial segregation led to differential, regulated, and inadequate access to water for Africans in colonial Harare, an array of interlocking factors is behind the reasons why the government of Zimbabwe has not fulfilled its objectives. Upon the assumption of power, the Zimbabwean government spent the first two decades of independence paying little attention to the creeping problem of urban population increase and failed to appreciate the importance of augmenting water supplies and repairing or introducing new water infrastructure. The government began to face myriad political and economic crises, which significantly included the ruling party's political survival from the late 1990s, and financial resources to repair, maintain, and guarantee regular

water flows to the residents of Harare since 2000 simply dried up. Consequently, “the neglect of urban areas, however, proved to be short-sighted and later on came to haunt the state,” as Manzungu and colleagues have noted.⁸³ There was already a lack of resources to improve urban water supplies following the fiasco of the IMF and World Bank–sanctioned Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) that the Zimbabwean government embraced between 1990 and 1995, which led to massive rates of unemployment.⁸⁴ Instead of opening up the economy to market forces, the economy shrunk.⁸⁵ Whereas prior to the introduction of ESAP, the state had been supporting residents with low-cost urban water supplies, this program obliged the state to abandon the treatment of water as a “social good” and compelled it to treat it as an “economic good.” That way, the state could recover costs of delivery and purification and generate some profit. What followed, hot on the heels of the ESAP debacle, was “the cataclysmic decline of the Zimbabwean economy” as historian Brian Raftopoulos has characterized it.⁸⁶ On November 14, 1997, the Zimbabwe dollar “lost 74 per cent of its value within a four-hour period,” following the government’s two surprise decisions: 1) to make large payments to liberate war ex-combatants; and 2) to involve the Zimbabwean army in the struggles of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This had a massive and negative knock-on effect on the country’s savings and financial systems such that “after 2000, the economy spiraled rapidly into a world record decline.”⁸⁷ By 2008, Zimbabwe’s hyperinflation had soared to the height of 230 million percent and severely eroded people’s paychecks, returns and dividends, earnings, and savings.⁸⁸ One upshot of hyperinflation was that the government was forced to use the U.S. dollar in all financial dealings. With depleted foreign savings, the government lacked the foreign currency to acquire water purification chemicals for the city. It did not help that at such a time of dire need, the Zimbabwean government lost international donors and potential investors following its infamous Fast-Track Land Reform Program meant to return land to Black people. The contentious politics between ZANU-PF and the MDC also contributed to the water crises in Harare and the ruling party’s failure to provide water to the urban residents. Ever since ZANU-PF’s serial loss of municipal elections to the MDC in urban areas from 2000 onward, it has adopted a disruptive political strategy of interfering with the operations of the Harare city council. The ruling party has treated the MDC as its archenemy since its formation in 1999, its rising popularity in urban areas, and the threat it posed to ZANU-PF when it nearly won a majority in the 2001 parliamentary elections. That the MDC has been winning all or the majority of the municipal elections in urban areas since 2000 has been a thorn in the ruling party’s flesh.⁸⁹ In response, the ZANU-PF government orchestrated a disruptive and, at times, vicious and violent agenda to frustrate the MDC’s popularity and effectiveness. Thus, it singled out control over water as the most effective instrument to cripple the MDC-led city council. Rather than spending time work-

ing jointly with the city council to come up with water development projects, the central state elected to circumscribe the activities of the MDC council in order to cast it to the urban populace as incompetent and not worthy of being voted back into power. But as urban voters kept returning the MDC council in all elections, so too did ZANU-PF intensify its authoritarian assaults. In the process, the political fight with the Harare municipal council, including the appointment of ZINWA as the urban water governing institution, and the dismissal of mayors and councilors achieved only one thing: the creation of perennially inadequate and erratic water and sanitation services, resulting in poor-quality water delivered through municipal taps to urban residents. It is without question that the outbreak of the cholera epidemic that decimated four thousand people, mostly in Harare, was easily linked to these deleterious conditions. All in all, as the ruling party's political fortunes and hopes to win back the hearts and minds of urban voters progressively waned, its interest in ever resolving their genuine grievances around water and sanitation also diminished as it employed tactics that alienated it from the people rather than endeared it to them. Herein lies the ZANU-PF government's complete failure to provide water for its urban people.

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