

# COMMENTARY

## ZIMBABWE: GOVERNANCE THROUGH MILITARY OPERATIONS

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The military-style Operation Murambatsvina (Restore Order), which was launched on 19 May 2005 to curb urban-based 'informal trade and settlement', confirms a characteristic that continues to severely undermine Zimbabwe's democratic governance. However, this message appears to be lost on the government because, even after Murambatsvina drew widespread international condemnation, the state established another operation – Operation Garikai/Hlalani Kuhle – on 9 July 2005. Current evidence has shown colonels of regiments trying to again take the lead in motivating local government councils to embark upon the construction of housing units to meet an apparently impossible deadline – 2,000 units in 40 days.

In the short history of independent Zimbabwe since 1980, operations that have failed to provide lasting solutions to socio-economic and political difficulties include Operation Ghukurahundi and Operation Chinyavada. Operation Ghukurahundi concerned the near-civil-war in Matabeleland in 1981–1986, whose effect was to perpetrate atrocities, decimating an estimated 20,000 lives - an event that has since elicited an apology from the presidency. Meanwhile, Operation Chinyavada, which was launched in 1983 and was intended to rid the capital, Harare, of its prostitutes, also proved disastrous. Horrendous human rights abuses were committed as hundreds of (mainly black) women were unceremoniously hauled off the streets to prisons and detention centres. However, the result was almost inevitable in that the wily and

age-old trade in human flesh survived the efforts of the operation.

Relying on military-style operations as a tool to respond to civil society and governance issues has its obvious advantages for policymakers. However, it has severe limitations for policymakers and citizens alike. This commentary will briefly highlight elements of militarism and military operations that make the tool unsuitable for use as a governance instrument by elected officials in a democracy.

Universally, a military-style operation is a short and blunt instrument that prioritises a higher goal at the expense of local tactical sensibilities. Furthermore, a military operation is subject to orders issued by its own hierarchy and therefore responds exclusively to this internal chain of command. A distinct language, posture, expectation and methodology of operation are associated with a military operation. A military operation adheres to strict timelines or limits: it has a clear start and completion period, sometimes worked out to hours and minutes. A military operation implies the participation of armed elements whose actions are normally exempt from normal laws and by-laws. A military operation also views those who impede its implementation or progress as 'enemies' and therefore are to be summarily dealt with in order to achieve the set objective(s). Finally, resort to a military operation signifies the failure of 'normal' methods and the collapse of preventative diplomacy options, therefore it may be argued that it represents an instrument of last resort. In

addition, a military operation is a high-energy and expensive tool that produces concentrated impact as well as highly visible evidence. However, it is generally unsuitable for sustained and long-term deployment, during which there is a rapid deterioration of its utility. Resorting to a military operation probably provides satisfaction only for those leading the process.

To summarise, a military operation functions according to distinct policy and decision-making processes. During its execution a military operation is immune from outside interference, except that communicated through its command structure. Once launched, it strives to complete its given task within the shortest possible time and perceives and treats any impediments as hostile. Finally, when the operation is complete, participants are immune from legal challenge(s), except through its political leadership and civilian administrative structures.

A military operation is therefore blunt, indiscriminate, and self-contained, is almost insulated from normal responsibility, and delivers invidious results. This makes it unsuitable for employment as a civil and democratic governance tool. The impact of Operation Murambatsvina substantiates this.

In retrospect, it is clear that Zimbabwean government circles believed that economic recovery was being undermined and the ongoing political crisis was being exacerbated by activities in the informal sector, and largely in urban settlements. The state, through the governor of the Reserve Bank, Dr Gideon Gono, in his 'Post election and drought mitigation monetary policy statement', intimated that "markets, flea markets, other informal market premises and 'illegal' housing structures were undermining the economy". This statement was issued on 17 May 2005. The following day, the government-appointed City of Harare commissioner, Ms Sekesai Makwarara, announced that the government intended to "enforce local government by-laws and eliminate all forms of illegal activity" and that strong action would be taken by 20 June.

Based on these official policy announcements, Operation Murambatsvina had a defined objective – the elimination of informal settlements operating as trade, market or settlement structures.

On 19 May 2005, the day after the official announcements, the blitz was launched, catching many citizens completely unprepared. This is

in line with all military operations, which exploit the element of surprise.

However, to meet the requirements of the civil governance charter, during the destruction a 30-day notice appeared in the national daily newspaper, *The Herald*, on 24 May, as required by the Regional Town and Country Planning Act of 1976 (Chapter 29:12); the Housing Standards Control Act of 1972 (Chapter 29:08) and the Urban Councils Act (Chapter 29:15) of 1995, requiring an immediate stop to the illegal activities. The order was legally effective only from 20 June. However, even after this date continued transgressions would require local government officials to approach the courts for remedial action.

This example provides an important lesson about a civil style of governance as opposed to a military approach.

The impact of the operation was shattering. Within a week, according to the 'Report of the Fact-Finding Mission to Zimbabwe to Assess the Scope and Impact of Operation Murambatsvina' by the UN Special Envoy on Human Settlements Issues in Zimbabwe, Mrs Anna Kajumulo Tibaijuka, which was undertaken between 26 June and 8 July 2005, Murambatsvina had spread to "more than 52 sites ... with practically no area designated as 'urban' being spared". This had a devastating effect on poor areas in the cities and towns of Harare, Bulawayo, Chinhoyi, Gweru, Kadoma, Kwe-Kwe, Marondera, Mutare, Rusape and Victoria Falls. At a conservative estimate 700,000 people were left homeless. If one added dependants, 2.4 million people are thought to have been adversely affected. Bulldozers, protected by armed police and army units, smashed, burned and razed structures that had housed poor urban dwellers. This was happening in a country that is experiencing serious drought (a fact admitted in a Reserve Bank policy statement), a development that had already reduced nearly four million peasants to joining food handout queues.

Governance through military operations such as Operation Gukurahundi, Chinyavada, Murambatsvina and now Garikai/Hlalani Kuhle has consistently resulted in human abuses and brief but spectacular gains, followed by enduring anger, denials and eventually abject apologies. The time may have come for Zimbabwe to confine its governance methodologies to exclude the militarised alternative as part of its wider political stabilisation.