

A call to National Dialogue: Is Zimbabwe ready?

Zimbabwe has gone through phases of violent conflict since independence some of which have been subdued by dialogue leading to agreement, cases in point being the Unity Accord of 1987 and the Global Political Agreement of 2008 to name but a few. At their peak the periods of violent conflict have unfortunately divided communities along political, geographic and ethnic lines. The Unity Accord of 1987 brought the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (Zanu PF) and Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) to dialogue following the massacres in the Matabeleland and Midlands provinces where an estimated 20,000 people were killed with thousands others maimed among a myriad of abuses. In 2008 there was dialogue between the Movement for Democratic Change led by the late Morgan Tsvangirai (MDC-T), the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) led by Professor Arthur Mutambara and Zanu PF after a disputed election that resulted in hundreds being killed and others injured and/or displaced.

Despite dialogues taking place after some of these violent epochs, Zimbabweans are still haunted by violence and a host of other political, social and economic challenges making it impossible for communities and the nation to forge ahead. While the previous dialogues have managed to keep violent conflict at bay for periods not exceeding 10 years; after the Unity Accord signed at the end of 1987 at the stroke of a decade violence was to break out with the food riots of 1998, in another decade in 2008 unprecedented violence broke out not forgetting Operation Murambatsvina in 2005, and in 2018 seven citizens are killed on the streets of Harare on August 1 when the military used live ammunition to control protesters.

A Commission of Inquiry into the August 1 violence led by former South African Head of State Kgalema Motlanthe presented its findings in December 2018. Regrettably, before the ink on the report has dried Zimbabwe is up in smoke again. At least 12 citizens are killed as security forces use live ammunition again to control citizens protesting escalating prices. The protesters left a trail of destruction as they looted and destroyed property at the same time violating the rights of other citizens who did not want to participate in the shutdown. The killing of citizens whose cases make horrendous reading happened in brazen disregard of the findings and recommendations of the Motlanthe Report.

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In the aftermath of the ‘dark days’ 14-16 January 2019 and subsequent days that followed to present day the issue of a national dialogue that is significantly different from all other dialogues before is dominating the limelight. The crucial question is whether Zimbabwe is ready for this anticipated national dialogue on which many pin hopes. Have Zimbabweans had the chance to do a post mortem of previous dialogues to see why they have missed the mark in that violence is temporarily subdued by addressing symptoms while the root causes of socio, economic and political problems are left festering underneath. There is no way that Zimbabwe can be ready for a national broad based dialogue if the military is not back in the barracks. Their being out on the streets means that they will continue to cause untold suffering of civilians. All cases of abuse have to be investigated but the involvement of security forces in the perpetration of the same abuses that are being reported means that it is not easy for citizens to approach the same security forces to report. The scenario already puts citizens in positions of helplessness as trust and confidence are seriously compromised.

The abuse of a civilian by security forces that have ‘shocked’ the President are just the tip of an iceberg of what citizens have experienced and some continue to experience. Citizens are wounded Mr President and some cannot even sit on their bottoms as a result of the injuries sustained in the beatings and other forms of torture and inhuman and degrading treatment. The sexual assaults against women are not new in Zimbabwe. It’s a form of abuse and inhuman and degrading treatment that continues to haunt Zimbabwe since the days of the liberation struggle. It is inhuman for women’s bodies to continue to be the battlefield whenever violent conflict erupts. Women continue to experience rape and it is however the last form of abuse that is reported for several reasons; women are ostracised and stereotyped in communities if they dare speak out about rape, some women have been pushed out of marriages for saying they have been raped and at times communities want to point a finger at the abused woman blaming her for bringing rape on herself.

A broad based national dialogue can only contribute to sustainable peace if all cases of abuse, torture and extra judicial killings resulting in the unnecessary loss of life are fully investigated and those responsible account for their actions. The readiness of Zimbabweans for national dialogue should not be seen and heard in newspaper and electronic headlines only but there should be tangible evidence that Zimbabweans are ready to set differences aside and embrace a

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common national agenda for peace. The litmus test for a national dialogue is prioritisation of national peace and commitment displayed by actions and not just by word of mouth. The current discord in various statements points the glaring deficits in sincerity and political will to see through the national dialogue process. Some of the pointers include hate and toxic language that is propagated in the media and other circles.

Most people have been talking about how the passing on of legend Oliver Mtukudzi would provide a platform that would make Zimbabweans realise that ‘What unites us is stronger than what could ever divide us’ according to a statement by the President. People from all walks of life converged to give the legend a deserving send off. The leader of the main opposition party MDC Alliance, Advocate Nelson Chamisa is reported to have been denied entry into the National Sports Stadium on Saturday 26 January 2019 for a Tuku tribute concert. The explanation given was that he had been barred from getting into the sports arena with his motorcade and that the entrance he wanted to use was reserved for VVIPs. On the day of Mtukudzi’s burial (27 January 2019) in his rural home in Madziwa, Mashonaland Central Province, Chamisa was again refused entry to the homestead. 20 security personnel put up a barrier which was then broken by youths to allow him entry. These incidents show political intolerance that is still deeply entrenched in the Zimbabwean way of life which triggers violent conflict and continues to polarise citizens.

Setting the tone for national dialogue the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC) has released a statement announcing that it is in the process of “providing a platform for a national dialogue to allow Zimbabweans to share their views on how to address the situation in the country and foster sustainable peace and development.¹” According to the mandate of the NPRC Section 252 function (d) of the Constitution the NPRC is tasked with developing procedures and institutions at a national level to facilitate dialogue among political parties, communities, organisations and other groups in order to prevent conflicts and disputes arising in the future. The mandate of the NPRC in this section fully supports a broad based process that is not limited to political players but one that deliberately seeks to get views from the citizens, civil society organisations, the church and relevant groups to inform how to deal

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<http://www.nprc.org.zw/sites/default/files/NPRC%20Press%20Statement%2020180125%282%29.pdf>

with root causes of Zimbabwe's violent conflicts with a view to foster sustainable peace.

In order to ensure Zimbabwe moves forward and engages in meaningful dialogue, Zimbabwe Peace Project makes the following recommendations:

- All reported cases of human rights violations should be fully investigated and perpetrators face justice.
- The state through its justice delivery institutions should guarantee victim confidentiality and protection
- The Commander in Chief of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces must order all army personnel still on the streets to return to the barracks.
- The Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) should expeditiously implement the recommendations set out in the Motlanthe Commission of Inquiry report.
- The national dialogue process should be all inclusive and no Zimbabwean voice must be shut out.
- The Chapter 12 Commissions; NPRC, Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission, Zimbabwe Media Commission, and the Zimbabwe Gender Commission should play an integral role in the rolling out of the national dialogue processes

If you are concerned about acts of human rights violations in your community ZPP encourages you to get in touch on WhatsApp numbers: +263 774 883 406 and +263 774 883 417 and Toll free number

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