Economic Crisis and Political Apathy in Zimbabwe: The impotent society

ISPA-ECPR 2011, Sao Paulo, Brasil
Panel: Autocratic Stability: Trends and Causes

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Abstract
The Zimbabwean Regime of Zanu-PF has not only survived for decades but also amidst the deepest economic crisis. Whereas scholars expected a political uprising because of the ongoing marginalisation of people, apathy was the dominant feature of political life between 2003 and 2008. In studies of authoritarian regimes, political apathy has hardly played any role. Though many factors have to be considered in an analysis of the stability of the Zanu-PF regime, political apathy plays a key role to understand its long living nature. This paper argues that political apathy—a constant of Zimbabwean society—was nurtured substantially through the crisis. Factors as the high level of personal frustration due to the declining economy and the humiliation of the once proud Zimbabweans whose country served as a model for Africa had a negative impact on political activism. Survival mechanisms, as the chameleon-like adaptation to the ever-changing environment of hyper inflation did not only shift the focus from politics to economics but also contained the situation as it helped to restore the personal self-esteem of the humiliated. The same is true for the “exit option” which besides migration also encompasses people seeking an inner exile through taking refuge into humour as a way to trivialise the abnormal. The paper holds the thesis that political actors as the opposition party and civil society groups could not escape the overwhelming climate of apathy which affected negatively their capacity of taking action and strategic thinking.

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Introduction

“The paradox is that as the overall situation of the multi-faceted crisis worsens, the people directly affected become more and more impotent and demobilised” (Masunungure 2006a)

In the last decade, one big question has troubled analysts, civic activists, development practitioners and the international community: Why do Zimbabweans faced with such a severe crisis do not rise up against the Zanu-PF regime? Different explanations for the political passivity of the population have been given, among them fear of repression as the most dominant and convincing explanatory factor. A climate of fear, powerlessness and frustration could be felt tangibly and was hanging like a bell jar over the country. Whilst many civic activists and officials of the opposition party have complained about the difficulty to mobilise people only few have tried to get to the root of it. Some local academics detected political apathy as the main reason for political passivity.

The contribution which political apathy can make to the power preservation of authoritarian states was hardly examined in the newer literature on authoritarian states. Nevertheless, from some authoritarian states which have been governed over a long period (one generation) by one party or even the same president, like Syria, Zimbabwe and until recently Egypt a high degree of demobilisation of the population is registered. Juan Linz mentions in his famous definition of authoritarian regimes only states “… without extensive nor intensive political mobilisation.” Ottaway is one of the few who in the more recent literature points to the fears of the population of the unknown which need to be overcome, before voters support a regime change. According to Ottaway the voters cross this inhibition threshold only when they perceive the situation as desperate (ibid.).

This paper would like to test the possibilities of applying the concept of political apathy, which has been so far applied mostly to Western democracies, in the context of authoritarian states in the developing world. Therefore the following analysis is to be understood as a first approach to the topic with the prospect of upgrading it into a future research project. This step of transferring the concept to authoritarian states entails some difficulties as political apathy is known to be a “contested concept” (de Luca: 193), criticised for its vagueness and difficulties when being operationalised (Wasmund: 20). Political apathy is seen mostly in connection with political indifference and is used to describe political behaviour within political systems (e.g. participation in elections) as well as an attitude towards the political system (Wasmund: 20, Huth: 84). Huth points

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2 An exception is the study of Wedeen: Wedeen, Lisa: Ambiguities of Domination, Politics, Rhetoric and symbol in Contemporary Syria. Chicago London: The University of Chicago Pressing in 1999. In the apathy research it is distinguished between the <psychological> (Adorno), the <sociological> (Lipset), the <social-psychological> (F. Neumann) and the <democracy-theoretical> approach (Habermas) (Huth, Iris: Politische Verdrossenheit. Erscheinungsformen und Ursachen für das politische System und die politische Kultur der Bundesrepublik Deutschland im 21. Jahrhundert. (Politik und Partizipation, Bd. 3), LIT. Verlag 2004, 90).


to the variety of reasons which might produce political indifference within individuals: Whereas for some it stems from an attitude that considers politics generally as dirty, others might be content with the system but unwilling to engage with it. For the purpose of this study where the focus is on autocratic stability, the phenomenon of political apathy is looked at from a structural, rather than from a psychological point of view. The latter sees the individual as responsible for his political indifference and in a position to make a free choice (behaviouristic approach), whereas the structuralists attribute causal agency to “forces, structures, institutions, or elite manipulation over which one has little or no control” (de Luca: 11). It is thus evident that for the analysis of political apathy in authoritarian states the structural approach must be adopted. Even if the apathy concept is debatable in itself and is often overused, the definition of Wasmund is seen as helpful with regard to authoritarian states:

„Where the personal life situation is felt as natural, and fateful, the social consciousness remains statically oriented, no more political learning processes take place, resignation paralyzes any initiative, no feeling of political effectiveness can be developed“.

When looking at political apathy it has become common to refer to concepts of anomy, political efficacy and political alienation which have been developed and operationalised on the basis of Marx and Durkheim. When using these concepts one must be aware that in the past problems have arisen because of divergent definitions of the concepts and conflicting methodological approaches. For a first approach to the topic it is sufficient at present to use them as landmarks which help to account for political passivity in times of crisis.

The present study concentrates only on one particular period – the years from 2003 to 2008 - for which it is assumed that the economic crisis led to a strengthening of the already prevailing political apathy and thereby to a decline in the protest potential.

Not much is known about the roots of political apathy in Zimbabwe; yet, the lack of political participation after independence as well as decreasing political control since 2000 due to massive electoral manipulation probably acted as a trigger. Other factors, for example the (traditional) political culture which is commonly said to have favoured political passiveness cannot be incorporated in the analysis, not only because the concept is quite vague, but also because not

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6 Pateman, Carole: “Political Culture, Political Structure, Political Change”, in: British Journal of Political Science. 1971, 291-305, 295. “One impact which must be considered is the impact upon the individual of the political structure itself, a political structure as seen in terms of power and authority, that is, at least sometimes, exercised nonconsensually and that places an external constraint on the individual and influences his behaviour and attitudes, i.e. which helps “shape” his political culture. This does not ignore the fact that for some individuals the effects are worsened due to their own psychological conditioning. Scholz differentiated into a socio-political, a subjective-individual and a subjective-social area. See Scholz, I: Politische Apathie. Sozialwissenschaftliche Ansätze zur Definition des Apathiebegriffs. Frankfurt a.M.: Haagt + Herchen Verlag 1982, 10.


8 Parsons and especially Merton have coined the concept of anomy which has gone through various changes of meaning. According to Merton anomy is preceded by a disintegration of the cultural structure which occurs when the individual does not dispose of the means to reach out to the socially accepted goals and values (Merton in Fischer, 123-145. Fischer: 21f.) Srole differentiates between “anomy”, used with reference to an objective state of society, and anomia, when referring to the subjective state of the individual (Fischer: 27). Almond/Verba use the term political competence instead of political efficacy.

9 The investigation period encompasses the frustration after two lost elections (2000, 2002) up to signing the Memorandum of Understanding between Zanu-PF and MDC in September, 2008. This doesn’t mean that the crisis is over, but takes into account the first signs of a slowly stabilising financial, economic, health, and educational sector. Surveys carried out in 2009 and 2010 prove that the majority of the population is content with the first successes of the government in these areas (Afrobarometer in 2009 and 2010, Freedom House in 2009). Hence, the term crisis is used exclusively for the drastic economic decline of the last decade which Zimbabweans themselves referred to as "the crisis".

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enough research has been done on this aspect\textsuperscript{10}. Nevertheless, it goes without question that submission to authority and the tendency to avoid conflicts which are rooted in the traditional culture, have contributed to the political passiveness of the Zimbabwean during the last years\textsuperscript{11}. So far the analysis is based on articles and survey material (Afrobarometer 1999-2009 among others)\textsuperscript{12}, talks with civil society activists as well as with ordinary people and personal observations during a three year stay in the country\textsuperscript{13}. The most recent Afrobarometer from October 2010 and the Freedom House survey are referred to only now and then\textsuperscript{14}. Particular emphasis should be put on the study by Mpani who is the only person so far who has tried to answer the question of non-mobilisation on the basis of quantitative data (Afrobarometer 2005)\textsuperscript{15}. Nonetheless it must be stressed that the quantitative surveys give only a first glimpse into trend directions and that more detailed surveys with the focus on the broad field of political apathy as well as further analyses of the existing data are required. Furthermore a complementary qualitative approach would in my opinion help to understand the phenomenon of apathy and impotence which became more pronounced during the economic (and political) crisis. Therefore, no final appraisal can be given in the following.


\textsuperscript{11}A strong submission to authority and the faith in procedures of a state under the rule of law is attributed to Zimbabweans, which coincides with the results of the surveys (Mpani: 61f., 5; Dickow: 71). As regards submission to authority Masunungure explains: “...serves to prove the fundamental and underlying political character of the average Zimbabwean; his/her subject orientation to authority, any authority. (...) Moreover, this attitude is deeply embedded in the Zimbabwean psyche and it will take a painfully long time to unwind. And it is a product of more than a century of uninterrupted authoritarianism” (Masunungure 2006b).


\textsuperscript{13}The author stayed from July 2004 to July 2007 in Harare and worked as Country Representative of the Konrad-Adenauer Foundation which supports democratic forces in the country.


\textsuperscript{15}See Mpani, Glen: 'To Protest or Not To Protest? Zimbabweans' Willingness to Protest, Master of Social Science in Democratic Governance, October 2007, University of Cape Town, 104 pp., unpublished.
1. The concept of political apathy with regard to Zimbabwe

Though the focus of this study is on the effects of the economic and political crisis on Zimbabwean society, it is obvious that political apathy is nurtured through domestic structures of subordination which are typical of rural African societies. Within families the head of the family is the sole authority though before decision-making he might consult other family members. This strong position is mirrored on a village level in the powerful position of traditional leaders. At village or community level age is more important than education – so that young, well educated Zimbabweans are often thwarted when they try to make their voice heard. Early research on political apathy has emphasized the importance of political socialization with regard to the development of political efficacy. The more the individual is able to influence decision-making in non political spheres like the family, in school, or at work, the more ego-strength he develops thereby also gaining political competency and efficacy. Studies have shown that very hierarchically organized groups with no chance of individual promotion foster a feeling of resignation and impotence. Other studies have concentrated on oligarchic tendencies within party structures which also foster feelings of little political efficacy and thereby of political apathy. In the light of the widespread disempowerment encountered in authoritarian states, it is easy to jump to conclusions, therefore further research should concentrate not only on the disempowering but also on the empowering aspects of hierarchically organized societies.

Coming back to the admittedly tricky concept of political apathy and its application to authoritarian states, the case study of Zimbabwe will show that many of the attributes which are generally linked to political apathy can be found: Without question, Zimbabwean citizens whose political freedom was restrained more and more by the authoritarian state could not develop any sort of political efficacy in the political field, as every possibility to influence politics was taken away from them. If there is no chance of being able to exercise any political influence, motivation for political participation will decline significantly (Wasmund: 43). Here the frustration about the lost presidential and parliamentary elections in 2000, 2002, 2004 (senate elections) and 2005 needs to be borne in mind as well as the many failed demonstrations or stay-aways initiated by the opposition party or the trade unions.

According to Lane a person who has little sense of political efficacy is likely to live in a closed world filled with private problems, something which can be seen with regard to Zimbabwean society during the period of investigation.

There is also no doubt that Zimbabweans show attributes of political alienation stemming from the frustration of the individual about the discrepancy between ideology (e.g. equal distribution of economic wealth) and the reality of society. One consequence is a deep mistrust “of all top dogs (Fischer: 85). Besides repression and the mismanagement of the economy, high levels of corruption and the plundering of national resources could be named as factors triggering an even deeper feeling of alienation towards the political elite. As the government either did not react at all with regard to the ever rising inflation or engaged in illusionary recovery programs, people seemed to

16 With regard to the roots of political apathy see Wasmund: 43-53.
18 Political efficacy or competency refer to the feeling that individual political actions have an impact on the political process. See Campbell, A./Gurin, G./Miller, W.E.: The voter decides. Evanston 1954, 187, Pateman: 298, Wasmund: 34.
20 Already in 2005 more than 80% believed that the president and other government officials were involved in corruption, Afrobarometer 2005: 33. At that time, the extensive looting of diamonds in the Marange field by high army officers and Zanu-PF politicians had not yet taken place.
blank out the government more and more. A phenomenon worth for further research as it
assumingly went much beyond alienation.
There can also be no question that people living in a climate of economic meltdown and
hyperinflation are prone to develop attributes associated with the concept of anomia. With regard
to individuals anomia refers to the lack of relatedness to society. A reason for this can be one’s own
position within society (social status) and the lack of means to achieve social goals. Srole
developed a first instrument for measuring anomia which later became famous as the Srole-scale.
As some of the statements seem to fit the Zimbabwean context during the period of investigation
some quotes from the scale shall be presented here:
1. The individual’s sense of the unresponsiveness to his lot and to his needs shown by community
leadership: “Most public officials (people in public office) are not really interested in the problems
of the average man.”
2. The individual’s perception of the social order as essentially flickle, unpredictable and orderless,
giving rise to the feeling that he could do little to direct his life with any degree of time perspective
or planning ahead: “Nowadays a person has to live pretty much for today and let tomorrow take
care of itself”.
3. Loss of faith in the doctrine of progress as applied to the self: “In spite of what some people say,
the lot (situation, condition) of the average man is getting worse, not better”.
4. Deflation or loss of meaning of internalized group norms, values, and goals, resulting in extreme
form in the individual’s sense of the meaningless and futility of life itself: “It’s hardly fair to bring
children into the world with the way things look for the future”.
5. The individual’s sense that the framework of immediate personal relationships, the very rock of
his social existence, was no longer predictive or supportive: These days a person doesn’t really
know whom he can count on”.

Though the scale was criticised for its methodological weakness, it found many imitators who either
used it, developed similar scales or used the statements as hypothesis for their own research.
According to Wasmund, people with a high level of anomia are often pessimistic, anxious, cynical
about politics, not seeing any worth in social or political activism (Wasmund: 25). Many meanings
were attached to the concept, but there was general agreement that individuals with the
characteristics mentioned had a low SES background and were less prone to participate actively in
politics. The assumption that people showing traits of anomia would have more authoritarian
attitudes, be more ethnocentric or chauvinistic is disputed and certainly not true with regard to the
Zimbabwean population which has a very positive attitude towards democracy and an extremely
high level of tolerance towards ethnic and religious groups. With regard to the case study of
Zimbabwe the first three statements express quite well the common mood within the population as
reflected also in the opinion polls. Concerning the fourth statement, survey results show quite the
contrary: Zimbabweans’ high level of law abidingness has not declined throughout the period of the
crisis nor have democratic values. Nevertheless social disintegration on a community level and
broken families are common consequences of the hardships of the last years, therefore future

21 Initially the concept of anomaly referred only to societies showing “the effect of social disintegration and lack of
internal and external regulation” observed by Durkheim. See Lane, 166. Later the focus shifted to the individual, who
according to Srole moves within a continuum of eunomia and anomia, between “self-to-other-belongingness” and “self-
to-other-distance” or “self-to-other alienation” (Srole: 197).
22 For the following see Wasmund, 21-26; Fischer, 19-29; Merton, 123-143: Lane, 166-168.
23 Leo Srole: “Social Dysfunction, Personality, and Social Distance Attitudes”, paper read before American
Sociological Society National Meeting. Chicago 1951, quoted in Lane: 167f.; see also Srole: 198-199.
24 More than 80% agree to the following statement: “Democracy is favourable to any other form of government”
research should look into the loss of meaning of group norms and values as consequence of the crisis – even though it needs adaptation to an African context. With regard to the fifth statement, trust is still very high among family members and it is known from other societies going through difficult periods that phenomena of retreat and isolation as well as a feeling of shared destiny are characteristic in times of crisis, therefore no appraisal can be made without a more solid empirical basis. For the purpose of this paper the statements should be used as a first orientation framework with regard to the effects of the crisis on members of Zimbabwean society.

2. Background Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe has frequently provided negative headlines during the past years: The world-highest inflation – some forecasters even predicted 90 Sextillions\(^{25}\), halving of the gross national product, outbreak of cholera, sinking of life expectancy from 55 to 35 years within a decade, dependence of the former grain exporter on international food aid, a collapsing education system and health service - the list could be continued even further.

On account of the magnitude of this nearly one decade-long crisis, both internal and external observers expected a mass uprising or at least violent social riots. The absence of political mobilisation by Zimbabweans in face of a crisis which in its effects could not have been more disastrous was judged critically by foreign countries. From neighbouring South Africa with its anti-apartheid fight Zimbabweans had to face the reproach of being "cowards."\(^{26}\)

Many different attempts to explain this can be found – whilst some put emphasis on the collective trauma caused by the cruel past of the colonial regime, civil war and bloody Zanu-PF rule, others stress the distinctive law abidingness of Zimbabweans or the steadfast hope for a better future\(^{27}\). So far only a few isolated studies from Zimbabwe and South Africa exist that go deeper into the subject\(^{28}\).

In spite of massive crisis the spark which kindles the fire has not flared up. Instead, a „Government of National Unity“ of the long-standing government party Zanu-PF (Zimbabwe National Union – Patriotic Front) led by Robert Mugabe and the opposition party MDC (Movement for Democratic Change) under Morgan Tsvangirai was formed in February 2009 after years of social agony\(^{29}\).

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\(^{26}\) Some Zimbabwean activists replied to this reproach that the anti-apartheid fight also took several decades to be successful. With regard to the underestimation of the duration of struggles for democracy see Brownlee: "One problem with world media is that they are only, you know, recording the final act - half a million people in the streets (...) and boom, they lost it, it's finished. That was not the way. The non-violent struggle in Serbia lasted for 10 years, and we had so many successes and failures in this struggle." (Serbian activist quoted in Brownlee, Jason: Authoritarianism in an age of democratisation. Cambridge England, New York: Cambridge University Pressing in 2007: 18.


\(^{29}\) This by no means underestimates the courage of many Zimbabweans who voted in 2008 for the opposition party, although they could count on repressive measures by the Zanu-PF. Bratton, Michael/ Masunungure, Eldred: “Zimbabwe’s long agony”, in: Journal of democracy, Vol. 19, No. 4, 2008, 41-55.
However, the prevailing power constellation has hardly changed. The Zanu-PF controls the whole security sector and thereby keeps the upper hand. The power dominance of the party is also reflected in the behaviour of President Mugabe who arbitrarily ignores central points of the coalition agreement. Hence, in spite of some success the inclusive government is marked more by continuity than by change. Once more the question arises: whether and how the population, which was punished brutally for its vote in favour of the opposition party in 2008, (repression wave on the occasion of the second ballot for the presidential elections) will express its discontent over an elite that is still in power, in such a way as to produce real change.

Several factors have allowed Zanu-PF to remain in power since independence in 1980: Political repression, militarization of politics, control of the media, etc. Many of the ruling mechanisms of the Mugabe regime are also known from other authoritarian systems. What makes the case of Zimbabwe so particular is the survival of the regime in spite of the massive economic and political crisis (2000-2008). Different factors facilitated the stay in power, above all the enrichment of the political elite by privileged access to foreign currency in times of hyperinflation; also the looting of own resources (land, gold, diamonds) which kept the patronage systems going. Nevertheless, one important factor which is neglected in many analyses is the phenomenon of widespread political apathy which, so the hypothesis of this article, contributed decisively to the power preservation of Zanu-PF.

The following factors are held responsible for this: Successive impoverishment of the population; the spread of a feeling of impotence, frustration and humiliation due to the economic crisis; coping mechanisms which direct the focus away from the political to everyday survival. A population constantly preoccupied with adapting to the ever changing economic environment of hyperinflation and getting more and more frustrated in the process is easy to control by a government itself facing internal and external challenges. Therefore, the obvious supposition is that the government has used the crisis with its effects on the population as an instrument for the consolidation of its own power. Hence, in the following the term ‘economic repression’ is used, because it is assumed that the political elite which does not lack qualifications and expertise in other areas had no real interest in a reversal of the economic situation. Without question, the skilful use of political repression has contributed substantially to preservation of power, the consequences of which are only too palpable: Investigations into the plight of persons affected by the „operation clean-out“ which in 2005 made more than 700,000 people homeless show that many of them became victims of the use of force during the last decades, with the result that 70% of the interviewees were diagnosed with clinically significant disturbances. In comparison with the region of Southern Africa Zimbabwe shows exceptionally high degrees of traumatisation. Nevertheless no comprehensive studies about the

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30 For other factors, e.g. the weakness of the democratic forces, or strategies of the government party see Schlee, Beatrice: “Zimbabwe: The survival artists – a lesson in the matter of power preservation”, in: Molt, Peter / Dickow, Helga (Ed.): Cultures and conflicts in comparison: comparing cultures and conflicts. Commemorative volume for Theodor Hanf, Baden-Baden; Nomos in 2007, 562-576.

31 Access to resources was vital for the unity of the government party and above all for elite cohesion. See also Brownlee, 13f, 32f.

32 Factionalism within Zanu-PF over the succession struggle, international criticism coming mainly from Western countries but later also from African regional bodies like SADC (Southern African Development Community).

33 The good education of the Zanu-PF elite, not least of Mugabe himself is well known. It contributes to the better positioning of the Zanu-PF within the inclusive government.

effects of repression on the social and political behaviour of the population have been carried out so far.

3. Consequences of the economic meltdown
As the crisis continues the situation is getting more and more out of control by 2006. The inflation hits more and more shocking magnitude, prices double or treble, salaries must be adapted in an ever shorter rhythm, school fees can rise from one month to the other by 1000%, when it comes to payment one juggles with zeros. With rising inflation everything that seemed so secure finds itself in a process of disintegration: the fact that one has a job; that one can send children to school; that one can pay the public transport fees; that one can pay for medication and last but not least offer the dead a respectful, proper burial. For all this there is now no guarantee. In a state in which the service area collapses more and more, the individual has to concentrate on the most immediate necessities. „I am surviving“, has become the usual answer in greetings. Unreserved adaptation is required day by day since one moves in a volatile sphere. Sometimes there is no public transport, at other times no petrol, then there is petrol, but the power is out, then the power is back on, but there is no water, then both water and power are out but you can get petrol. You need skills in order to survive, juggling the available possibilities, adjusting to shortages, initially with grumbles and then with indifference. The pace of change with which one has to cope is more than rapid, to survive you have to keep your end up; who still knows what the black market rate of the US dollar was one or two months ago?

3.1. Humiliation
The fact that Zimbabwe shows far higher levels of discontent and social envy than other countries with lower economic development and a higher poverty rate (e.g. Chad), can also be ascribed to the rapid decline of the former model country of Zimbabwe. No other country in the world has managed to decimate its GNP within such a short period of time without experiencing a war situation. Zimbabwe’s decline came abruptly, although there were obvious signs by the end of the 90s. Since the economic collapse, many people in the lower and upper strata have still not found their voice again. Whereas they were once proud to be Zimbabweans and looked down on soft-currency neighbours such as Zambia, now they are pariahs, unpopular in South Africa and Botswana, where they are entering the job market in droves, since when crime is reported to have risen dramatically. In the present study the hypothesis is put forward that the economic disaster of Zimbabwe, the former bread basket of Southern Africa, felt by the ordinary man in the loss of his former modest economic security, nurtured a feeling of humiliation. All of a sudden it was difficult to send one’s children to school, to procure regular food and medication. Humiliation can show itself in different forms: in multiethnic states with one dominant group minorities are often robbed of their identity and thereby humiliated, or like in former Zaire under Mobutu where the ruler issued not only strict clothes regulations but intervened even in the naming of his ”subjects“ (Christian surnames were forbidden). Humiliation and its effects as a ruling instrument in authoritarian states have hardly been examined so far.35


35 An exception is Wedeen’s study on Syria, where the stereotyped and monotonous imperious cult around Hafiz al-Asad mortified those who had exposed the emptiness of the phraseology (Wedeen 1999). De Luca also talks about political mortification as a subtype of political apathy but only with regard to America in the late 20th century and with a different meaning, highlighting the pressure individuals face under life in a modern competitive society (de Luca: 200f.)
3.2. Normalising the abnormal as survival strategy

The economic crisis costs not only energy, but time. Most people have learnt quickly and have submitted to the new "economic laws" just as they did to the repressive political laws. People who waste their time complaining about water shortages are squandering energy needed to get hold of sugar or of cheaper maize meal for the family. Hence everybody in Zimbabwe has turned into a chameleon with the one and only aim of adaptation. The population survives on "cross border trading" and remittances from relatives who have emigrated. Society is already in the process of "businessing": There is hardly anybody who does not import cheap goods from South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique or Zambia either directly, or through contacts, to sell at profit in Zimbabwe. This "businessing" also ties down people who are “too busy” to even think of the political struggle.

Masunungure describes the situation in which Zimbabweans find themselves in 2006 as follows:

"Briefly stated, the notion of “normalising the abnormal” starts from the premise that there are some things or situations that are manifestly abnormal. For instance, that it is abnormal to queue for food items as a result of shortages of say, sugar, cooking oil, maize meal, bread or for other commodities like fuel, water and for other services like health care. And yet people have over time been led to believe that it is in fact normal to queue for such basic survival commodities and services. Because we accept aberrations as normal, we see no need to correct them because we may even see them as intrinsically good. Moreover, when and where people accept the abnormal as normal, they have developed creative coping mechanisms rather than seeking to deal with the source of the abnormality" (Masunungure 2006b).

From other authoritarian as well as totalitarian states it is known that one strategy of control is the continuous occupation of citizens with the aim of preventing them from independent political thinking ("to keep them busy")

If one transfers this strategy to the Zimbabwean context, the economic crisis leads exactly to the same consequences, be it unintentional or as a welcome side effect. The majority of the population simply has no time for anything other than trying to survive in a more and more chaotic situation and seeking to provide for everyday survival ("bread and butter issues"). Without question, the regime profited from this situation, less clear is to what extent the situation was deliberately upheld. As the government did not engage in serious crisis management, the term economic repression seems justified.

Nevertheless, the coping mechanisms of constant adaptation fulfil another, psychological function. They offer the individual the possibility of blocking out the absurd and abnormal of the situation, while at the same time providing an opportunity to regain lost personal self-esteem. The fact that the individual, in spite of most severe circumstances, "masters" his life, enables him to become again a subject and an activist on the micro level in a world which makes him impotent at the macro level. The less the individual is able to act politically, the more he will derive his self-esteem from becoming a master of his own destiny.
According to Almond/Verba personal effectiveness and political efficacy correlate, it is important that the individual retains a “sense of control or mastery over the social environment”. As has been shown, the overall feeling during hyperinflation was that of losing control – be it in the political field or in one’s professional or personal life. Interestingly de Luca points to the effect that once freedom and dignity are limited in one area of life, the individual seeks to compensate for this in another area (in Western societies in consumption). There is the possibility that Zimbabweans did seek to protect their self-image and regain their self-respect through their skillful adaptation to the environment (de Luca: 182). Another compensation strategy was for sure the retreat into family life. These extreme challenges have left their traces: Nearly half the population complains about physical health problems which hinder them in doing their work and more than half feel worn out (Afrobarometer 2010: 64). It is widely agreed that the feeling of being overburdened does not contribute to political participation (Wasmund: 46).

4. The feeling of impotence

“What can I do...?” is the remark most commonly heard in Zimbabwe in this time of crisis. Declining self-confidence, hopelessness and fatalism are spreading. The mood of the country is dominated by the economic crisis. Many can think of nothing beyond their own survival and that of their family. In such circumstances it is inevitable that people – including activists – withdraw into their private lives.

In the following a first attempt is made to paint a general picture of the mood prevailing among the majority of the people so as to give a first impression of the effect of the crisis. The Afrobarometer asks how people perceive the economic situation of the country – and the answer is very clear – already in 2005 when the crisis had by no means reached its peak, more than 80% perceive the economic situation as very bad (Afrobarometer 2005: 7). With regard to their own living conditions seven out of ten respondents assess their situation as very bad. In the Byblos-survey eight out of ten respondents state that their living conditions have got worse during the last ten years, and deteriorated even further in the last year (Dickow: 75). Also, the less educated, elderly people, people from the informal sector and unskilled manual workers are here overrepresented (ibid.). The results of the CISH survey are complemented by the Afrobarometer which asked for their expectations for the next year: Here more than 80% state that they fear further deterioration of the economy in general as well as in their own life (Afrobarometer 2005: 5f.). Just how frustrated people feel can also be seen in the high number of those who think that their own (social) group is economically worse situated than others. A statement to which 85% of the interviewees can agree (Dickow: 82). Not only farmers and people with low professional education but also teachers and professional workers are overrepresented. This is not very astonishing as the economic crisis has hit all income groups. Nor is it surprising that nearly three quarters of the respondents know social envy. In this group people with low SES (socioeconomic status) are overrepresented, as are the unemployed and street vendors (ibid.). Just how prevalent this feeling of impotence is with regard to professional life is highlighted by the following statement: „No matter how much I try, I will not get the education and jobs I am entitled to (68%, Dickow: 72). This resignation is also reflected in the results of the Afrobarometer – though nearly half of the respondents do not have a job which pays them a cash income they are also not looking for a job.

39 "When I see what the rich have, I feel that I should have the same" (Dickow: 73).

40 Though this might be a realistic assessment as the unemployment rate is very high, others have not yet given up hope. That it is not totally unrealistic to look for a job is shown by 43% of the respondents who are looking for a job (some of them are not employed, part-time employed or full time employed, Afrobarometer 2005: 63). Further information about the respondents (level of education, urban or rural location) would be required to get a clearer picture about the circumstances which might have influenced the answer.
Only 9% have a full-time job and are not looking for another job (Afrobarometer 2005: 63). This declining self-confidence is also reflected in the extremely high percentage of those who, when asked about class, see themselves in the lowest strata of society. Just under two thirds of the interviewees position themselves in the lowest stratum, above all the unemployed, low earners, the older generation and less educated people (Dickow: 77). Even though it is known that a large number of the middle class has left the country to seek for a better future in neighbouring countries or in Western states, the numbers of those who see themselves in the middle class are alarmingly low (a mere 15%) and will have decreased further by 2008. A further indication of the high frustration felt by society is shown by the next reply: eight out of ten respondents fear that their children will have a lower standard of living (Dickow: 72). Though this high figure is scarcely surprising, it gives a glimpse of the profoundness of the desperation, as children are crucial not only for the reproduction of the next generation but also for one’s own survival as they are commonly expected to provide for their parents’ welfare once they are adults.

Finally, the high level of impotence reveals itself when the question is asked if people feel themselves competent to change anything about their situation. Three quarters of the interviewees agreed to the following statement: "There is little a person like me can do to improve people's lives" (Dickow: 67). As seen in early studies on political apathy in Western democracies during the 50s and 60s, this feeling of powerlessness is prevalent among people of low SES – in the case of Zimbabwe the rural population, people with little schooling, unemployed people, people with low family income and adherents of African Independent Churches. The enormous boost which the latter receive is a typical crisis symptom.

Altogether the survey results give unequivocal evidence of the fact that discontent, disillusionment and frustration prevail in Zimbabwean society. Huth points out in her analysis with regard to the consequences of political apathy that loss of control, lack of transparency and helplessness can be an obstacle for motivation and engaging in action (Huth: 93). This statement is confirmed by the low level of mobilisation among Zimbabweans.

### 4.1. Effects on political participation

Survey data show that the population was not only dissatisfied with the economic development of the country but also clearly expressed their disapproval of the performance of the president. Chart 1: Economic situation and satisfaction with the performance of the president

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41 One fifth of the interviewees sees itself in the lower middle class and 3% in the upper middle class / upper class (Dickow: 77). The author explains that normally the majority of respondents rate themselves as middle class.

42 In 2005 some 20% indicate that they belong to African Independent Churches or the Pentecostals. It is generally known that the significance of free churches increases greatly in times of crisis (this also applies to crisis-shaken Congo, see Schlee 2004). As the crisis progressed, this could be quite clearly seen on the streets of Harare. Particularly in the outskirts where one frequently saw gatherings of adherents of the new founded churches.


Another indication of the success of the propaganda of the regime is that in 2005 only 50% see Zanu-PF as responsible for the decline, 24% blame Western sanctions (Afrobarometer 2005: 6).
Questions: In general, how would you describe the present economic conditions of this country? A) Very bad b) Bad c) Neither Good nor Bad d) Good e) Very Good f) Don’t know

Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following official has performed his job over the past twelve months or haven’t you heard enough about him to say; The President? A) Strongly disapprove b) disapprove c) approve d) Strongly approve e) Don’t know, haven’t heard enough

Source: Mpani: 5

Furthermore, three quarters of the respondents did not believe that the government would solve their most important problems (food shortage/famine, management of the economy, unemployment) within the next years (Afrobarometer 2005: 39, 42). Some researchers believe that deprived people incline more to political protest than the privileged because of their desperate situation\(^44\). Looking at the level of absolute deprivation already in 2005 – much higher levels can be assumed for 2008 – a mass uprising would have been very probable\(^45\).

Chart: Absolute deprivation

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Question: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: enough food to eat, gone without transport, gone without school expenses, gone without fuel to cook food, gone without clean water, gone without cash income, gone without medicine and gone without shelter a) Never b) Precisely Once or Twice c) Several Times d) Many Times e) Always f) Don't know

Source: Mpani: 26
But far from rebelling, quite the contrary was the case - an evaluation of the data of the Afrobarometer clearly shows the steady decline in the number of those who took part in political protests.

Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you have personally done any of these during the past year: a) Got together with others b) Attended a demonstration or a protest.

Mpani and Leysens could disprove the assumed linkage between a high level of deprivation and an increase in the level of protest potential and show instead that absolute deprivation reduces the level of the same. In 2009 60% of the urban and rural population state that they have never taken part in a demonstration (Afrobarometer 2009: 12) and about half of the respondents have never lodged a complaint against the mismanagement at local level (Afrobarometer 2009: 41). In studies on political apathy the significance of voter turnout and its validity as an indicator have been discussed – for Zimbabwe a tendency for a shrinking participation can be seen the more voters perceived their own political efficacy as limited – nevertheless, due to the coercive political environment, voter turnout can not be considered as a useful indicator. These findings strengthen investigations done in Western countries in the 1950s and 60s showing a higher predisposition of people with a low SES background to be less politically active or even apathetic.

In the opinion of 65% of the respondents the ability of ordinary people to influence the national government has shrunk greatly in the last years (Afrobarometer 2005: 29).

Looking at Zimbabwe in 2009 almost 80% believe that there is nothing or little they can do when there are problems with the way local government is run (Afrobarometer 2009: 4).

Mpani, 55. The Afrobarometer was carried out in April/May 2004 and in October 2005. The author examines the relevance of economic, political and cultural factors as well as the meaning of cognitive consciousness and the dilemma of collective action for the protest behaviour of Zimbabweans. For his results see p. 76ff.; Leysens already ascertains on the basis of the Afrobarometer of 1999 legitimacy problems of the government. A point which needs to be considered in more detail with regard to the then level of political apathy and its later development (Leysens, A. J.: Marginalisation in Southern Africa: Transformation from below? Afrobarometer paper No 37, Cape Town South Africa. Institutes for Democracy in South Africa in 2004, www.afrobarometer.org/papers/AfropaperNo11.pdf., accessed 12/13/2009, 31 pp., 24).

A major topic in the analysis of political apathy is the level of trust. Here the already very low figure of 36% of respondents who trust their fellow Zimbabweans (Dickow: 63) has further declined to about a fifth (Afrobarometer 2009: 50). This tendency mirrors the little trust the President receives: 68% don’t trust him at all or just a little. Trust in the family is much higher – in 2009 two thirds trust their family a lot, and a fifth of the respondents somewhat. These tendencies seem to confirm the findings of other investigations – that the level of personal trust is decreasing with the increase of feelings of impotence and pessimism, which is also reflected in the low level of trust put in politicians. The retreat into private life can also be seen in the high figures of trust put in family members (66% trust them a lot, 22% somewhat (Afrobarometer 2009: 49). Nevertheless, the last figure is interesting as with the deteriorating situation, the trust in family members seems also to have decreased when compared to figures from 2005 (Dickow 2005: 63), which can be attributed to an increase of social disintegration and the struggle for limited goods.

4.2. Humor as an expression of political cynicism

Another strategy to deal with the crisis is the exit option. An essential characteristic of Zimbabwean traditional culture is conflict avoidance. In former times people who had differences of opinion with the traditional head of the community left their home and joined another community or even founded a new one. Nowadays those who have the possibility leave their country for a new start in one of the neighbouring countries or in Great Britain – three to four of the estimated eleven million Zimbabweans are considered to have left the country. For Huth the avoidance strategy is a normal reaction of alienation which in turn is linked closely with political apathy:

“(...) fear and powerlessness make appropriate behaviour difficult, they prevent openness and curiosity, and can on the one hand increase the tendency towards emotional reactions and even political aggressiveness, but equally they can lead to escapism and a blocking out of reality (Huth: 93).

However, there are also other exit possibilities – for example, the escape into promises of salvation offered by the African Independent Churches. The percentage of those who belong to these new churches and to Pentecostal churches equals that of Catholics and Protestants (20%, Dickow: 55). The adherents of African Independent Churches are overrepresented in rural areas (26%) and among people with no or little formal education (30%, Dickow: 57). Together with the Pentecostals they are also overrepresented when it comes to praying and the practice of religious rituals which is generally quite high (74%, 67%) Almost 90% state that religion is very important for their lives (Afrobarometer 2007: 53). Though further research is needed especially into the phenomenon of independent churches which have spread significantly throughout the country in the years of the crisis, the general trend is quite clear, religion matters – independent of education, but even more in the rural and most impoverished areas of the country.

Another exit option is escape into humour, political cynicism and sarcasm. This option is reflected in numerous jokes and caricatures about the crisis and the absurd features it can assume. Research

48 Interestingly, in 1999 75% of the respondents did not at all trust (or just a little) the president, thus 7% more than six years later, what can probably be attributed to the greater freedom of speech at that time. Nevertheless, more research is needed to clarify the reasons for the decrease of the figure six years later (Afrobarometer 2005: 30).

49 There are no reliable figures; the correctness of the last census of 2002 can also be doubted. The majority of emigrants is in South Africa where around two million Zimbabweans work in the formal and informal sector. According to UNDP, 80% of the migrants remained in Africa, 66% of them chose to go to South Africa. Less than 500.000 are estimated to live in Western countries. UNDP: Working paper 11. The Potential Contribution of the Zimbabwe Diaspora to Economic Recovery. 2010, 64pp, http://www.zimbabwesituation.com/WP11.pdf, acess 3.2.2011, 9.

50 90% of the adherents of African Independent Churches pray regularly or often and 86% practise religious rituals (attend services, fast, Dickow: 81). The percentages of adherence to religious groups vary in the different Afrobarometer studies and need further research.
from other countries shows that political cynicism develops, when people have experienced several disasters in their lives (Wasmund: 41.). This is why cynicism is found more in elderly people than in the younger generation. When confronted with the discrepancy between official rhetoric and social reality younger people are more likely to resort to political cynicism as investigations among minorities or deprived people in the US have shown Wasmund: 42).

The psychologist Makanza analyses this phenomenon as follows:

"There is something special about one who has the ability to laugh at one's situation in spite of its gravity. That person has transcended the boundaries of what others call normal and refuses provocation. Zimbabweans have that 'collective of character' that the world has termed the 'great Zimbabwean mystery'. (…) The humour used by most Zimbabweans is a way of playing with words and language to interpret the current events. In a way, the humour has developed into a second language for Zimbabweans, allowing them to talk about the painful situation without actually talking about it. Often, the humour trivialises the issue and distances it from the person. In most cases, the humour is intellectual, creatively playing with words and abstracts from the current reality. Trivialised, reality therefore loses its power to demoralise and dehumanise its victim"51.

The caricatures in the newspapers become a topic of conversation at work and when meeting friends. Anyone can recognize himself in the drawings and gags. As others have no problem in getting the message, the individual is assured that his own fate is by no means special but shared by many others. This makes it easier to bear. Another possibility is to "de-dramatising the drama". In reply to the question, how things stand in Zimbabwe, the outsider receives the answer: "Zvakaoma", which means „it is tough’. Makanza stresses that this is an abnormal response: not to be outraged in the face of extreme provocation on a daily basis (ibid.: 1).

The behaviour of Zimbabweans reminds one of war situations in which the individual has to activate avoidance strategies in order to survive. According to Masunungure, the „normalisation of the abnormal” reinforces the risk-averseness of Zimbabweans (Masunungure 2006b).

Nevertheless, in contrast to the experience of some other countries the relative closeness of the Zimbabwean system makes it impossible for the majority of the people to break out of it, by active resistance, say for example, a liberation movement. To what extent the population has felt supported by the activities of opposition and civil society, is arguable. Mpani is of the opinion that above all the rural population has felt abandoned by the democratic forces (Mpani: 82-84).

Conclusion
The aim of the analysis was twofold: On the one hand to explain the political passivity of Zimbabwean society in times of most severe economic decline (2000-2008) using the concept of political apathy and on the other to test if the concept of political apathy can be made fruitful for analysing the stability of authoritarian states.

With regard to Zimbabwe, the concept has provided a useful framework as it helped to classify some of the phenomena of the society under the categories of political efficacy, political alienation and anomia. It became clearer that the behaviour of Zimbabweans who were often blamed for their passivity was guided by a cost-benefit analysis, namely participation in protests was assessed as not being worthwhile as in their perception it would not have made an impact on the political system which was strictly controlled by the Zanu-PF elite. In this regard, “apathy is a realistic response”, as Pateman emphasises (Pateman: 298). The concept of political alienation and anomia provided useful tools to explain the effects of authoritarian policy-making on the individual, especially as seen in the case study of Zimbabwe, in times of severe crisis leading to a further isolation of the

51 Makanza: 3. Masunungure views the phenomenon with concern and warns against the effects for future generations (Masunungure 2006b).
individual. Simultaneously it also became clear that the framework needs to be adapted to the specific context of the country of research and that more clarity about definitions and possible methodologies for empirical research are needed.

It was highlighted that the lack of political mobilisation can be ascribed to the severe impoverishment of the population during the crisis years, because contrary to generally held assumptions, absolute deprivation leads not to a higher, but to a lower level of protest. An explanation for this can be found in the higher level of political apathy among people with a low socioeconomic status. In the case of Zimbabwe, nearly the whole population suffered a severe deterioration of living conditions. This is reflected in the data which show clear signs of frustration and impotence on a personal and political level. It was shown that the need to constantly adapt to an ever changing environment of hyperinflation necessitated concentration on everyday survival, which in turn leaves hardly any capacity for political activities. The question was raised if the political elite consciously maintained the situation which was, after all, in their favour since it prevented the population almost by necessity from political engagement. When the political elite recognised the profit which can be scooped from the crisis for their own enrichment as well as for the stabilisation of the regime since control over the population became easier, they made no attempt to put an end to it. Therefore, the question is not why Mugabe could remain in power when the country was going through such a severe economic crisis. Instead the thesis is upheld that the regime survived not least because of the economic crisis and its negative impact on political mobilisation.

The analysis has made it possible to draw a more realistic picture of the opportunities opposition parties and civil society activists have to mobilise citizens in an authoritarian regime marked by high levels of apathy. Priority should be given to research on the possible impact of a climate of political apathy and its effects on the politics, strategies and efficacy of democratic forces like the opposition parties and NGOs promoting democracy. Though activists are showing lower levels of apathy (which can possibly be attributed to their political socialisation), they cannot escape a climate in which stagnation and immobility prevail. Just as people in the rural areas complain about being left alone by the democratic forces, the same goes for the political activists who also feel left alone by their supporters. As structures impact on people’s behaviour, a deeper look into this empirically difficult field could be worthwhile and provide some answers for the notorious weakness of opposition parties and civil society groups in many authoritarian states.

One feature of political apathy is fatalism and unjustified hope and Zimbabweans are prone to it:

In October 2010 70% of the population wished for elections to be held this year in the hope of finally changing the prevailing power constellation clearly favouring the “old elite” - despite massive manipulation and repression in the last elections (Afrobarometer in 2010: 52).

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52 Concerning the land occupation politics which became the main trigger of the economic crisis it is assumed that the catastrophic economic results of the expulsion of white farmers for other branches of industry (supplies, banks, insurances, etc.) was not clear to the political elite in this magnitude. Interview with the economic consultant John Robertson on 6.4.2009.

53 Political elites had privileged accessed to scarce goods like petrol, sugar, foreign currency and used the discrepancy between the official exchange rate and the pressure dictated by the black market for their personal profit. The unlawful looting of diamonds in which numerous Zanu-PF elites are involved proved even more lucrative. At least one billion USD must have been sold illegally since 2006 (Chingoma, Moses; Munemo, Owen; Hove, Mufaro:US 1$ of billion Marange diamonds looted, Zimonline, 10 December 2010 12/10/2010).

54 According to Habermas people with high levels of anomia develop phantasies and dreams about how the world should be for them as a strategy for avoiding conflicts. Sperling, Eckhard; Jahnke, Jürgen: Zwischen Apathie und Protest. Bd. 1. Studentenprobleme und Behandlungskonzepte einer ärztlich-psychologischen Beratungsstelle. Bern: Hans Huber 1974, 44.
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