

## Civil 'disobedience' and images of war: The military and police in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe

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### ABSTRACT

Following the detection of the first Covid-19 cases in early 2020, the Zimbabwe government, like other countries, implemented response strategies to manage the unfolding pandemic. This was mostly through lockdowns, closure of borders, and promulgation of health protocols. An important component of this response framework was the outright deployment of the police force, and armed military personnel to enforce strict civil compliance with the lockdowns, curfews, business operations and health guidelines. This resulted in the heavy presence of the police, and soldiers, in public spaces to deal with civil 'disobedience'. This engagement further culminated in reports of alleged human rights violations and shrinking the democratic space while also portraying 'images of war'. Citizens responded to the 'war' through a web of strategies that included outright defiant actions like demonstrations, unauthorised movements and unsanctioned business operations. Reports of bribery, extortion, and other corrupt acts, permeated the interface between the law enforcement agencies and the general public. What was termed 'disobedience' by law enforcement agencies in the face of the pandemic were actually survival strategies by the people in the 'new normal' period which threatened their sources of livelihood, and freedom. Even in the face of severe restrictions, citizens 'somehow' found their way into the cities, vending positions or getting to their intended travelling destinations, and playing a 'cat and mouse game' with the police and soldiers.

### KEYWORDS

lockdown, pandemic, war images, civil disobedience, survival strategies

### 1. Introduction

The outbreak of coronavirus in 2019 in China greatly affected communities globally, with Zimbabwe not being spared. This resulted in the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring the outbreak, a public health emergency of international concern and a global pandemic which required governments to take measures against its existential threat in early 2020 (Moyo & Phulu, 2021). The adoption of a myriad of responses by governments to the unfolding pandemic should, partly, be understood against this background. National responses demonstrated variations, with some drastic or draconian measures being implemented (*The Herald*, 18 March 2020).



The Zimbabwean government, like other governments, responded to the pandemic by taking on board the WHO guidelines to curtail the spread of the virus. These included the introduction of lockdowns, closure of borders, health measures such as wearing of face masks, sanitisation and maintenance of social distance. This was buttressed by strict enforcement, and dealing with perceived civil 'disobedience'. It is the focus of this paper to express that the otherwise genuine deployment of the police, and the soldiers, into the public spaces created 'images of war' during the pandemic mostly in the form of running battles between law enforcement agencies and the civilians. The battles left many questioning the level of force with which the police, and soldiers, dealt with scenarios surrounding the enforcement of Covid-19 pandemic protocols.

The discussion illustrates that civil 'disobedience' and the involvement of the law enforcement agents resulted in the arrest or imprisonment of many people, with others sustaining bruises or serious injuries. The loud calls to stay at home, while justified, could not easily be followed by people in a country where the majority are in the informal sector, which implies the need to be out on a daily basis to work for the sustenance of their families. The necessity to earn a living even during such a health set-back resulted in people across the economic spectrum devising survival strategies which, in most cases, led to illicit transactions or confrontations with the police unfolding.

The pandemic set in a lot of contestations, including opposition political voices raising issues around human rights, and corruption, against the Zimbabwean government, which has used lockdowns to stifle some constitutional rights. Some attempted to use the pandemic to raise such national voices through demonstrations.

The 31<sup>st</sup> July 2020 goes into memory lane with heavy presence of the police, and military personnel, manning strategic access points into major towns and cities such as Harare, Bulawayo and Gweru. The timing of the planned demonstrations, however, ended up with organisers, and participants, being labelled violators of the Covid-19 health protocols, culminating in ugly scenes of arrests, alleged abductions and beatings. The reaction of the international community was a response to what they viewed as human rights abuses in the face of a health pandemic.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

This paper is premised on the predation theory, with a focus on the predatory state, in its quest to explain the images of war that developed in Zimbabwe during the Covid-19 pandemic. The theory implies the capacity of predators to prey on their targets (Shumba, 2018). In the context of the current study, the state becomes the predator that preys upon its citizens (Evans, 1995). The predatory state, therefore aims at promoting the interests of dominant groups within the state, which include politicians, the army and bureaucrats or influential private groups as a way of surrounding themselves with protection against the citizens (Vahabi, 2020). Under worst circumstances, and when need arises, the predatory state uses its apparatus such as the party, the security forces and state-business relations to dominate civilians and to silence them, mostly through coercion. The end result of this "game" is that state-society relations are characterized by violence (Shumba, 2018) as the host feeds on its prey. This theory also brings to the fore how such a state ends up undermining human rights while at the same time narrowing the democratic space. The predation theory is used in this context to illuminate on the relations of the state

and the civilians during the Covid-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe.

Pursuant to the enforcement of Covid-19 guidelines and compliance by citizens, the Zimbabwean government unleashed security forces into public spaces. It also silenced critical opposition voices and dissents in the process, with images of war appearing across the country.

The philosophy of civil disobedience is anchored on refusal to obey certain commands or demands of a government or occupying power with the aim of securing concessions from that government. In some contexts, it is a public symbolic violation of the law rather than a rejection of the system as a whole ([britanica.com/topic/civil-disobedience](http://britanica.com/topic/civil-disobedience)). It is a form of resistance characterized by actions of the citizens such as refusing to obey laws or regulations deemed unjust but without violence. According to Rawls (1971), the peaceful actions are undertaken to bring about change in those laws or policies. The concept can help shed light on the manner of reaction of the public to Zimbabwean's policy and legal pronouncements on the pandemic.

### 3. Covid-19 in Zimbabwe

The dawning of the Covid-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe occurred at a time when the country was ill-prepared for such a challenge. This was due to a deteriorating health infrastructure and facilities, compounded by a serious brain drain of health and other professionals in the country (Dandara, et al., 2020). The high unemployment rate, poor infrastructure, compromised water and sanitation facilities, shortage of personal protective equipment (PPEs) and a struggling economy, all posed a challenge to the level of efficiency with which the government approached the pandemic (Chitsamatanga & Malianga, 2021). Such a scenario greatly affected even the relations between the state and its civilians when it came to the implementation of major alternatives meant to flatten the Covid-19 curve, mainly the lockdowns, maintenance of social distance, curfews and the wearing of face masks. This was compounded by the highly charged political atmosphere pitting the governing and opposition parties.

On 21 March 2020 government announced the first Covid-19 positive case in the country (Maulani et al., 2020). The country also reported its first death in Harare on 22 March 2020. The victim was a journalist who was also the second person to have tested positive to Covid-19 in the country (Chitsamatanga & Malianga, 2021). Since then, positive cases increased partly due to new variants of the disease, non-compliance with protocols and inadequacies of the response strategies. From 22 July 2020, cases of new infections rose drastically with a 65,6% rise in a week from 1 034 to 1 734, while the cumulative figure of confirmed local cases jumped by 204,9% from 286 to 872 (*The Herald*, 22 July 2020). As of 11 February 2021, the country had recorded 34 949 cases and 1 382 deaths (Hove, 2021). On 17 March 2020 the government declared Covid-19 a National Disaster, which facilitated the mobilization of resources and adoption of necessary measures in dealing with the pandemic (*The Herald*, 18 March 2020). A National Covid-19 Taskforce mandated to advise, lead and manage the response to the pandemic was set up (*The Herald*, 2 May 2020). In one of his early addresses concerning the pandemic, the Zimbabwean President highlighted the need to limit, suspend or forego certain social, economic or recreational activities since the pandemic called for 'a new social culture' (*The Herald*, 23 March 2020).

The rising infections and deaths from 2020 over to 2021 necessitated the

government to introduce a number of measures to contain the pandemic. Of significance is the declaration of the first 21-day 'total' lockdown which came into effect on 30 March 2020. Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020 detailed the regulations of the lockdown which included prohibition of movements or travel except for workers in essential service sectors and going to buy medicines and food, banning or limiting gatherings, shutting of most shops and businesses except supermarkets and food retailers and closure of borders (*The Herald*, 28 March 2020). The outstanding feature of these measures was that it translated into a 'stay-at-home' order which the President indefinitely extended in May 2020 with reviews at two-week intervals (*The Herald*, 16 May 2020). Schools and tertiary institutions of education were also shut down.

The raft of measures in mitigating Covid-19 encompassed the setting up of testing facilities, designated hospitals, quarantine and isolation centres, imposition of curfews, cash transfers to the vulnerable, financial assistance and mobilisation of stimulus packages for supporting businesses (Price, 2020). WHO recommendations such as social-distancing, wearing of face masks in public spaces, sanitising or frequent hand-washing were adopted. Vaccination was ratcheted up in 2021 (*The Sunday Mail*, 25 July 2021). Noteworthy is the government's deployment of state security forces to ensure these measures were religiously followed

#### **4. The deployment of state security apparatus**

The government deployed security agents in full force in all public spaces, including designated road points, markets and business centres. This was also done amidst what government termed a general laxity and carelessness among some citizens in their adherence to the announced protocols (VOA News, 3 January 2021). The government emphasized that the forces would curtail crowding at water points, bus termini, grinding mills, supermarkets and shopping complexes as well as curb unnecessary movements. They would ensure that people observe social distancing and proper wearing of masks, among other measures (VOA News, 3 January 2021). In a way the government intended to deal with civil 'disobedience' in the face of the pandemic. It has been argued that many of these measures have 'not been fully implemented except for lockdown,' and therefore have not adequately mitigated the impact of Covid-19 on the socio-economic livelihoods and well-being of many (Zimbabwe Peace Project, 2021).

In March 2020, President Mnangagwa emphasised 'decisive measures' and directed the National Command Element of the security arms to deploy as appropriate in support of civilian authority' to ensure compliance, peace, law and order (*The Herald*, 28 March 2020). In January 2021, the President couched the pandemic management discourse in war rhetoric as a 'war we will win', even reminiscing the sacrifices of the liberation struggle. President Mnangagwa declared "We face a new kind of war, but a war nevertheless. We face a new enemy, but a new enemy nevertheless" (*The Sunday Mail*, 24 January 2021).

The military commander also regarded Covid-19 pandemic as a 'public health war' which security forces joined (<https://www.myzimbabwe.co.zw> 29 July 2021). The then Second Vice President, Kembo Mohadi, supported the idea that security forces were to enforce compliance with strictness and toughness (VOA News, 6 January 2021). Such was the thinking of national leadership underpinning the deployment. The army was deployed to help the police in the enforcement of the lockdown on 4 April 2020, and by mid-July, the two departments were mounting joint roadblocks and holding joint patrols to ensure compliance by the public

(Afrobarometer, 2020).

The laws of the country allow the government to call any security institution if need arises and for the defence forces to assist the police as well as other quasi-government departments in times of emergencies (*The Sunday Mail*, 27 June 2021; *allAfrica*, 4 July 2021). The defence minister asserted that combating Covid-19 was 'strengthened' by the army's involvement as they became part of the frontline against the scourge and assisted in managing cases through the Medical Corps (*The Sunday Mail*, 27 June 2021). Though difficult to ascertain the number of state security officers seconded for Covid-19 duties in Zimbabwe it is hardly surprising that armed security forces were prominently deployed as the government has more soldiers and police than professional health workers (Moyo & Phulu, 2021).

The heavy deployment of the military and or police is not without precedence in Zimbabwe as they have been deployed during the *Gukurahundi* era, *Operation Chikorokoza Chapera*, August 2018 post-election violence and 2019 demonstrations, *Operation Hakudzokwi*, *Operation Murambatsvina*, *Operation Restore Legacy* and public protests since independence. Human rights violations and violence has permeated these interventions, the most disturbing of which is the reported killing of 20 000 innocent civilians in the 1983-87 *Gukurahundi* (CCJP, 1997).

## 5. Militarisation and images of war

The early days of the initial lockdown in Zimbabwe set the tone of the interface between the public and security forces. On the first day of the 21-day lockdown, police mounted check points on routes to the Harare's CBD, stopping cars and turning away 'unauthorised' pedestrians while truckloads of metropolitan and national police, wielding baton sticks and riot gear dispersed people from the usually-busy places like Copacabana terminus (Africa Research Bulletin, 2020). The police moved around with a loud hailer declaring in a threatening tone:

We don't want to see people here on the streets. We don't want to see people who have no business in town, just loitering. Everyone to their homes! (Africa Research Bulletin, 2020).

In Bulawayo, police on horse-backs and bicycles dispersed people from markets at a time when some informal traders grumbled about the short period, they had to procure food to last the 21-day lockdown, considering they lived from hand to mouth and there was a shortage of money (ARB, 2020). In Zvishavane, smaller grocery shops and vegetable markets were ordered to close in spite of the operators' understanding to the contrary, leaving only bigger supermarkets and wholesalers operating (Personal Communication). Right from the start, security forces demanded total compliance without deviations, a 'no-nonsense, no-excuses' kind of approach which was still evident from second day as detailed in a monitoring report by the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum. Harare was 'calm' around the CBD while police activity was heightened around the opposition party, Movement for Democratic Change's offices in anticipation of a court judgment concerning a leadership dispute in the party (Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum Covid-19 Monitoring Report, 31 March 2020).

At Glen View 3 shopping centre, increased security personnel presence was notable. Grocery shops were forced to close and people forced to go indoors. In Chitungwiza/Seke, police reportedly refused residents permission to go and fetch water at a church, yet in many areas citizens struggled to access portable water. (Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Covid-19 Report, 31 March 2020). The report

further notes that roadblocks were prevalent in Mutare, Marondera, Chegutu and those without exemption letters were turned away. The same occurred in Gweru where those without clearance letters were forced to disembark from buses and sent back home (Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Covid-19 Report, 31 March 2020). In Masvingo, 4 newspaper vendors were briefly arrested for violating lockdown, while across town at Aphiri and Sisk business centres police assaulted 11 people who were drinking alcohol at bars selling clandestinely. In Zvishavane police assaulted seven people queuing at ZB Bank with sjamboks and button sticks (Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Covid-19 Report).

Over the first two days of the lockdown, three scenarios emerged as deduced from the above report. Reports of assault by police rose from 3 to 18 within 24 hours. Most major cities became 'deserted' and the volume of traffic significantly became lower. Lastly, in high-density residential areas like Mkoba, Dangamvura and Chitungwiza some people, however, still loitered in groups disregarding the lockdown and social distancing. This general pattern across the country was experienced for the better part of lockdowns subsequently.

Throughout the first phase of the lockdown, there were allegations of the heavy-handedness of the police and army, with cases of some people having been prevented from going out to procure essential services and medicines (Obasa et al., 2020). Soldiers allegedly tortured ordinary citizens for minor transgressions in the name of enforcing Covid-19 guidelines. Between March and September 2020, plain clothes soldiers and police 'systematically used clubs to beat civilians' in the CBD and suburbs for violating curfews, failure to wear masks or maintain social distance (US Embassy Human Rights Report for Zimbabwe, 2020).

A respondent claimed in an interview for this research that he witnessed a group of young men being forced to jump, do press-ups and frog-jumping and rolling on the dust by soldiers but was terrified to get closer to verify their 'crime' (Personal Communication, 12 July 2021). A security guard narrated how they would also see people being humiliated, harassed or kicked and clapped on numerous occasions during the night while at his work-post (Personal Communication, 13 July 2021). In February 2021 alone, the army contributed to 12,12% while the police to 59,66% of the human rights violations, mainly revolving around the enforcement of Covid-19 protocols (Zimbabwe Peace Project, February 2021). Such running battles between the security forces and civilians during the pandemic mirrored 'images of war'.

Though there is lack of data on how Covid-19 have impacted on cases of violence against sex workers during lockdown, there have been reports of sexual violence against them by security officers after accusing them of breaking restrictions. Gender based violence have also been reported at quarantine centres and around ports of entry (Martin & Ahlenback, 2020). A case landed in the High Court of a Karoi woman, who was assaulted and police unleashed a dog on her for violating curfew rules while she was cooking outside her home, but within her yard (VOA News, 10 April 2020). A 28-year-old man also sued for compensation after his arm and leg broke while wrestling with the security forces who were forcing him to stay indoors (VOA News, 15 April 2020). In a case of high degree of insensitivity, police arrested and detained a woman along with two very young kids at Rhodesville in Harare for not wearing masks, resulting in the issue going viral (*The Herald*, 14 February 2021).

On 9 February 2021, an anti-riot contingent raided vendors at Chigovanyika in Chitungwiza, vandalised their stalls, destroyed farm produce and reportedly confiscated a vendor's cash and goods (Zimbabwe Peace Project Monthly Report, February 2021). About five months later they randomly threw teargas to scare away informal traders in Mbare and videos of them struggling to run away with their

wares circulated (*NewsDay* Zimbabwe, 21 July 2021). The streets and suburbs were transformed into 'feared war-zones'. So prevalent were such cases that the High Court ruled that police should not beat up people and subject them to inhuman treatment during lockdown enforcement (*The Herald*, 14 April 2020).

## 6. Numbers don't lie

Apart from those frequently 'forwarded' on social and print media, 'politicization, militarization' and conceptualisation of 'war images' is also illustrated by astronomical figures of arrests. About 2 000 people were arrested in the first week for defying lockdown laws across the country, while in Bulawayo many were 'rounded up and crammed into police trucks and were held' at the police station. The Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights also received individual complaints for alleged harassment by security agents (*Aljazeera*, 6 April 2020). By 9 April 2020 the figures of arrests had hit 3 251 resulting in the Minister of Information expressing how disheartening it was that some citizens were willing to put themselves and those around them at risk by flouting the lockdown regulations' (*The Herald*, 10 April 2020). During the first two phases, police arrested 19 317 lockdown regulation offenders between 30 March and 2 May 2020 (*The Herald*, 4 May 2020). More than 105 000 people were arrested between 30 March and September 2020 for alleged Covid-19 lockdown violations or alleged involvement in demonstrations across major cities, among them political activists, civil society members, journalists, trade unionists and ordinary citizens (US Embassy Report, 2020). Human rights organisations recorded 'worrying figures of human rights violations', with the Zimbabwe Human Rights Forum verifying almost 170 arrests, 160 assaults, and 10 attacks on journalists (NPRC Watch, 10<sup>th</sup> Edition, 2020).

A June 2020 report indicated that 1 312 people were arrested over a 24-hour period, mostly for violating ban on gatherings and failing to wear masks (*Anadolu Agency*, 5 June 2020). With about 1 000 arrested over two days for 'unnecessary movement' around 19 July 2020, critics argued that opposition and anti-government activists were being targeted in the build-up to the proposed 31 July protests (*BBC News*, 19 July 2020). From 28 July 2020 government intensified the deployment of the military in Harare which was followed by 'disturbing scenes of unchecked violence' against unarmed civilians as the security forces allegedly used live ammunition, with over 100 000 people being arrested over a span of four months (Maulani et al., 2020). Around 20 November 2020 the police said that, thus far the cumulative 'Covid-19 arrests' had hit 224 037, complaining that people were no longer valuing the wearing of masks and other protocols. They announced 'intensified patrols, surveillance and checks' (*Xinhuanet*, 20 November 2020).

The levels of defiance picked up around the festive season, late 2020 and early 2021. This may be due to citizens being used to crowded gatherings, celebrations and pronounced movements during that period. Parties and New Year celebrations were held in Mbare suburb in Harare and in many venues across the capital, which attracted thousands of revellers. Some of the organizers of the gatherings were later taken to court or into detention and 52 other people arrested for 'openly defying' the restrictions. Across the nation 2 321 were arrested on New Year's Day, including 200 teenagers crammed at a house party in Westgate (*The Guardian*, 5 January 2021). The arrests were spread throughout the country such that by early July 2021, of the cumulative 800 000 arrests since March 2020, Harare accounted for 236 000, Bulawayo 121 168, Manicaland 98 379, Masvingo 71 263, Mashonaland East 73 861, Mashonaland Central 56 218, Midlands 38 644 and

Matabeleland North 16 123 for offences related to liquor sales, business operating hours, unnecessary movements, gatherings and not wearing masks (VOA News, 12 July 2021).

Numerous statements by police or government officials emphasized that the arrests were due to outright disobedience or complacency, in response to which they issued threats, intensified deployments, accused citizens of a regime change agenda and increased fines. This view does not take cognizance of socio-economic realities. The analysis by Dr Norman Matara of the Zimbabwe Association of Doctors for Human Rights appreciates the centrality of survival strategies as shaping the response of citizens to Covid-19 regulations. He argued that although people were arrested for breaching regulations, on the ground, most of them had genuine cases. He asserted that people travel because they want to earn a living since about 95% of the people are self-employed, hence will always be travelling and looking for food or jobs among other necessities (The World, 21 July 2020). Yet, the police and the state termed this 'unnecessary movements' and hence the arrests.

To a greater extent, what authorities deemed wilful non-compliance is actually a struggle for survival by citizens. It is this (mis-)conception that partly explains government's prioritization of heavy policing. In comparison to 105 000 people arrested, only 101 375 tested for coronavirus as of 19 July 2020 indicating that 'the regime has deployed at least equal, if not more, resources to arrest and intimidate citizens than to fund the public healthcare system' (GardaWorld, 1 August 2020).

## 7. Covid-19 and political activism

On 13 May 2020, youths from the main opposition political formation, Movement for Democratic Change-Alliance, held a flash demonstration in Warren Park suburb of Harare to protest against corruption, poverty, economic malaise, the state's failure to provide care and social safety nets to the vulnerable during lockdown (Mawere, 2020 & Ndhlovu, 2020). Following this, three female participants and leaders in the protest, namely Joana Mamombe (a Member of Parliament), Cecilia Chimhiri and Netsai Marova were reportedly arrested and taken into police custody for breaking Covid-19 regulations. The case generated serious controversy and debate locally and internationally when police later denied having taken them into custody (*The Herald*, 14 May 2020) and they could not be located until after about two days in Bindura, kilometres away from Harare. The women alleged being dumped there after having been abducted by suspected state security agents followed by intense physical, emotional and sexual abuse. In their interviews from hospital beds, they claimed that their abductors beat them with sticks or gun, commanded them to sing, chant slogans, drink each other's urine as well as sexually abusing them (*The Guardian*, 17 May 2020).

Ndhlovu (2020) opines that the protest was 'misconstrued as anti-government.' From the standpoint of authorities, it translated into 'disobedience' and opposition seeking to tarnish the government. It amplified that the country was indeed at 'war', as their widely circulated video images show them struggling to walk, heavily bandaged, crying and detained in hospital under heavy guard. Social media went into an overdrive while embassies of the United States and European Union commented on the trio's case giving it further prominence (*The Herald*, 16 May 2020). A state-owned newspaper editorial commented on the name of the place they were found, stressing: '*Muchapondwa*' Shopping Centre which translates to 'You are going to be murdered' (*The Herald*, 16 May 2020). The state later charged and remanded the trio at a hospital where they were admitted for

disregarding Covid-19 laws during the demonstration, faking their abduction and tarnishing the country's image (Mawere, 2020; *The Herald*, 27 May 2020). Even Political Actors Dialogue members met the President about 'the very crucial issue' of alleged abductions which they wanted thoroughly investigated (*The Herald*, 28 May 2020). The government denied being involved in the alleged abductions and produced a video purporting to prove the opposition and the trio's 'fake' narratives (<https://www.facebook.com/zanupfparty/videos/fake-abductions-unmasked-877057786429104>). Their case has been dragged on and on at the courts even at the time of writing.

The case fits into the narrative of civil 'disobedience' in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. By accusing them of faking abductions to tarnish the country's reputation and interests, the state was intimating that they had 'declared war'. The trio's case generated intense debate and culminated in a 'war of words' pitting the ruling party and the opposition, and by extension, politicisation of the Covid-19 pandemic and the human rights perspective setting in.

### **8. Images of war amplified: 31 July 2020 protests and 'digital discourses'**

The Covid-19 pandemic had cases of violations of the mitigating guidelines being dealt with by the country's security forces. Some cases assumed political undertones. At the end, scenes witnessed on the ground reflected more 'images of war'. In July 2020 Jacob Ngaruvhume, leader of opposition Transform Zimbabwe, made an announcement galvanising support in preparation for a demonstration against corruption which was to be held on the 31<sup>st</sup> July 2020. This came in the aftermath of earlier reports of widespread corruption scandals exposed by investigative award-winning journalist, Hopewell Chin'ono. Among others, he accused government of corruptly awarding a US\$60 million tender to Drax International Company to supply coronavirus requirements without going to tender and charging highly inflated prices (ZPP, July 2020 Report; Kademaunga & Saki, 2020).

The stunning revelations by Chin'ono triggered 'physical, verbal and online war,' with the public, civil society, opposition politicians, independent media and the international community on one hand while generating hostile reaction from the government, ruling party and their agents on the other. What followed was an escalation of this 'contest'. An 'online anti-corruption protest' which morphed into a 'protest movement', featuring radical collaborative efforts among civic voices, Zimbabwe National Students Union, Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, the church, progressive media and political activists who mobilised support for the planned 31 July demonstrations took centre stage. Much of the mobilisation was done on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, culminating in the #31July and #ZimbabweanLivesMatter campaigns (Kademaunga & Saki, 2020).

Faced by such intended 'politically motivated' Covid-19 protocols violations, the government and its agents, intensified their repressive approach against perceived 'disobedience' as fronted by these organisers and supporters. Although the government eventually arrested (and later fired) the then Minister of Health Obadiah Moyo, the Drax company representative, some officials and cancelled the tender following revelations, the 'war' was not over. On 20 July Ngaruvhume and Chin'ono were arrested for 'inciting violence' and were forced to stay in remand prison for an extended period (Moyo & Phulu, 2021). The two in particular, along with others, became the 'faces of civil disobedience' according to the state but could be viewed as 'faces of the struggles of the citizens' amidst corruption, lack of accountability, economic challenges and the debilitating impact of Covid-19. As if to buttress the images of war Chin'ono videotaped and streamed live his arrest on Facebook enabling people to watch it online, as security agents besieged his house and caused

some damage without a search warrant (VOA News, 12 July 2020). Other prominent personalities linked to the planned demonstrations alleged that they faced harassment, abductions and intimidation or arrests of their family members (ZPP, July 2020 Report).

By the end of July 2020, the state's paranoia had reached 'unprecedented levels' in their dealing with offenders, resulting in 'dozens' being arrested, 'hundreds' brutalised and security agents deployed across the entire country (ZPP, July 2020 Report). Judging by statistics, July 2020 marked the peak of state's violence on its citizens, with the army and police accounting for 80,66% of human rights violations distributed as 48 cases of unlawful detention, 68 of assault, 168 of harassment and intimidation as well as alleged 15 cases of abduction and torture (ZPP, July 2020 Report).

The verbal dimension of the 'war' remained present from the cornered government. As if to set citizens against each other the ruling party's spokesperson, Chinamasa, 'unambiguously' encouraged people to defend themselves (against the 31 July protesters) by 'any means at their disposal' (ZPP, July 2020 Report). The Home Affairs Minister, declared that the 'reckless demonstrations' of 31 July 2020 were banned and was quoted saying; "anyone who disregards this warning and proceeds to join the planned insurrection to steal power will be met by the full wrath of the law" (ZPP, July 2020 Report). The President himself described protest supporters as 'bad apples' who were to be 'flushed out' (Amnesty International, 2020). The President further announced that security departments would "appropriately respond to [the] shenanigans" of "these malcontents" who had a "divisive and ruinous plan" (Burke & Chingono, 2020).

Few days before 31 July, police published a list of 14 'wanted persons', mainly government critics like trade unionist Peter Mutasa, opposition Member of Parliament Job Sikhala and former ruling party youth executives whom they wanted the public to assist in locating and arresting. These were primarily the organisers, opposition members and prominent supporters of the protests.

The list took the battle to another level as many reportedly went into hiding and the atmosphere became tense. As if to prepare for 'war' there emerged reports that a ruling party Member of Parliament was allegedly training youths for retaliation against protestors in Harare South. (ZPP, July 2020 Report). On the eve of the planned protests suspected secret police raided the home of an online journalist, Mduduzi Mathuthu in his absence and arrested three of his relatives, with one of these, Tawanda Muchiwa, later found on 2 August 2020 severely tortured and dumped (ZPP, July 2020; Amnesty International, 2020). The victims reported that they were pressured to reveal the whereabouts of Mathuthu.

Similar to the 'MDC trio's scenario, Muchiwa's video images from a hospital showing him struggling to narrate his ordeal invoked images of war. From 30-31 July 2020 police and soldiers, 'armed to the teeth', were strategically and menacingly deployed at street corners, intersections and junctions to crush the Covid-19 violators through the planned demonstrations. Furthermore, videos were widely circulated showing soldiers beating people, bundling them into trucks, haranguing motorists as well as assaulting shoppers and vendors in places like Gazaland in the capital (ZPP, July 2020; AI 2020). By the end of 31 July 2020, over 60 people were either arrested, brutalised or bundled into vehicles for attempting to demonstrate, including an internationally-acclaimed author, Tsitsi Dangarembga, main opposition party spokesperson, Fadzai Mahere, student Panashe Sivindani and disability issues activist, Henry Chivhanga (ZPP, July 2020). Some ordinary citizens were also arrested and later bailed during this period for 'public nuisance', 'intention to incite public violence' and Covid-19 transgressions (Amnesty International, 2020).

Although they failed to attract a massive turnout, primarily due to the government's

intimidation the 31 July 2020 protests, in particular, and many events since the beginning of the first lockdown in March in general, placed the unfolding 'war' between the citizens and state security forces on the international radar. This was mainly as result of the questionable timing of the events, which occurred at a time when the world in general and the country in particular was grappling with the Covid-19 pandemic. The government was accused of hiding behind the pandemic in dealing with opposition forces (United States Institute of Peace, 24 June 2020). The government also politicised the protests equating them to an insurrection and resorted to its often-used rhetoric of this being sponsored by external forces. Its long-standing 'war-like' political contest with the opposition, Movement for Democratic Change, loomed large in this 'Covid-19 war'.

### 9. 'Internationalisation of the war'

As events unfolded in Zimbabwe following civil 'disobedience' and the government's response through brute force, this attracted the attention of the international community over human rights abuses. A report claimed that the excessive use of force and crackdowns on protestors during the Covid-19 lockdown resulted in the death of at least 10 people (Amnesty International Zimbabwe 2020 Report). Three men were reported to have sued the police for injuries sustained from beatings by the security forces (AfroBarometer, 2020). Such developments and the suppression of the *#ZimbabweLivesMatter* campaign attracted scrutiny by the regional and international community. International celebrities like Ice Cube also spoke out against the human rights violations, while the Director of Amnesty International for Southern Africa characterized the scenario as a 'witch-hunt' and 'blatant abuse of the criminal justice system' (Jobson, 2020). In the aftermath of the crackdown of the July protests, South Africa's ruling party sent a high-powered delegation to assist Zimbabwe in crafting solutions to the unfolding economic and political crisis.

In August 2020 South Africa's President, Cyril Ramaphosa, appointed two special envoys to Zimbabwe with a similar mission while the African Union Chairperson also expressed deep concern over the use of excessive force by officers enforcing Covid-19 regulations (Human Rights Watch World Report, 2021). On 24 July 2020 The United Nations High Commission for Human Rights further commented on allegations of suppression of rights to freedom of peaceful assembly, expression and association under the pretext of lockdown restrictions, including dispersing and arresting of health professionals protesting poor conditions of service (UN News, 24 July 2020). Similar concerns were issued at different times by embassies of the European Union, United Kingdom and United States of America (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Locally, the Zimbabwe Human Rights Association had also raised alarm over police crackdown during the Covid-19 induced lockdown (Obasa et al., 2020).

The Paris-based Reporters, Sens Frontieres, a press freedom organisation, considered the arrests of journalists during the lockdown as the 'largest total press freedom violations' in sub-Saharan Africa (Rivers & Ndhlovu, 2020). The combination of online video footage, shrinking of the democratic space, heavy-handedness of officers enforcing Covid-19 guidelines and a sustained social and print media campaign resulted in Zimbabwe's 'war' being placed on the international arena, attracting heavy criticism

## 10. Covid-19 and misinterpretation of the law

In some instances, the police displayed either over-zealousness or misinterpretation of the Covid-19 regulations in their dealing with civilians, resulting in heavy losses on the part of the latter. More often police exhibited outright heavy-handedness and insensitivity. A case in point is the confiscation of 3 tonnes of vegetables and fruits in an early morning raid of Sakubva Market Place in Mutare on 3 April 2020 for disregarding lockdown rules. The officers and council officials ambushed about 300 farmers who had brought tomatoes, cabbages, lemons and green vegetables from all over Manicaland Province to supply 'hundreds of vendors'. The farmers fled from the police, who then loaded the confiscated farm produce into trucks and burnt them, triggering a 'public outcry' (*The Herald*, 3 April 2020; *Manica Post*, 10 April 2020; Kubvumbi 2020).

A government spokesperson claimed that the President had exempted farmers from initial lockdown but that had not been implemented by police ([news.trust.org/item](https://news.trust.org/item), 8 April 2020). Vendors' Initiative for Social and Economic Transformation condemned the burning of the farm produce which was meant to alleviate the plight of the poor. The anomaly was straightened up after the President issued an order directing security arms to ensure that food supply chains remained functional and for agricultural activities to proceed without disturbances throughout the lockdown. They were to allow farmers to deliver produce to markets after it was also noted that they had misinterpreted certain regulations ([ZimLive.com](https://www.zimlive.com), 3 April 2020). Government even pledged monetary compensation for the 'unfortunate' incident (*The Herald*, 8 April 2020). Nevertheless, the wide circulation of images of the burning in the presence of heavily armed officers underlined that the poor were victims of security forces brutality even in circumstances to pursue economic survival which was not deliberate disobedience of government orders. The images generated in such scenarios would make one equate this to war situations.

## 11. Survival strategies in the 'New Normal'

The pandemic set in a 'new normal' by way of stringent measures, which either banned or restricted peoples' socio-economic and political activities and rights. In order to continue earning a living during the challenging times of the pandemic, people in different economic domains devised their own survival strategies. This, however, was not easy in view of the high level of repression alluded to earlier. In so many cases, running battles with the security forces became the order of the day as people tried to make ends meet. In the transport sector Government banned commuter omnibuses and pirate taxis as a way to alleviate the spread of the virus. It directed those who wanted to continue in the transport business to join the Zimbabwe United Passenger Company (ZUPCO) franchise urban transport system (*The Sunday Mail*, 27 June 2021). This put many out of business considering that the majority did not have operating documents while many buses would not pass the fitness tests to be done before their resumption of operations. Thus, many of the omnibuses, cargo trucks, pirate taxis (*mushikashika*) and private vehicles continued to operate by hook or crook despite threats of arrests, fines or vehicle impounding (*The Herald*, 28 April 2021 & 3 June 2020; Nyathi, 2021).

To beat the system some '*mushikashikas*' removed vehicle number plates to disguise themselves or used 'side routes' that avoided police road blocks. They would even dump passengers few hundred metres before a roadblock or where diversion was not possible or start operations very early before the setting up of checkpoints (*The Herald*, 26 May 2020). In other cases, the illegal kombi operators adopted a

confrontational route, a case in point being their barricading and attacking ZUPCO buses or barring them from loading in Bulawayo (*The Sunday News*, 30 July 2021). Payment of bribes to security officers to facilitate passage became widespread during lockdown (Personal Communication). Citizens had to 'buy' the cooperation of security forces at roadblocks and borders, thereby making lockdown implementation difficult (Matthew et al., 2020). Reports of officers accepting bribery and abusing their power to extort permeated the media (*The Herald*, 16 May 2020).

Regular commuters, including street vendors, employees, small business operators as well as long-distance travellers had to devise strategies to ameliorate the lockdown and feed their families. Covid-19 mitigation strategies translated more into executive orders without the input of people or communities affected, leading to resistance and even politicization. Most people would wear masks for fear of the police and military rather than their own safety (Matthew et al., 2020). The communities also devised codes for alerting each other when security officers' approach and they 'would scatter in different directions' (Matthew et al., 2020). Resilience and courage have been the hallmarks of navigating the lockdown restrictions. John Kwaramba, a vendor selling mobile phone accessories, persistently boarded buses into town although not an exempted essential service provider. He risked arrests and fines but had no other option to survive (Al Jazeera, 2021).

Since the beginning of lockdowns, there have been accusations against soldiers and police officers pressuring people to pay bribes to avoid arrests or be allowed to travel. In May 2020, the police spokesperson urged citizens to refuse to pay officers demanding payments to be allowed to travel whether exempted or not (*The Herald*, 4 May 2020). One commentator declared '*unobhadhara 5 yusa pa roadblock worovapasi*', meaning one had to corruptly pay USD\$5 to quickly go past a roadblock (*The Herald*, 26 May 2020).

In towns like Zvishavane and Masvingo, liquor retailers, vendors and illegal foreign currency dealers were also pressured to pay money to operate or be allowed to travel to major cities for orders or for any other errands for which one could not secure a clearance letter (Personal Communication). By February 2021 police were taking advantage of government increase of fines to a maximum of ZW\$5 000 as penalty on defaulters to abuse people without travel letters or masks during intensified patrols (ZPP, February 2021). Vendors complained about the police behavior after the extension of the lockdown in July 2021. A second-hand clothes vendor, Lucia Mtetwa said,

I only see corruption increasing because of these letters because everyone wants to go somewhere, with exemption letters or not. This gives police an advantage. They will start demanding bribes as they were doing last time during lockdown (*The Zimbabwean*, 17 July 2021).

At one point, there was an outcry when a pregnant Chitungwiza woman was allegedly forced to pay a bribe to get past a roadblock when she was in labour, while some 106 maternal deaths from March to June 2020 were attributed to movement restrictions which hindered women to access services (Amnesty International, 2020).

Those selling liquor also faced operational restrictions such as closure of bars, bottle stores and beer-halls or shortened opening times for off-the-premises consumption and serving fully vaccinated clients for the better part of the long lockdown. Many bars and shops in the townships continued to sell beer through the back-door with communication and coordination being done through WhatsApp. A number of houses turned into shebeens and liquor distribution centres (Matthew et al., 2020). Some soldiers would reportedly demand free beer or cash for an operator to sell well into the night but with music playing at low volume and front doors locked (Personal Communication). By mid-2021 it was noted that some were defiantly

opening beer-halls and night clubs despite bans (*allAfrica*, 4 July 2021). The President expressly warned defiant beer drinkers in January 2021 to desist from the culture (*The Sunday Mail*, 24 January 2021).

Some methods to navigate lockdowns included 'illegal technological innovativeness'. According to Matthew et al. (2020) citizens used information communication technology to expose corruption but also manufactured 'fake exemption letters' and coordinated ways of circumventing lockdown rules relating to the sale of liquor and church gatherings, among others. This included the use of WhatsApp group platforms to communicate by those selling from homes or beer-halls secretly or smuggling bodies and merchandise at the borders. Those deploying ICT to manufacture 'fake exemption letters' sold them to people from non-essential service category at as much as USD\$50 to enable them to go into town or travel (Matthew et al., 2020). In one extreme case, there was a not-so-easy to authenticate story of a Harare woman from Kuwadzana who resorted to black magic bees to prevent security agents enforce lockdown measures (Matthew et al., 2020). Reports are similarly abounded of 'fake Covid-19 free certificates and fake sanitizers' sold in cities as well as kombis with 'fake ZUPCO' stickers. A bar-coding system was later devised to eliminate fake Covid-19 certificates (*The Sunday Mail*, 14 February 2021).

Government designated universities, polytechnics, colleges and other institutions as quarantine and isolation centres, particularly for returning citizens and deportees in an effort to slow down the spread of coronavirus. From 1 April to 19 August 2020, 15 776 Zimbabweans returned from other countries with over 1 457 quarantined (OCHA, 2020). However, citizens protested the poor and crowded conditions at such centres and were unwilling to stay for the entire duration of their quarantine while some even escaped, giving government logistical nightmares. Police had to pursue those who had escaped. A July 2020 report stated that 276 fled, 30 of whom were arrested and taken to court for exposing others including their families to the virus ([bbc.com/news/world-africa-53462259](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53462259)).

During the initial phases, returnees from the UK complained publicly about the appalling conditions and shanty facilities at their Belvedere Teachers College quarantine centre, including the absence of running water. One actually wrote to a publication exposing the inhospitable conditions and thus exposing the government in the process (University News, 6 May 2020). This forced Minister of Social Welfare to visit the centre for assessment (*The Herald*, 22 April 2020).

Challenges like poor management, lack of operational guidelines, lax safety measures, poor conditions and food shortages pushed some people to escape, or government releasing them from quarantine before the scheduled time (ZPP, April 2021). Government was forced to react by enhancing security to stop people from escaping while police would work in liaison with traditional leaders to report the escapees. Some returnees claimed not to have identity documents on admission which made tracing difficult once they escaped (*The Herald*, 28 May, 2021). Others bribed police to escape from the holding institutions (Personal Communication). Cabinet had ordered that travel or identity documents be collected until the end of the quarantine period and that names of those absconding be published. In addition, traditional leaders were trained on the dangers of accommodating escapees without reporting them (*The Herald*, 3 & 10 June 2020).

A number of studies have noted an increase in smuggling of goods and illegal entry along the country's borders. These activities were a response to the closure of borders and the restrictions on the repatriation of bodies of the dead. Using the case study of Honde Valley in Manicaland, Mwatara (2021) highlighted an increase in smuggling as people tried to make ends meet amid restrictions while local residents continued to cross the border as they had done in the past. Smuggling syndicates bringing merchandise and dead bodies arranged illegal entries into the country, often

aided by corrupt police and soldiers, along borders with Mozambique, Botswana and South Africa, posing threats to efforts to contain coronavirus (Matthew et al., 2020).

Second hand clothes vendors were in an 'emphatic second coming' to 'earn a living' in Harare by end of June 2020 (*The Sunday Mail*, 28 June 2020). This points to smuggling as the source. At Spillway and Dulibadzimu (Beitbridge), illegal crossing points smugglers avoided quarantine and police arrested as much as 30 people at those points during the lockdown period (*The Herald*, 14 September 2020).

Government was forced to consider procurement of drones and related technical equipment to patrol borders effectively. During lockdown, second hand clothes vendors were in 'an emphatic second coming' which pointed to smuggling and survival strategies by the vendors (*The Sunday Mail*, 28 June 2020). Smuggling of bales of second-hand clothes was also reported through the Mt. Selinda border post, a situation which was brought to an end when government fired warning shots against the perpetrators (Mangiza & Chakawa, 2021). All these were survival strategies by the public who viewed the lockdown as a hindrance

Negotiating the Covid-19 induced restrictions was, however, not been an easy undertaking for the ordinary citizen and informal worker. Practicing social distancing at crowded queues at supermarkets for subsidized meal-mealie emerged one such challenge (Personal Communication). Many people ended up engaging in persistent 'cat and mouse' battles with the police who at times disregarded the reasons why people were thronging the town centres. People queued for farm produce at market places under the watch of the police and military (Al Jazeera, 6 April 2020). Yet, some vendors resorted to taking wares to neighbourhoods in the face of tight security and transport controls (Al Jazeera, 6 April 2020). Similar scenarios of alleged 'diabolic treatment' of the ordinary people by security forces were observed in areas such as Nyanga, including assaults, harassment of elderly women, soliciting for sexual favours from women to be allowed to sell their wares or travel (Nyahunda et al., 2021).

## 12. Conclusion

With regards to the deployment of police and soldiers, Zimbabwe seems to fit into the pattern of over 60 countries profiled by the Amnesty International (2020) where it concluded, inter alia, that law enforcement often played a far too prominent role in what otherwise should have been fundamentally health matters. The security officers became far more visible in public spaces in the implementation of Covid-19 mitigation measures than health professionals doing mass testing, screening and educating. The country gravitated more towards the 'hard lockdown' and a militarized route with unnecessary use of force to clamp down on non-compliance and as counter-action against political critics, human rights campaigners, ordinary citizens and women. The so-called disobedience by government and security personnel was to a greater extent an attempt to negotiate processes, laws and actions that had put the citizens' daily survival activities on the rope. This was mainly experienced in the informal economic pursuits, resulting in civil liberties under serious threat. This could also be attributed to the inadequate, if not, outright lack of social safety nets for the people, culminating in citizens making confrontations with soldiers in an endeavour to survive. Indeed, it is undisputable that it is difficult for people to stay at home when there is need to look for food (Samutereko, 2020). This pushed many people to disregard movement restrictions thereby picking conflicts with the law enforcement agents. At the end of the day, there has been a loud cry from the government in relation to civil 'disobedience' at a time when people were called upon to stay at home for safety. Although there are

variations in terms of levels of compliance, there are certain patterns that emerged which point to a militarisation, politicisation and creation of images of war in Zimbabwe's Covid-19 response framework and its implementation as has been revealed in this study.

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