

Book review

Polarization and transformation in Zimbabwe: Social movements, strategy dilemmas and change

McCandless, Erin* 2009

Durban, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 254 pp.

ISBN 978 1 86914 218

Reviewed by Lesley Connolly

Programme officer in the Peacebuilding Unit at ACCORD

Polarization and transformation in Zimbabwe: Social movements, strategy dilemmas and change, written by Erin McCandless, attempts to illustrate how social movements and civic organisations face significant strategy dilemmas which can hamper their effectiveness and prevent such organisations from contributing to transformative peace and change. The book investigates Zimbabwe and two particular dilemmas which have caused political polarisation in the country. The first is whether to prioritise political or economic rights in

* Erin McCandless is a part-time faculty member of the Graduate Program in International Affairs at the New School for General Studies, New York. She is the founder and co-executive editor of the *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development*, and she consults widely on issues of peacebuilding, most specifically for the United Nations.

efforts to bring about transformative change, specifically in terms of rights and redistribution, and the second is whether and how to work with governments and donors given their political, economic, and social agendas. This book looks at these two issues by focusing on two social movements: The National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) and the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans' Association (ZNLWVA). It analyses the nature of these organisations, the strategy dilemmas they have confronted in trying to mobilise change, the choices they made, the results that have ensued, and the implications for wider social goals of transformative change and peace. While the book does provide a narrative history of Zimbabwe – looking at the move towards independence, the post-independence era and the economic and political reforms which took place, the focus of the book is on the period of 1997–2010, the emergence of civil society and understanding the NCA and ZNLWVA's structure and identity, their strategy dilemmas and key strategic actions. The outcomes and impacts of these two organisations' actions are considered up until the Global Political Agreement was signed in 2008, and then reflections are made on the current, Inclusive Government context for understanding the strategy dilemmas, polarisation, and transformation.

Three aims run through the book: '*depolarizing concepts*', '*transcending strategy dilemmas*' and '*contributing to transformative peace and change*'. These aims are looked at in reference to the two organisations mentioned above – the NCA and the ZNLWVA. Regarding the first aim, McCandless finds that in Zimbabwe the nature and role of civil society is deeply questionable. Accusations about political and self-serving agendas and motives of different actors, and their alliances and relationships with political parties, the government and donors, she argues, are at the heart of the polarisation issues.

The second aim is used in the book to shed light on the nature and operational mechanisms of what she terms '*strategy dilemmas*', and how processes of polarisation are affected by but also entrench these dilemmas, in an effort to highlight ways to transcend them. As is well conceptualised in the book, there are two primary strategy dilemmas confronting Zimbabwean civil society organisations and social movements. The first is whether and how to work with government and/or donors given their political, economic, and social agendas,

in terms of, as McCandless terms it, *participation* or *resistance*. *Participation* here refers to the strategy of partnering with, or working within, processes set up by government or donors, and *resistance* to the strategy of instigating change by working outside the system, challenging and transforming existing structures of authority or processes that visibly reinforce the status quo, or create entirely new, parallel structures and processes. The second strategy dilemma, as mentioned earlier in this review, is whether to prioritise political or economic rights and concerns in efforts to provoke nation-wide transformative change in terms of, as McCandless puts it, *rights* or *redistribution*. The *rights* discourse is often associated with liberal thinking, concerned in particular with civil and political rights and individual liberties; *redistribution*, as discussed above, is often associated with the redistribution of wealth, land or other natural resources.

The third aim of '*contributing to transformative change and peace*' is the core aspect of the book, and aims to provide an analysis of Zimbabwe which could also be applied to the greater international sphere. McCandless analyses the key strategic actions of the NCA and the ZNLWVA: the NCA's 'No' vote campaign and ongoing use of 'mass action' (pp. 107–117, 130–143), and the ZNLWVA-led land occupations, the 'Third Chimurenga' (pp. 118–130). The strategy dilemmas, issues of participation/resistance debate, and rights/redistribution debate are considered in each of the cases, and ultimately show that these dilemmas have played out differently for each organisation, mainly because of the political allegiances: the NCA linkage to the MDC, and the ZNLWVA linkage to ZANU-PF. Furthermore, McCandless emphasises that those who have supported the NCA tend to regard the ZNLWVA as a 'group of troublemakers, a violent arm of President Mugabe's ZANU-PF party, dismissive of civil and political rights and generally operating with suspect motives' (p. 45). Whereas those supporting the ZNLWVA see themselves as striving to implement economic justice and regard the NCA as 'a network of political individuals and NGOs working in the interest of urban elites, Zimbabwe's white farmers, donors and the wider Western neo-liberal force' (p. 45). She concludes that it is these differences which resonate in the strategy dilemmas which fuel the polarisation and need to be overcome in order to promote effective change.

In the penultimate chapter of the book, chapter six, the core issues of polarisation are analysed through a ‘*transformative change and peace impact assessment*’ developed by McCandless for this study, which looks at the above-mentioned cases in order to highlight what can be done to promote change. She assesses six indicators with regard to the NCA and ZNLWVA: *conflict transformation, empowerment, mobilisation and participation, relationships, root causes and policies and institutions*. She highlights the need for both constructive changes of the system and structure as a whole, and of the movement towards intergroup relationship between organisations. There is a need to raise the profile of conflict and bring the notion of addressing the structural root causes of the violence to light. However, she argues that these movements can often be very confrontational in their efforts to bring about change and thus their actions actually result in increased polarisation. In the book, the author further argues that over the decade (2000–2010), despite exhaustive efforts on the part of civil society to bring change, the two strategy dilemmas have not always been well managed; they have often served as obstacles rather than entry points for transformative change. The empirical research and assessment in the study illustrates how civic actors have, at times, been drawn into polarisation, and how their activities have even served to fuel polarisation. McCandless argues that the issues underlying Zimbabwe’s polarisation and driving the strategy dilemmas represent legitimate grievances that need to be properly valued and fairly addressed for genuine peace to be established in Zimbabwe.

The last chapter of the book, chapter seven, provides the key lessons we can take away from this book. One of these lessons resonates out of the complexities underlying the nature of civil society in particular contexts as highlighted by McCandless. This suggests the need for a more nuanced approach to conceptualising civil society. In divided societies, where the stakes are higher and systems and structures for bringing about change are less reliable or available, it should be assumed that the boundaries of social actor categories are likely to be unclear. While many Zimbabwean civic organisations tend to draw upon one or the other strategy, the cases examined suggest that both participation and resistance have been relevant and effective for the ZNLWVA and the NCA at different times and in relation to different actors. More systematic consideration needs to be given to the roots of the use of each strategy in order to highlight

what the key fault lines are: namely, the issues that may disrupt the process and lead to destructive polarisation and violent confrontation. Lastly, McCandless illustrates that social movements and civil society never act in isolation. One group's actions must be understood within the wider context of social action. The interaction of various movement and actor strategies, actions and outcomes must also be factored into any analysis of change. If one is able to address these root issues leading to polarisation in civil society in Zimbabwe, the chance of transformation and long-lasting change increases substantially.

Overall, the book, through an in-depth case study analysis and peace and conflict impact assessment, draws lessons for activists, practitioners, policy-makers, and scholars interested in depolarising the concepts that underpin polarising discourses, and in transcending strategy dilemmas, as well as understanding how social action can better contribute to transformative change and peace. The book provides entry points to bring about change rather than simply addressing the obstacles. The book builds upon John Paul Lederach's notions that various paradoxes underlie peacemaking where the interplay of opposed ideas or energies seems to create irreconcilable contradictions (p.212). McCandless also refers to the theory of state-building and the need to identify dilemmas, assess the possible intended and unintended consequences of policy and program action and evaluate short-term decisions in light of long-term implications for institution balance. This book assesses the choices made in Zimbabwe and provides a base upon which actions can be taken to identify ways to change the structures in the society. On the whole, the book is successful in broadening the debate over how contemporary social organisations develop different, as well as common, strategies, even within groups with divergent historical, social and ideological roots. The author successfully develops an innovative research framework, conceptualising social change in a way that makes it methodologically measurable. Her grounded empirical research provides lessons for scholars of civil society, peacebuilding and democratisation, and policy makers – which are applicable to situations beyond Zimbabwe alone.