

Political Crisis and its Implications for Educational Development of a University in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study examines the intricate relationship between political crisis and its repercussions on educational development, with a specific focus on a university in Zimbabwe. Political instability, characterized by frequent changes in government policies and civil unrest has significantly impeded the institution's academic and operational progress. The analysis reveals that such turmoil disrupts the allocation of resources, affects faculty and student morale, and hampers the overall quality of education. Additionally, the study explores how political interference undermines academic freedom and institutional autonomy, leading to a decline in international collaborations and research output. By drawing on qualitative data, the research highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by the university community and proposes strategies to mitigate these adverse effects. Data was analysed through thematic analysis procedures which helped identify common themes. The findings underscore the need for a stable political environment to foster sustainable educational development and the critical role of educational institutions in promoting democratic values and societal progress in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: Political crisis; educational development; tertiary institutions and implications, Zimbabwe.

Introduction

The political crisis in Zimbabwe is characterized by numerous governmental deviations, pervasive corruption, civil discontent, and economic volatility. These factors have a cascading influence on various sectors, impacting heavily on education among other sectors. At a university in Zimbabwe, political instability has steered inadequate backing, resource mismanagement, and interruptions in academic

programs (Muzondidya, 2017). The political landscape has also fostered an atmosphere where academic sovereignty is compromised, with faculty and students often facing censorship and intimidation (Raftopoulos, 2013). Additionally, a university in Zimbabwe provides a poignant case study for examining the effects of political instability on educational outcomes because of its status as the premier higher education institution in the country. Since its establishment, the university has been a beacon of academic excellence and a vital component of the nation's intellectual and socio-economic advancement. However, the recurrent political crises that have plagued Zimbabwe over the past decades have significantly disrupted this trajectory. Political instability has affected the higher education institution's ability to sustain international collaborations and entice foreign students and scholars, restraining its universal engagement and research capabilities (Mlambo & Raftopoulos, 2010). The strain on fiscal and human resources has also brought about a decline in the quality of education being offered and infrastructural deterioration, thus affecting both teaching and learning experiences (Chitiyo & Chitiyo, 2009).

This introduction prepares the stage for a comprehensive exploration of how political crisis hampers educational development at a university in Zimbabwe. By analyzing the chemistry between political dynamics and education policies, this study aims to provide an inclusive understanding of the various challenges confronted by the university and forward viable strategies to mitigate these effects. The goal is to highlight the significance of political stability in fostering a favorable atmosphere for educational excellence and to underscore the role of universities in promoting societal progress amidst political turmoil (Alam, 2022; Tien et al, 2022). By focusing at a university in Zimbabwe, the study seeks to provide a detailed case study that can inform policy-makers, educational leaders, and international stakeholders about the specific impacts of political crises on education institutions in similar contexts. The insights gained from this study could be instrumental in shaping policies and interventions designed to enhance the resilience and sustainability of higher education institutions facing political instability.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to comprehensively investigate the multifaceted impact of political crises on the educational development at a university in Zimbabwe. The following objectives guide the study:

1. To analyze how political crisis affects the administrative functions and governance structures at a university in Zimbabwe.
2. To investigate how political crises influence academic freedom, freedom of expression, and the intellectual environment at a university in Zimbabwe.
3. To analyze the economic impact of the political crisis on the university's funding, resource allocation, and overall financial health.
4. To analyze how political crisis influences student experiences, academic performance, and overall educational outcomes at a university in Zimbabwe.

Research Questions

The study sought to give answers to the following research questions:

1. How has the political crisis in Zimbabwe affected the quality of academic programs and the retention and performance of faculty members at a university in Zimbabwe?
2. What are the implications of the political crisis on student enrollment, retention, academic performance, and overall student experience at a university in Zimbabwe?
3. How has the political crisis influenced the availability and allocation of financial resources, educational materials, and infrastructural development at a university in Zimbabwe?
4. In what ways has the political crisis impacted research activities, funding opportunities, and international collaborations at a university in Zimbabwe?

Literature Review

Political crises significantly influence educational institutions, particularly in regions with fragile political systems. A university in Zimbabwe provides a case study of how political instability can affect educational development. This review examines the various effects of political crises on a university in Zimbabwe, including administrative disruptions,

academic freedom, funding issues, and impacts on student experiences, with specific examples illustrating these challenges (Ndlovu, 2018). Since the early 2000s, Zimbabwe has faced substantial political turbulence. Key events include the land reform program initiated in 2000, hyperinflation and economic collapse in the late 2000s, and the military coup that deposed Robert Mugabe in 2017. These events have had far-reaching effects on all societal sectors, including higher education.

Furthermore, political crisis often lead to disruptions in university administration. At UZ, changes in government policy and political interference have caused significant instability in university governance. The administration has been determined by the political powers who feel threatened by the students' politics and want to exercise their political muscle in destabilising students' political structures. For example, the appointment of university leaders has frequently been influenced by political affiliations rather than academic merit, undermining institutional integrity. A notable instance occurred in 2008 when the then Vice-Chancellor, Levi Nyagura, was appointed primarily due to his allegiance to the ruling party, affecting the university's autonomy and administrative efficacy (Mlambo, 2017; Breslin, 2023).

Also, academic freedom is vital for educational development, and its erosion due to political instability hinders scholarly activities and innovation. At UZ, there have been numerous instances of repression against academic staff and students for expressing dissenting political views. For example, in 2017, several students and lecturers were arrested for participating in anti-government protests, highlighting the risks associated with political expression on campus (Ndlovu, 2018). This climate of fear and censorship stifles intellectual discourse and innovation. Students' focus has been diverted from education to political rivalry resulting in violent clashes in and around the university campus. Brooks (2023) highlighted that continuous political upheaval deterred students from working more aggressively towards creating tertiary institutions a hub of educational transformation and development in the country with improved learning results.

In addition, the economic impact of the political crisis severely affects university funding. Zimbabwe's economic instability has led to drastic reductions in government allocations for higher education. A university in

Zimbabwe has experienced severe budget cuts, leading to deteriorating infrastructure and shortages of essential teaching materials. For example, during the hyperinflation period of 2008, the university struggled to pay staff salaries, maintain facilities, and procure basic supplies, which significantly degraded the quality of education (Chindanya, 2019). The government could not see the value behind the financial support that the institution needs for its academic growth leaving the academic platform unsustainable as most academic staff embark on a great trek in search of greener pastures.

Political instability significantly affects students' mental health, academic progression, and prospects. Understanding these impacts is crucial for developing support mechanisms for students. Frequent strikes by staff and students, driven by grievances over inadequate and late payment of salaries, high tuition fees, and poor learning conditions, disrupt the academic calendar. In 2019, a prolonged strike by lecturers over unpaid salaries halted academic activities for several months, delaying graduations and extending the academic year (Muringani, 2020). Additionally, the constant political and economic uncertainty has a detrimental effect on students' mental health and academic performance. Most studies brought forward to have the idea that the involvement of politics in education in developing countries has often led to the creation of a hostile education environment that doesn't favour positive educational outcomes (Croucher, 2023; Tonon, 2021).

Despite these challenges, there have been efforts to mitigate the impact of political crises on a university in Zimbabwe. International partnerships and external funding have been crucial in sustaining certain academic programs. For example, the partnership with the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) has provided critical support for research and development projects at UZ (Nyoni, 2021). Additionally, the resilience of staff and students, who often rely on community support and informal networks, has been instrumental in maintaining educational continuity. Innovations such as online learning platforms have also been explored to mitigate the disruptions caused by political instability (Sandahl & Björklund, 2023).

The intersection of political crisis and educational development at a university in Zimbabwe reveals the multifaceted impact of political

instability on higher education. Administrative challenges, threats to academic freedom, funding constraints, and adverse student experiences are significant issues that hinder educational development. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive understanding of the political context and proactive strategies to enhance the resilience and sustainability of educational institutions in politically shaking environments.

Methodological Approach

For an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study qualitative case study was adopted as it enabled the researcher to analyze and interpret data. The chosen approach is best for the research since it assists the researcher in exploring and providing deeper insights into the phenomenon under study. Also, it enables the participants to provide the research with explanations of their thoughts, feelings, and experiences regarding the issues that surround them (Mohammad & Vargas, 2022; Hancock, 2021). For the data collection procedure, interviews and focus group discussions were used to assist the researcher in getting the participants' views and experiences regarding the concept being investigated. These procedures are vital as they lead to a deep understanding and build-up of answers to the central question of the study (Dawadi et al, 2021; Shonhiwa, 2023; Terrell, 2021).

The sample comprised eighteen students from a university in Zimbabwe who were purposively selected. The participants who are mostly final-year students in the departments of political science, education, and law were used in the study. Pseudonyms were used for all the participants that were used in the study. The research was also gender sensitive during participant selection. Each participant was identified using the faculty name and number. This created confidentiality and credibility for the study as participants' image was protected and motivated them to participate freely. Narrative analysis was used to analyse qualitative data since it allows the participants to provide the researcher with valuable insights into understanding their lives, feelings, and behaviours (Breslin, 2023; Walliman, 2021).

Participants

Faculty of Political Science (FPS) N=6; Faculty of Education (FE) N=6; Faculty of Law (FL) N=6.

Faculty	Males	Females	Age range	Total
Political Science (FPS)	3	3	21-26	6
Faculty of Education (FE)	3	3	20-25	6
Faculty of Law (FL)	3	3	21-27	6

Results and Discussion

Key results of the study were presented and discussed to guide getting the answers to the aim of the study (Tonon, 2021). These activities enabled the creation of a way to get answers to the implications associated with the inclusion of politics in the development of education. Thus, dynamics were created toward exposing the unseen issues that were formulated during interviews, personal observation, and focus group discussions (Bolin et al, 2023; Luetke Lanfer et al, 2023).

Political Involvement in the University

Politics strengthens and influences our education in general. One can't fully detach education from politics. This is supported by participant FPS 2 who stated:

My education enables me to have a broad spectrum of issues to do with my country and the world. It is with politics that I understand better my society and the expectations needed of me as I contribute towards the development of my country. Upon completion of my studies, I will meet people in society who have various opinions and understanding. Political knowledge will help me to co-exist.

Participant FE 4 was of the view:

I used to hate anything to do with politics but through passing various educational stages and processes and later learned that there is a bit of politics in most educational institutions and it assists in the development of education. That is if it has been positively accepted and denied there is a struggle in the education system. In the administration and even students, there are politics of varying magnitudes playing stability roles. We need political inclination for diverse thoughts and developments in education in general.

There is a strong belief among the learners that politics plays a crucial role in motivating them to study hard and let them view the world around them

with a scrutinizing mindset that challenges them to aspire to see value in bringing change to the present and future world as shown by the above exempts. Factors like political ones have a fundamental effect on the learning corridor as they bring about choices to pursue people (Adhikari et al, 2023). Education is not independent of the political influence but rather it is strengthened by such developmental factors. However, there is an outcry once it overstretches its boundaries since excess of it creates negative influences on education (Shonhiwa, 2023). A lot of implications for the educational process thus emerge if politics are given a greater existence in the institutions of learning as presented by Sok and Bunry (2021) who said that comprehensive politics is not healthy for higher education development. If left to assimilate with education freely without being controlled becomes disastrous to educational growth and development. This is supported by FL 5 saying:

'I am demotivated to study with local institutions especially at a university in Zimbabwe for various reasons which came to reality once I enrolled here for my first semester. Pressure groups from outside the university have found their way into student politics which should be local'.

There is no intrinsic desire in the students as they are forcibly exposed to politics and this has caused much frustration amongst most of them especially those whose studies are not politically related. FE 6 explained that:

The purpose of student politics is to push the institution to keep checking the welfare of students if it is student student-oriented. But now with the great influence from outside politics, one is forced to be seen in one of the party politics aligned student's political movements, ZINASU or ZICOSA.

In addition, FL 2 elaborated that:

Being a student at a tertiary college, especially at a university in Zimbabwe in the pre- and post-national election periods is somehow tough. During this time all national political parties will be active amongst us as they believe in the power of students' politics in creating their political influence in society.

Students feel that their study time is hampered by the political environment that is created as described by FPS 3:

Election time is a torrid moment for most of us as our lives will be hanging by thread since mainstream parties will be fighting to create vibrant youth politics which they feel is key to their national political progress and success. A lot happens on the university campus which is not progressive for most if not all students.

The above excerpts show that politics is not following the tertiary educational planning but has managed to sway education towards the dictates of national politics. Students are thus becoming the foot soldiers for the political mileage of the national politics which has negatively influenced the progression of the tertiary education. Educational terrain is pushed into the quagmire as politics becomes the main theme of the once-rich knowledge acquisition base. Alam (2022) highlights that there is a line that separates education from political issues for the transformation of the nation and for education to be achievable. Political involvement in education is not only detrimental to education development but also jeopardizes the world's success in meeting its desired developmental goals (Bruns et al, 2023; Walliman, 2021). FE 5 stated that:

We have limited time to concentrate on education issues as politics is proving to be the major stumbling block to most of our studies. Its influence is turning out to be a thorn in the flesh as politicians from all circles of the political divide once create their political spaces amongst students which results in students' political skirmishes as they fight for power and force membership into their movements.

FL 1 elaborated saying:

Some of us are not interested in these types of college life which disturbs our studies as we turn to focus on something that we didn't enroll for. How can someone be pushed into doing politics that doesn't benefit others, not him or her? Let those who want to be politicians practice what they want to do not everyone. And don't force people to join you, it's a choice.

From the above responses, political influence is creating disharmony in centers of higher learning. Education is suffering a lot as the politics of

parties is controlling the environment and daily educational routines. There are no longer free spaces for the studies of those non-partisan students to take place (Malschinger et al, 2023). Politics has suffocated educational development which has seen students' life in tertiary becoming comprehensively difficult to manage. Furthermore, divisive tendencies are created as politics is practiced among students. Grynawiski & Steinsson (2023) in their presentation highlighted that a politician's success is realized through creating a battleground for warring forces to engage in fights through selective application of the laws.

This collaborates with what FPS 2 said:

We are not worried about having politics amongst us if it's for the students' extra activity not for social gains like it is now. Today we are no longer safe as student pressure groups were created in the institution and these groups are now acting like mafia groups they are harassing everyone daily.

This affects those students who are peaceful and do not want to be associated with violent situations as explained by FE 6:

We are forced to be in a group but if we go into a group of our choice the opposite one will pray for our lives to such an extent they create fights over membership which turns out to be risky to our lives. Those who are sponsored by the ruling party have bragging rights as they seem to be immune to arrest after engaging in violence on the campus while those from the opposition sponsored will get arrested even for falsified rumors.

PL 4 shared his experience:

The boys violently came into my room one Sunday morning just after breakfast as I was getting down to do my studies. I was terrified because of their facial expressions but I tried to remain calm though I knew something bad was coming after. They started asking rude questions about my relationship with the leader of the opposing student organization whom I had been seen conversing the previous afternoon. The rest is history, I dislike it.

This shows that there is an escalation of the violent political environment as students are attacked in the compound. This is reflected in FPS 2 sentiments:

One day some overzealous students pounced on me like hungry lions for no reason shared with me. When they left me I was now in great pain and decided to make a report at the nearest police station. There my nightmare revealed itself when I ended up being the accused for politically motivated violence. I was kept in prison for a month and my education was disturbed badly during that time.

This shows the negative nature of college politics which has never been good for most students' learning environment as most are falling prey to it. This is happening in a way that they will not expect to see. To some politics is a grave train that they do not wish to board as they fear for their lives and the subsequent disturbances that come with politics into their careers (Breslin, 2023).

Political Parties' Hunting Ground

Mainstream parties have found themselves a hunting ground for their future university leaders. Parties are practicing their activism amongst the students as seen by pressure groups formed. FE 5 this saying:

We have two main pressure groups which are ZINASU and ZICOSA. They are the wings of the main political parties in Zimbabwe. These groups are there to recruit and spread political agendas. These groups are violent and clashes are now a common feature in and around the college campus and they will be showing their party's powers.

Participant FE 3 highlighted that:

ZANU (PF) and CCC, the main political parties have created a bad image of the college as they all want to win the membership of students whom they regard as the flame holders of their party vision. The institution is now like the school of political excellence where warring groups and individuals exercise their political will. An institution that was created to instill a political mindset in the students. Political information dissemination is high as various members of these parties who are students here are working extremely high in preaching the gospel of their parties. This has left the college authorities with nothing to do but to see.

The above responses show that there is a big crisis in the daily existence of institutions of higher learning that has been brought about by the presence of political parties. This has also caused the unfair treatment of students by the public authorities, especially law enforcement and the judicial system with political parties influencing the execution and management of college politics (Tien et al, 2022). Most of those who are in the government opposing student movement are randomly arrested and detained without trial while those in the pro-government student movement are not and are free to practice their activism. This unfair treatment has resulted in those students arrested facing difficulties in their studies as the disturbances will make them skip some of the lectures (Mutanda & Ndawana, 2023). This is supported by FPS 4 who declared that:

The system is captured with those in the ruling party-backed student movement enjoying activism as they have been given the untouchable tag where if arrested they are verbally warned at the police station and released. This is not the case with those in the opposition-backed student movement who if arrested are detained and taken to court and charged with disorderly conduct and at times remanded into custody. We are just students and we fail to understand why we are treated differently when we are all doing college activism.

FL 2 shared his experience at the hands of politics:

I was arrested when we were a month away from our final year exams and remained in custody for three weeks. I was given bail a week before examinations started which means had one week to prepare for my exams. The charges were so flimsy and what surprised me most was that I was not doing anything politically related but we were having a group discussion on one Sunday afternoon. We saw a riot police vehicle arriving where we were having our discussion. They just accused us of unlawful gathering and the rest is now. My education was under threat.

From the above responses, there is a strong feeling that students are the target of political misfortunes and interferences. The crisis is increasing unabated and education is left to suffer. Zimbabwean education is receding in the rankings at a fast rate to such a level that it is no longer being considered much in the education index platforms. The political crisis has

an input in creating an environment that makes students learning become difficult. This concurs with Malschinger et al (2023) who argue that for students to be able to benefit from the education they get from colleges political influence should be avoided. Accordingly, students should be prepared to make political choices once they leave college (Grynaviski & Steinsson 2023; Bruns et al, 2023). Cooperation is expected from the government and corporate world to create an environment that safeguards the students from political abuse and persecution. Students need everyone's guidance towards becoming stakeholders in future national development (Alam, 2022; Brooks, 2023).

Recommendations

The researcher calls upon all concerned parties to cooperate to ensure that university governance is independent of political interference by creating a transparent and merit-based system for appointing university leaders. Also, advocate for laws that protect academic freedom and the autonomy of educational institutions from political influence. Additionally, institutions should promote academic freedom by safeguarding faculty rights guaranteeing that faculty members can teach and conduct research without fear of political retribution. Protect students' rights for them to express their opinions and engage in peaceful protests without facing academic penalties. Also, enhance security and stability and implement measures to ensure the physical safety of students and staff, including cooperation with law enforcement to protect campuses from violence. Develop and regularly update emergency preparedness plans to respond to political unrest.

It is also recommended that institutions should secure financial stability through diversifying funding sources and proper financial management by institutions of higher learning. This reduces dependency on government funding by seeking alternative sources such as private donors, international organizations, and partnerships with the private sector. In addition, the implementation of robust financial management practices ensures efficient use of resources and financial stability despite political uncertainties. Also, break the barrier of isolation and strengthen international partnerships to provide faculty and students with opportunities for collaboration, exchange programs, and access to global academic networks.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while the political crisis poses significant challenges at a university in Zimbabwe, a strategic and comprehensive approach can mitigate its negative impacts and ensure that the institution continues to fulfill its educational mission. By prioritizing autonomy, security, inclusivity, and excellence, at a university in Zimbabwe can build a resilient academic environment capable of withstanding political upheaval and contributing to the country's long-term development. Politics and education should find a way of coexisting in society for development to be achieved.

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