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Contesting Centralism: Revisiting Urban Resistance and the Making of a 'Rebel City' in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Bulawayo City Council (BCC) has largely resisted the national government's pursuit of an exclusionary centralist ideology and unfettered ministerial discretion in local affairs. The legislative framework, particularly after independence, is anchored in decentralization; however, the central government has often issued directives that run counter to the law, thereby entrenching centralism. This study situates BCC within the context of rebel cities, analyzing the strategies the city has employed to avoid central government domination, the challenges it has faced, and key lessons for other local authorities. The study adopts a qualitative case study approach to analyze the power dynamics on (1) the contested nationalization of water distribution by Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA), (2) the appointment of special interest councillors by the central government, (3) the ownership dispute over the Bulawayo Power Station, and (4) the refusal of government-mandated street name changes. Using these cases, this study unpacks the strategies, legal, political, and symbolic defiance, employed by BCC in rebelling against the central government. The study, therefore, develops an institutionalized conceptualization of a rebel city that is significant in explaining how cities can become avenues of sustained resistance to central government. The recurring pattern of institutional resistance by BCC through organized legislative, political, administrative, and symbolic strategies provides the empirical basis for regarding it as a rebel city. In this light, the study extends the concept of a rebel city, which tends to emphasize social movements, class struggle, and resistance to capitalism, to encompass institutionalized local government or municipal resistance to central government's intervention. The case study of BCC highlights the broader challenges of achieving effective decentralization in a context marked by state centralism, offering insight into the complexities of transformative urban politics.

Introduction

At independence, Zimbabwe inherited an excessively centralized local government model anchored on the policy of racial differentiation. This system culminated in a binary state, which was characteristically racist, exploitative, and subservient (Chigwata, 2010; Mamvura & Marowa, 2024; Muchadenyika, 2017). The demise of colonialism led to new governance structures, epitomized by legal and institutional reforms and expanded decentralization initiatives (Chakunda, 2018). Decentralization, conceived as a strategic policy framework, was initiated in 1980 to redress inherited colonial inequities, promoting participatory governance and transferring power and/or authority from the central state to sub-national levels of

government (Conyers, 2003; Nyikadzino & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2022; Chigwata & Marumahoko, 2018). However, critical scholars such as Chakunda (2018) argue that, despite achieving independence, Zimbabwe's post-colonial decentralization initiatives embedded in the new legal and institutional framework failed to dismantle the central government's control over sub-national governments. The new independent central government lacked the political will to implement decentralization initiatives and consolidated power by developing mechanisms that entrenched excessive central authority within the legal and institutional frameworks. While the need for checks and balances on sub-national governments is significant, contemporary intergovernmental relations are increasingly characterized by harsh ordinances and directives by the central government over sub-national governments (Marumahoko, 2023).

Statement of the problem

Zimbabwe's constitutional and legislative framework, particularly after independence, is anchored in decentralization; however, the central government has often issued directives that run counter to the law, thereby entrenching centralism. This government's obsession with pursuing a centralist approach to governance is shrinking the space for subnational governments to exercise their full autonomy. As a result, there has been an increase in intergovernmental conflicts, especially in local authorities led by opposition parties. In addition, there has been an erosion of effective service delivery due to tensions between central and sub-national governments. BCC has largely resisted the national government's pursuit of an exclusionary, centralist ideology and of unfettered ministerial discretion in local affairs, thereby presenting the city as a typical rebel city. This view finds expression in four persistent cases: the nationalization of the water supply by ZINWA, the imposition of special-interest councillors, the ownership dispute over Bulawayo Power Station (BPS), and the refusal to implement government-mandated street name changes. In this light, the study examines the strategies employed by the BCC to avoid central government domination, the challenges it has faced, and key lessons for other local authorities.

Research objectives

This study is guided by three key objectives that anchor its critical examination and analysis:

- to examine the legal and institutional architecture for local government operations in Zimbabwe
- to analyze the legal, political, and symbolic strategies adopted by BCC in resisting central government domination.
- to assess the nature of BCC's resistance against state centralism
- to develop a rebel city analytical framework to examine BCC as a form of institutionalized urban resistance to central government's intervention.

Concept of a Rebel City

Cities have a long history as pivotal centers of capital accumulation and political revolutions characterized by deeper currents of social and political change. Because of their dynamic demographics, cities epitomize urban class conflict, complex political economy, and the emergence of social movements (Bandauko & Arku, 2024; Cheeseman, 2022). The multidimensional interplay of political, economic, and sociological factors makes cities dynamic spaces of resistance and innovation (Le Galès, 2017). Therefore, cities are increasingly characterized by spontaneous disruptions, social protests, and the rise of cultural and productive innovations, indicating the complex interplay of urban life (Thörn et al., 2016; Mayer et al., 2016).

The study of rebel cities is therefore one of the most contentious discourses, with a broad philosophical basis and cutting across an array of disciplines, including political science, economics, and sociology. Harvey (2012) located rebel cities within Marxist theory, positioning them as centers of revolution and main actors in the processes of economic, cultural, and societal transformation, social reproduction, and community reorganization. Harvey (2012) further submits that Marxism conceives the city as an arena for class conflict beyond the workplace. From a Marxist perspective, rebel cities are at the center of both capital and class struggles for a more socially just and ecologically friendly society. In this context, rebel cities represent two paradigms: the first is the failure of neoliberal capitalism, and the second is the epicenters of revolt. Therefore, the conceptualization of the rebel city by Harvey (2012) is best understood in the context of urban social movements, capitalism, class struggle, and transformative urban politics.

In the context of transformative urban politics in BCC, the form of resistance shows a transition from urban social revolt to institutionalized local government or municipal resistance. The resistance revolves around local government institutions, councillors, legislative challenges in the courts of law, autonomous administrative decisions, and symbolic acts. In this light, the concept of a rebel city can be extended to encompass institutionalized local government or municipal resistance to the national government's pursuit of an exclusionary centralist ideology and unfettered ministerial discretion in local affairs.

Against this backdrop, the concept of rebel cities, as actualized in this study, has three strands. The first strand is the cultivation of critical and radical theories to redefine the trajectories of developmental cities in centralized political systems. The second strand is the analysis of intergovernmental relations and the projection of resistance against centralism. The third strand concerns the location of the anti-systemic BCC and the analysis of the political, economic, and social implications of the city's development. This study regards the BCC as a significant experiment in anti-state centralism. Hence, the city becomes a referent for a radically different vision of urban governance as the quintessential "rebel city" by rebelling against the intrusion of the central authority of the national government.

Table 1 Rebel City Analytical Framework

Key dimension	Key analytical lens	Key empirical evidence
Central government action	Nature of central government action that leads to resistance	The national government's pursuit of an exclusionary centralist ideology and unfettered ministerial discretion in local affairs.
Institutional resistance	How cities employ their legislative authority to resist central government intervention	Administrative actions, city council resolutions, and resistance to compliance.
Legal resistance	Do cities approach the courts based on legislative and constitutional provisions?	legislative and constitutional challenges, and court proceedings.
Political resistance	Do cities confront and contest the central government's political authority?	Resistance to ministerial appointments and interventions
Symbolic resistance	Do cities engage in symbolic acts to contest central government intervention?	Reclaiming urban space through street naming and sustaining urban heritage
Sustained rebellion or persistence	Do cities engage in sustained or episodic resistance to central government interventions?	Empirical cases showing resistance from cities over time.
Social mobilisation	Do cities mobilize their residents and civil society to resist central government interventions?	Civil societies and residents support cities' retaliation to central government interventions.

Source: Author's conceptualisation

This study develops an analytical framework to provide a rigorous criterion for a rebel city, as shown in Table 1. A key point of this framework is that a city need not achieve successful resistance to qualify as a rebel city. However, a clear pattern of sustained rebellion is required, even when such resistance does not yield the desired outcomes.

The above framework is critical for analyzing and conceptualizing a rebel city because not every city under the leadership of the opposition party is necessarily a rebel city. In addition, not every intergovernmental conflict can be characterized as a city rebellion.

Methods

The study employs a qualitative case study approach to examine the power dynamics on: (1) the contested nationalisation of water supply by ZINWA, (2) the appointment of special interest councillors by central government, (3) the ownership dispute over the Bulawayo Power Station, and (4) the refusal of government-mandated street name changes. The four cases are selected because they encompass the different dimensions of centre-local contention as shown in Table 2 below. The study also utilises secondary data sources. Secondary data were accessed from multiple sources, including academic and policy studies in internationally refereed journals, council reports, ministerial directives, and legislation governing urban local authorities. The key academic and policy literature analysed focused on the context and dynamics of policy interactions among the national government, provincial governance structures and subnational governments. In addition, the constitution and key legislation governing urban local governance: Urban Councils Act chapter 29:15, Regional, Town and Country Planning Act chapter 22:13, and Public Finance Management Act chapter 22:17 were analysed to locate the powers and/or authority of urban councils within the contemporary intergovernmental system. Ministerial directives analysed include guidelines on budgeting; the directive to cancel all debts accrued by residents and corporates on or before 31 July 2013 (issued under section 303 of the Urban Councils Act, chapter 29:15); and the directive to transfer water management from councils to ZINWA. Council reports were analysed to examine how BCC responded to policy directives from the national or provincial government.

Table 2 The four cases: dimensions of centre-local contention

Case	Central government intervention	Response by BCC	Mechanism of resisting	Outcome
Water Supply by ZINWA	Transfer of water function from BCC to ZINWA	Refusal, mobilized residents and civil society in resistance, and legal contestations.	Institutional, administrative, legal, political, and social mobilization.	Transfer resisted
Special interest councillors	The appointment of special interest councillors by the central government through ministerial appointments.	Opposition through questioning legality, no immediate administrative acceptance, and legal challenges.	Administrative, legal, and political.	The appointment of special-interest councillors was resisted.
Power Station	Ownership and disputes over the Bulawayo Power Station by ZESA, a parastatal.	Challenge over ownership	Institutional, administrative, legal, negotiation, and social mobilization.	Dispute unresolved
Street naming	The central government proposed street name changes in urban areas	Rejected the proposed names and came up with alternatives in some cases	Institutional, administrative, legal, political, and social mobilization.	Street naming was contested and stopped.

Source: Author's conceptualisation

Local Governance in Zimbabwe: A Birds-Eye View

According to Chakunda (2015), Zimbabwe's Constitution, under Section 5, clearly defines the state as unitary, democratic, and sovereign, whose political governance is organized into a three-tier system: national or central government, provincial and metropolitan councils, and rural and urban councils. For a broader analysis of the legal infrastructure governing local governance in Zimbabwe, it is significant to reflect on the transformation of the local government structure from the colonial era to the contemporary era, with emphasis on the laws and ordinances enacted to regulate this tier of government.

Chigwada (2018) argues that Zimbabwe's indigenous political and governance systems were disrupted and weakened by the establishment of colonialism in 1890. The colonial system introduced foreign legislation, structures, and institutions designed to advance and buttress the interests of the colonial enterprise. In pursuit of a profitable colonial economy, the colonial regime created institutions at national, regional, and local levels that were anchored on racially discriminatory structures that privileged whites over blacks (Chigwada, 2018). Therefore, the colonial governance system created a dualistic model that discriminated against the indigenous black people. Accordingly, Madhekeni & Zhou (2012) argued that this dualistic, racially motivated colonial structure formed the foundation of a highly centralized system of governance. This was the genesis of an entrenched central government supremacy over local authorities. In the same vein, Masunungure (1996) argues that "from its inception, the overriding imperative was the consolidation of the colonialist hegemony and its attendant infrastructures of control."

The roots of urban local governance in Zimbabwe can be traced to the Salisbury Sanitary Board of 1891, established by the British South Africa Company (BSAC). According to Mapuva (2014), this board was set without any constitutional provisions. This was further reinforced six years later with the passage of the Municipal Ordinance of 1987. On the other hand, advisory councils operated within the powers bestowed on District Commissioners (Mapuva, 2024). The legal framework for urban local government was shaped by subsequent legislation, such as the Municipal Act of 1930 and the Urban Councils Act of 1973. According to Nyikadzino (2014), the urban local governance architecture, particularly town planning and service delivery, was designed along racial lines, with European suburbs receiving better services than African townships (Nyikadzino, 2014; Mhlanga et al., 2021). Buttressing this viewpoint, Mapuva (2014) postulates that the colonial urban local governance system led to substandard service delivery to Africans, which then provoked urban resistance and ultimately the liberation struggle.

With the attainment of independence in 1980, the Zimbabwean government attempted to address the colonial local governance system through decentralization to broaden the participation of all citizens and devolve power to local authorities (Kurebwa, 2015). The decentralization process sought to achieve a more democratic and responsive governance system through (1) elimination of racial restrictions, (2) promotion of elections in which all citizens above the age of 18 years could participate, and (3) equal distribution of resources (Kurebwa, 2015). Therefore, the government established a single Ministry of Local Government that brought together urban, African, and Native councils under one roof. The government sought to end the colonial racial dual governance system. Approximately 220 African councils were amalgamated into 55 district councils under the District Councils Act of 1980 (Kurebwa, 2013). The Rural District Councils Act (Chapter 29:13) of 1988 subsequently unified rural and district councils into a single rural administrative system, although its full effects were not realized until the early 1990s. However, despite the decentralization wave since independence, the central government has remained dominant and appears to be consolidating its power in contemporary intergovernmental relations (Kuwa & Zinyama, 2025; Madhekeni & Zhou, 2012).

Devolution under the new Constitutional order: a pyrrhic victory

The local government became a constitutional creation when Zimbabwe adopted its 2013 Constitution. Before then, local governments in Zimbabwe were 'constitutional orphans.' The 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe ignited new hopes for governance reforms and the reconfiguration of center-local relations (Chakunda, 2023). The constitution establishes a devolved system of governance that recognizes the local government as a distinct tier within this structure.

The 2013 Constitution provides space for devolution through the establishment of provincial, metropolitan, urban, and rural councils with defined roles and responsibilities. Section 264 of the Constitution explicitly sets the parameters for the devolution of power from the central government to provincial, metropolitan, and local councils. The rationale is that when power is devolved to subnational governments, it promotes sustainable development, democracy, and peace because of their proximity to the communities (Mapuva, 2015). According to Chigwata and De Visser (2018), Section 264 of the Constitution guarantees all subnational authorities the "right to govern," conferring all powers necessary to exercise this authority effectively.

State Centrism and Intergovernmental Relations in Zimbabwe

Critical scholars have argued that contemporary intergovernmental relations in Zimbabwe can be described as an expansion of centralism operating under the guise of decentralization (Olowu, 2001). Along the same lines, Marumahoko (2023) argues that contemporary center-local relations show a worrying trend in which the central government usurps local authorities' powers by assuming responsibility for services traditionally under the authority of sub-national governments.

Table 3 Central government political suspensions and dismissals of elected MDC(-T) local government officials (2003–2016)

Year	Council	Interventions by Central Government
2003	Harare City Council	Minister Ignatius Chombo suspends Executive Mayor Elias Mudzuri (MDC T)
2004	Harare City Council	Minister Ignatius Chombo suspends 7 MDC Councillors
2005	Chitungwiza Municipality	Minister Ignatius Chombo suspends Mayor Misheck Shoko (MDC T)
2006	Mutare City Council	19 MDC-T councillors resigned on 4 January 2006, paving the way for Local Government Minister Ignatius Chombo to appoint an acting council
2010	Harare City Council	Minister Ignatius Chombo suspends 7 MDC-T Councillors
2012	Masvingo City Council	Minister Ignatius Chombo suspends Councillor Gapare (MDC-T)
2012	Mutare City Council	Minister Ignatius Chombo suspends Mayor Brian James (MDC-T)
2012	Gwanda Municipality	Mayor Lionel De Necker was dismissed for failing to comply with a ministerial directive.
2012	Chinhoyi Municipality	The Mayor and Deputy Mayor were suspended
2015	Gweru City Council	Minister Saviour Kasukuwere suspends Mayor Hamutendi Kombayi and ten MDC-T councillors.
2016	Harare City Council	Minister Saviour Kasukuwere suspends Mayor Bernard Manyenyeni (MDC-T)

Source: Author Compilation from various sources-(AllAfrica, 2005; IRIN News, 2003; U.S. Department of State, 2011; The Standard, 2012; Nehanda Radio, 2016; Rukuni, 2011, AllAfrica, 2012 and NewsDay, 2013; Chigwata et al, 2019).

The increasing state centrism is expressed across the political, economic, and policy domains. Politically, the central government possesses extensive supervisory powers over sub-national authorities (Chigwata et al, 2019). For instance, the central government led by ZANU-PF has, in many instances, suspended and/or dismissed local councillors from the opposition party, MDC, under the guise of protecting citizens' interests (Chigwata et al., 2019). Table 1 shows some instances in which the central government, led by ZANU PF Ministers of Local Government, intervened in sub-national governments by suspending and/or dismissing elected MDC T councillors, mayors, and chairpersons. According to Marumahoko (2023), the increasing political interference in local government is chiefly because, since the year 2000, the opposition party, MDC-T, captured all the city councils from the ruling ZANU PF, which significantly shifted political power in urban areas. Therefore, the increasing state centrism is undermining local democracy and the autonomy of local authorities in delivering effective local services (Marumahoko, 2023; Chigwata et al., 2019).

Economically, the central government continues to control the financial architecture of local authorities. Kuwa and Zinyama (2025) postulate that sub-national governments are constrained in their ability to exert authority over economic resources because they depend on central government fiscal transfers. This dependency relationship has created ground for the central government to interfere in the daily operations of local authorities. Critical scholars have argued that ZANU-PF employs a strategic, irregular disbursement of constitutional intergovernmental fiscal transfers to undermine opposition-led urban councils for political expediency (Bland, 2010; IDAZIM, 2010; Marumahoko, 2010).

At the policy level, the central government's priorities often overshadow the local development policies of sub-national authorities. This view is expressed when the central government issues directives that interfere with the policy direction of local authorities. For example, in 2013, the Minister of Local Government issued a directive for all local authorities to cancel outstanding ratepayer debts just a week before the presidential, parliamentary, and local elections (Chigwata et al., 2019). This kind of policy inference, driven by political expediency and the central government, weakens local authorities' policy autonomy as independent actors in local development.

Results and Discussion

The directives regime and a constrained policy and administrative latitude for local authorities

Zimbabwe has a complex history of intergovernmental relations rooted in the colonial system of dualism. As noted earlier, the policy of dualism and racial differentiation was the hallmark of the colonial local government system. The demise of colonialism and the birth of independent Zimbabwe in 1980 led to a new political dispensation. With the attainment of independence in 1980, the Zimbabwean government attempted to address the colonial local governance system through decentralization to broaden the participation of all citizens and devolve power to local authorities (Kurebwa, 2015). Decentralization was deeply anchored on a combination of legislation and policies, such as: (1) Prime Minister's Directive (1984), (2) Rural District Councils Act (1988), (3) Thirteen Principles of Decentralization (1996), and (4) Urban Councils Act (1966) (Tanyanyiwa, 2015; Kaponda, 2024; Chigwata, 2014; Crook, 2001). Nyikadzino (2015) argues that, despite numerous legislative and policy reforms, the post-independence central government retained excessive control over local authorities. For instance, as part of a grand political strategy, the Minister of Local Government issued a directive in July 2013 instructing all local authorities to pass resolutions to cancel outstanding ratepayer debts for rates, water, and sewerage charges. This was despite councils owing utility bills to creditors who are part of the local government service

delivery value chain. The circumstances that led to the cancellation of the debts were political, as the directive was issued at a presidential election rally by the then local government minister. According to Muchadenyika (2014), this was political grandstanding intended to weaken the opposition's strongholds, with greater negative implications for local authorities' ability to provide services. Although the directive was implemented nationwide, it is important to note that major urban centers with large numbers of debtors owing substantial amounts to urban local authorities were controlled by the opposition. Issuing such a directive, therefore, weakened the opposition-led councils' ability to deliver services. However, this political-expediency policy directive improved ZANU-PF's position in its bid to regain control of the urban councils, which are strongholds of the opposition. The idea was to influence urban residents to vote for ZANU-PF candidates and consequently weaken opposition domination in urban local governments. Nyikadzino (2015) also argued that ruling party elites with vast property in urban areas were among the largest debtors and sought to use the directive as a reprieve from debt. Whatever the extent of diversity in analyses of the background to this directive, scholars have agreed that the directive stretched the fiscal scope of councils and thus had a long-term negative impact on service delivery.

Various other policy pronouncements and directives issued by the central government have negatively affected local authorities' capacity to deliver services. These include the transfer of vehicle licensing from local authorities to the Zimbabwe National Roads Administration (ZINARA). This has deprived local authorities of an important revenue source for road development. Although ZINARA administers the Roads Fund (RF) on behalf of local and other road authorities, there is substantial evidence of inconsistencies and corruption in its administration. Local authorities have largely disputed the criteria ZINARA uses to disburse funds. Substantial evidence has shown politically related biases in the allocation of RF to the detriment of scientifically sound criteria.

The discussion above shows tendencies towards centralization or decentralization, where the central government is ubiquitous in what is ideally a local government space. According to Madhekeni & Zhou (2012), local authorities "have traded blows with central government, particularly accusing the responsible Ministry of reducing them to spectators in their field through excessive ministerial intervention." There are, therefore, wide examples of such directives to local authorities. The MLG has also appointed commissioners and resuscitation teams purportedly to investigate local authorities. Cases in point are Chitungwiza, Harare, Gweru, and Mutare. However, Madhekeni & Zhou (2012) viewed the appointment of commissioners in a less favorable light, as a deliberate attempt to sneak in a ZANU-PF agenda into opposition-dominated councils, with the overriding imperative of sustained centralism and patronage.

BCC in the rebel mode: Cases and examples of radicalism against the centre

As mentioned earlier, even after independence, the central government has continued to maintain its grip on local authorities, with a thrust towards centralism. This has been done in the name of the center playing its oversight role. Both the Urban Councils Act Chapter 29:15 (UCA) and the Rural District Councils Act Chapter 29:13 (RDCA) provide for the supervisory and monitoring role of the central government over local authorities. Both Acts also provide for various ways in which the center can perform the aforementioned functions and monitor and supervise local authorities' performance to ascertain compliance with relevant legislation. Firstly, the center has unrestricted access to all council records as per UCA 9(1) and RDCA 51(8). Secondly, local authorities are expected to do some self-reporting through budgets that the center approves and the annual audits as per UCA 288(2) and RDCA 137(6)(a). Thirdly, the center can also request information from local authorities as stated in UCA 309 and RDCA 153. In

addition, the center can carry out investigations when it has reason to believe a local authority is acting ultra vires and not in the interests of the residents (UCA 311(2) and RDCA 154(1). Moreover, the center can intervene through directives (UCA313). However, the center has, in some instances, abused a legally given mandate in pursuit of political and other agendas that hinder effective governance at the local level (Muchandenyika, 2017; Tanyanyiwa, 2015; Chatiza, 2010). Such policy interventions and related directives have variously affected the policy, governance, and administrative capacities of local authorities.

BCC is not the only local authority that has resisted these directives, but it stands out for maintaining its stance and refusing to comply. This study focuses on four key cases where the city council defied the directives. These are: the handover of water provision to ZINWA in 2007; the appointment of special-interest councillors; the takeover of the Bulawayo Power Station by ZESA in 2019; and the renaming of roads.

Institution and legal resistance: Takeover of water provision by ZINWA dispute

The dispute over water provision demonstrates how the BCC resisted central government intervention through institutional, administrative, political, and legal mechanisms. The key was to assert its institutional and legal authority over water provision in the city. In the early 1990s, Zimbabwe started experiencing crises marked by severe economic decline and widespread social and political instability. Musemwa (2014) notes that Zimbabwe experienced extreme inflation, with the annual rate reaching an estimated 5 billion per cent and month-to-month inflation around 230 million per cent by January 2009. At that time, the highest Zimbabwean currency denomination was ZW$100 trillion, which fetched less than US$10 on the black market (Mabiza, 2013). The decision to hand over water provision to ZINWA was driven by the crisis, which had depleted resources needed to provide essential public services such as education, health, electricity, and water supply. Mabiza adds that the combined effect of factors such as ageing infrastructure, shortage of water chemicals, and erratic supply led to the outbreak of cholera in Harare in 2009, causing 4000 deaths. This naturally turned attention to the problems of safe water supply in urban areas.

As part of its oversight role, the government intervened. The government, therefore, thought that handing over the water supply function to ZINWA would be a panacea for the crisis. ZINWA, as a parastatal, was established under the 1998 ZINWA Act, with a mandate to provide a coordinated framework for the planning, development, and management of water resources, a role formerly performed by local authorities. The Cabinet decision granting ZINWA the mandate to assume responsibility for water and sewerage services in Zimbabwean local authorities was made on 23 November 2006, with the takeover scheduled to take effect on 1 December 2006 (Chigwata et al, 2019).

Musemwa (2014) asserts that the reasons and advantages advanced by the center in support of the takeover included the following:

- water and sewerage services in most urban areas were deteriorating,
- some local authorities were already asking ZINWA to assume responsibility over the provision of water services,
- The takeover was intended to benefit residents by channelling funds for water sector development through a single entity rather than distributing them across individual local authorities. According to the central government, coordinated provision was better than assigning responsibility to individual local authorities, some of which were already failing to provide the service. In addition, it was assumed that the management would be done with the participation of the stakeholders and that this approach would be responsive to local needs and aspirations, as well as provide systems that are accountable to the people,

- ZINWA was expected to leverage economies of scale and other subsidies to provide support for economically disadvantaged groups; and
- ZINWA would ensure a reliable, safe and sustainable provision.

However, this decision, which contravened the Urban Councils Act by transferring service management from local authorities, was legally challenged by several councils. When the other local authorities relented under pressure, the Bulawayo City Council maintained its stance. Several reasons have been advanced for this stance, as explained below (Musemwa, 2014)

a. The history of water supply management in Bulawayo

The history of water in Bulawayo reflects the municipality's longstanding interest in controlling urban water supply. According to Musemwa (2008), upon the establishment of Bulawayo in the colonial era, water provision was initially monopolized by three white colonial settlers. This concession was later acquired by Willoughby's Consolidated Company (WCC), which established the Bulawayo Water Works Company (BWC). It should be noted that at the time, Bulawayo was unique among settlements of its type in having water services managed by a private company. The colonial administration justified this set-up because the town lacked an effective sanitation board. However, by 1924, after serious legal battles, Bulawayo's municipality gained control of the city's water supply.

It is evident that, historically, water supply was a contentious issue in Bulawayo, often framed by considerations of political authority and urban development. Therefore, handing over water to ZINWA brought back memories of how hard they had fought to gain control of the water, and now they were expected to give it away again, with no compensation. Moreover, there were economic and political reasons, as outlined below, that made it important for local authorities to remain in charge of water provision. Notably, most local authorities, except Bulawayo, eventually transferred water management to ZINWA.

b. Failure to observe the law

The BCC also resisted the directive, arguing that it lacked a legal basis. The council's mandate to provide water and sanitation services is derived from the Urban Councils Act (Chapter 29:15) and the Public Health Act (Chapter 15:09, Part V). In addition, the council argued that the procedure was not followed, as the initial official communication did not come from the Ministry. This was unprocedural, as they did not report to ZINWA (Mabiza, 2013).

c. Financial reasons as a basis for resistance

According to Mabiza (2013), the water account contributed over 50% of the local authority's revenue; therefore, handing it over would cripple the city financially. Local authorities were projected to lose between 50–85% of their total revenue base, with Harare losing approximately 50% and Bulawayo facing a reduction of over 40% (Mabiza, 2013).

d. Political reasons as a basis for resistance

The emergence of the MDC-T and its successful takeover of ZANU PF's urban local authorities in the post-2000 era intensified centre-local contestations. In Bulawayo, relations between the city and the state suggest that water was significant not only as a revenue earner but also as a means of affirming

political power in urban governance (Musemwa, 2014). Most political analysts have argued that the battle over water services was a manifestation of a clash between the two political parties for control of the city. Therefore, if BCC had not rebelled against the central government directives, it would have lost control of both its long-serving staff and the property it had invested in for decades. In addition, it would not have been compensated for the substantial investments they had made over the years in water and sewer infrastructure through tariff payments. They would also have lost their right to challenge tariff increases, as this will be the preserve of ZINWA and the Minister of Local Government and Urban Development.

According to Tashu (2024), the ZINWA Act excludes residents from key decision-making processes by failing to provide for citizen consultation on tariff adjustments. In contrast, the local government acts provide for the consultation of residents on the budget and tariff increases. Local authorities take the proposed budget estimates to the wards for discussion with residents. The local authority is also required by law to advertise the budget proposals in a local newspaper for 30 days. The center requires this evidence before the local authority budgets can be approved. Machingauta (2010) argues that the major challenge with ministerial directives is the lack of a shared understanding between the central government and local authorities regarding what constitutes the "national interest," particularly in councils led by opposition parties. When directives are issued to opposition-led local authorities, they are often perceived as attempts to undermine their independence, as was evident in the case of BCC.

Therefore, this case shows how the BCC invoked its institutional autonomy as a local council under the Urban Council's Act to resist central government intervention in a functional area that it regarded as the city council's authority. The developed rebel city analytical concept shows that city councils can become arenas of institutionalized resistance in the following ways. This case is significant in extending the rebel city concept from primarily urban social movements to institutionalized resistance by city councils.

Resource Resistance: Takeover of the Bulawayo Power Station by ZESA

The Bulawayo power plant was also a ground for contestation between the center and local government. This dispute is another dimension of institutionalized city resistance to interventions by the central government through its parastatals. This contestation revolved around ownership and control of city assets, rather than the water dispute, which was centered on the management of a city service. The plant came under the control of the Bulawayo local authority between 1947 and 1957. However, it exchanged hands in 1987 when it became part of ZESA following the amalgamation of local Authority Electricity Undertakings, the Electricity Supply Commission stations at Munyati and Hwange, and the Central African Power Corporation facility at Kariba. (The Sunday News, 2019). The Chronicle of 29 June 2019 highlights that the iconic cooling towers at the Bulawayo Power Station have, over the years, become the hallmark of the city that even visitors marvel at; and that it is from these gigantic ZESA towers that endlessly belch out white smoke as electricity is produced and that from industrial activities that Bulawayo got its "KoNtuthu Ziyathunqa" meaning 'the smoke that bellows.'

The battle for control remains unresolved as ZESA and BCC are locked in a dispute over the ownership of the Bulawayo Power Station (Harris, 2019). The council seeks to regain control of the coal-fired plant and is demanding royalties from the company. The council's main argument is that the facility was expropriated more than two decades ago during the amalgamation of local authority electricity undertakings into the ZESA. On the other hand, ZESA argues that it acquired the lease for the power station property, while the council insists that this was done illegally and that it is the rightful owner of the property (Harris, 2019). The Council argues that any attempts to nationalize the power station are

contrary to the devolution agenda as enshrined in the Constitution. In the June 2019 edition of Newsday, the Mayor of Bulawayo likened this issue to ZINWA's takeover of water and stated that the council would resist this move, as they did with the takeover of water. In this case, the resistance is more about local pride and the preservation of the city's history and heritage than about the environment. After failed attempts at negotiation, the BCC and Bulawayo Residents Association took ZESA to court over this unresolved issue. In this light, the ongoing nature of this dispute shows that institutional city rebellion cannot be defined by successful resistance alone but by the ability to persistently mobilize its institutional, legal, political, and social resources in contesting central government interventions.

Imposition of Special interest councillors

Mutema et al. (2012) point out that the Minister's authority to appoint special-interest councillors is derived from Section 4A of the Urban Councils Act. The rationale for their appointment is rooted in the intention to enhance the council's capacity through specialized skills, experience, and representation of minority or marginalized groups, such as farmers, youth, people with disabilities, businesses, and the mining sector. The goal is to strengthen local authorities' capacity to deliver efficient and effective services by ensuring councils have access to expertise not always present among elected councillors. Special-interest councillors serve at the Minister of Local Government's discretion and without voting rights. However, when centre-local relations are strained, the Minister's attempt to appoint special-interest councillors is often met with suspicion.

In the case of BCC, the appointment of special-interest councillors was opposed, as the council argued that ZANU-PF's move was antithetical to the democratic ethos, since it sought to impose candidates who had lost the election (Chigwata et al., 2019). The council argued that the Minister was undermining their operations. It has been argued that, in most cases, the special interests that the central government selects are usually its members of the ruling party. For example, after the 2013 harmonized elections, only two of the 57 appointed councillors were from the MDC-T (Mapuva, 2014). Most of these appointees were ZANU-PF councillors who had lost in the elections.

Another issue raised by the local authority was that the policy was arbitrarily implemented. Again, there was political favoritism, as the selection was not evenly distributed along party lines. Out of the 57 appointed after the 2013 harmonized election, only 8 were women, and only 3 represented the interests of people with disabilities (Mapuva, 2014). This shows that the appointments did not address skills or marginalized groups.

Mapuva (2014) asserts that some of the reasons for the opposition were that this process undermined the democratic processes in the local authority, as there was no consultation between the Minister and the local authority, district, and provincial administrators to assess local authorities' capacity gaps and identify independent technocrats to be appointed as special interest councillors. The ministry unilaterally appointed these councillors, and the question raised was whose interests they were representing. In 2010, the seven special interest councillors appointed for BCC could not assume office as the judgment in a case challenging their appointment in the High Court was still being heard in January 2011. In addition, de Visser & Mapuva (2013) affirm that the resistance also stemmed from a lack of trust, as the special-interest councillors were viewed as spies who supplied information about the local authority's affairs to the Minister, leading to the suspension of MDC councillors. Moreover, the special-interest councillors were not suspended along with the rest of the MDC councillors.

The Chronicle of January 5, 2013, carried a story about how a councillor who had been selected to advocate for the interests of people with disabilities could not resume his duties because the council stated that the Minister had exceeded the 7-councillor threshold. In addition, SW Radio on 22 January 2013 reported that the court had barred the Minister from appointing a special-interest councillor. The resistance was coming from both the council and residents through the Bulawayo Progressive Residents Association.

Renaming of streets

In November 2019, the central government renamed roads throughout the country, including those in Bulawayo. On February 6, 2019, during a full BCC council meeting, it chose to rebel against Cabinet recommendations and renamed several major streets and buildings. The council justified this decision as an effort to preserve the city's history and heritage (Chronicle, 2020). The city also justified its actions by citing Sections 274 and 276 of the Constitution, which establish and empower urban local authorities to represent and manage the affairs of urban areas across Zimbabwe (Tshuma, 2020). The Cabinet had renamed some of the Avenues, with Sixth Avenue being renamed Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa Way in honor of the President of Zimbabwe. However, the councillors chose to honor the President by renaming George Avenue (from Harare Road to Old Esigodini Road) to Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa Avenue.

The BCC further emphasized that preserving the history and heritage of Bulawayo's local population was essential for promoting national cohesion, reconciliation, peace, and stability within a devolved, unitary state. This statement was made in the context that some names have nothing to do with the city's history. In contrast, others bring back painful memories, such as the link between the central figures of the ruling party and their role in the Gukurahundi massacres, which led to the killing of over 20,000 Ndebele civilians between 1982 and 1987. As such, the BCC resolved that some colonial names be maintained (Sir Garfield Todd, Robert Moffat, Dr Leander Johnson, Charles Patrick Coghlan, and Cecil John Rhodes). In contrast, the names of local politicians were included. However, the move further strained the centre-local relations because the council rejected some street name changes implemented by the Cabinet in November 2019.

Against this backdrop, the four cases show a sustained pattern of institutionalized resistance by the BCC to central government interventions rather than a simple series of isolated centre-local contentions. Firstly, the ZINWA dispute over water service provision revolved around institutional and legal contestation. Secondly, the dispute over the ownership of the power station was characterized by disputes of ownership and control of resources. Thirdly, the dispute over the imposition of special-interest councillors led to institutional, political, legal, and social resistance as the central government sought to determine the BCC's composition and functioning. Lastly, the street naming confrontation extends BCC's resistance into the symbolic context of urban identity, heritage, and authority. Therefore, these four cases exhibit the BBC's sustained use of institutional, legal, political, and symbolic mechanisms to rebel against central interventions.

Conclusion

This study developed an institutionalized conceptualization of a rebel city, which is significant in explaining how cities can become avenues of sustained resistance to the central government. The recurring pattern of institutional resistance by BCC through organized legislative, political, administrative, and symbolic strategies provides the empirical basis for regarding it as a rebel city. In this light, the study extends the concept of a rebel city, which tends to emphasize social movements, class struggle, and resistance to capitalism, to encompass institutionalized local government or municipal resistance to central government's

intervention. Zimbabwe has a history of centralization and organized onslaught against decentralization. Whereas the legislative framework, particularly after independence, is anchored in decentralization, the central government has often issued directives to entrench centralism in contravention of the law. A system of political patronage has been strengthened to bolster the central government's interests throughout the intergovernmental value chain. This imposition of the center on local affairs has largely compromised the policy and administrative latitude of local authorities, thereby weakening their capacity for service delivery. Ironically, local authorities have remained acutely weak in challenging the center's invasion of local spaces. In a departure from the generally passive culture of non-resistance and weak compliance, the BCC presents an explicit record of cases in which it has resisted the imposition of central interests on the local space. The study analyzed four cases in which the city resisted the perpetuation of centralization and the entrenchment of political patronage. Overall, the case of Bulawayo is salutary in the cultivation of radical and transformative democracy and urbanism, particularly in nations that are still struggling to shed centralism.

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